Embracing Diversity in Programming for Music Educators

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Since the summer of 2016, I have found myself in the fascinating position of building resources, analyses, and advocacy tools intended to help conductors, educators and researchers discover, program, and perform music by women composers and composers from underrepresented racial, ethnic, and cultural heritages.

What started out as a simple online spreadsheet grew into the leading national organization focused on repertoire diversification — the Institute for Composer Diversity (ICD) at the State University of New York at Fredonia.

Introduction

The Institute’s website contains a number of different useful resources. The tools that have been the most beneficial so far are the Composer Diversity Database, with more than 4,000 women composers and composers from underrepresented racial, ethnic and cultural heritages, as well as the Works Diversity Database, which allows users to search for more than 1,400 wind band works, 11,000 orchestral works, and 1,600 art songs (with more genres coming later this year).

The Composer Diversity Database contains several search parameters, including location, genre, racial, ethnic, or cultural heritage, and whether or not the composers are living or deceased, while the Works Diversity Database allows users to find works by instrumentation, duration, and difficulty level, as well as the demographics of the composers.

In addition to the database resources, the ICD site has several other initiatives that have provided both information and impetus for change across the country. Our Orchestral Season analysis has looked at the 2019-2020 seasons of 120 U.S. orchestras through the lens of programming of underrepresented composers. The data we’ve published has been cited numerous times by NPR, The Washington Post, and The Wall Street Journal as more and more articles about diversity in programming have been published. We also have an extensive bibliography, strategies for best practices in programming, and links to several curated channels on Pandora.

Why is it necessary to diversify our traditional concert programming?

As the Institute has become more widely known, it has also spurred many questions relating to both its purpose and its future. In this article, I intend to discuss why intentional diverse programming should be something in which all music educators should be taking part, the systemic challenges inherent in diversifying the traditional repertoire, how tools such as the database and other resources can help such an endeavor, and what are some potential changes that educators can make at the state and local levels to improve the environment within which these new ideas can take root.

Why diverse programming is necessary

There is both a very simple answer and a very complex answer to the question, “Why is it necessary to diversify our traditional concert programming?” The simple answer is that it’s the right thing to do; the idea that music education should be entirely centered around a limited cohort of composers who were or are almost entirely male and White while the demographics of the student body and the broader public audience has never been just male and is increasingly not White is one that needs to be revisited.

The 2019-2020 New York State Education Department data show that females make up 48.7% and students of color comprise 56.8% of New York’s pre-college student body. As a statewide example of how repertoire compares to these demographics, the NYSSMA® Manual’s Band/Wind Ensemble required list includes 33 works by underrepresented composers (23 by women composers and 10 by composers of color) comprising 4.1% of the 804 total works on the list.

Nationally, New York is in the middle of the pack when it comes to diverse repertoire in state lists. There are many other states that are in the 4-5% range and none with more than 7% for total works by composers from underrepresented groups. From what we’ve found so far, the numbers aren’t drastically different in either the orchestral or choral genres as well.

We often hear the trope, “I don’t care about the identity of the composer ... I just want to play good music.” While the aesthetic and artistic content of a work is of great
importance, the power of the author and the author’s message and voice within that work is arguably of equal importance. As educators and schools begin to embrace the National Core Arts Standards that expect that students create and explore their own voices, it is imperative that models of creative artists who reflect the identities of those students are provided. Personally, I have worked with many young student composers through the NYSSMA® Composition and Improvisation Committee, the NAfME Council for Music Composition, and the Interlochen Summer Arts Camp, and my experiences with young women composers and composers of color have been that they overwhelmingly appreciate and desire to learn more about composers who are like them. The more complex answer to the question, “Why is it necessary to diversify our traditional concert programming?”, is that until relatively recently, works by women composers and composers of color were usually difficult to find, there was no urgent enthusiasm to look for them, and, ultimately, they remained unknown. The work ICD and others have done to provide online resources has aided in locating composers and works, increased attention to diversity and inclusion issues and has absolutely spurred the urgency to find diverse voices and music. But the final reason — lack of awareness on the part of the musical community — has been difficult to address. The challenge can be described through a chronological continuum: pre-college students are often exposed to a limited cohort of composers while in school; those that study music in college are often exposed to a larger (but no more diverse) cohort of composers in their ensembles and coursework; those who decide to pursue music education learn how to conduct with works within that cohort and understandably go out into the world teaching what they know, thereby creating a feedback loop of repertoire by composers who represent only a portion of who we are as a society and as a culture.

This is no slight on music teachers in the public schools; similar continuums exist for those who pursue professional conducting and academic careers as well. It is no different than audiences flocking to concerts programmed with works that they have heard before while being reticent about concerts that are overly new and challenging. We are comfortable with what we know, and we are both exposed to and taught about the music we know through the lenses of these continua.

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**Best practices**

All the tools and resources in the world wouldn’t be able to make a dent in this important issue if conductors and educators didn’t make the intentional decision to investigate their own programming processes and repertoire. ICD has several suggestions for best practices:

**Avoid only programming concert-to-concert.** All too often we find ourselves looking at the relationship between works on a single concert without backing up and looking at the big picture. Looking at a season’s programming with an eye toward your diversity goals will make it much easier to achieve those goals.

**Avoid “othering”** by not creating concert programs that focus on a single demographic — especially during the typical “celebration” periods of the calendar.

**15%-25%-35%**. We suggest setting goals of 25%-35% living composers, 15-20% women composers, and 15-20% composers of color (with overlaps between all three, of course) for yearly programming whenever possible.

**Avoid overprogramming.** We also suggest not performing too many works by a single composer over the course of a year (this is less of an issue with K-12 programming than in professional environments, but it’s still a helpful reminder to keep track of who the students are performing over time).

**Final thoughts**

Discussions around diversity in all of its forms can be awkward and uncomfortable for many professionals in the broader musical community; there are so many perceived risks that it can be difficult to know where to begin. Ultimately, the most important component to discussions around repertoire diversity is that infusing one’s programming and curricula with music by women and composers from underrepresented heritages will benefit every student in one way or another.

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