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# DON'T FORGET THE AUDIENCE

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~ Andrew Glover

For the past eighty years, a fundamental division has grown in the world of band music. “Traditionalists” have held a philosophy of programming which adheres to the notion of the concert band as an entertainment venue for audiences of primarily non musicians. Another group of band people, the “modernists,” favor programming of newer works of a more serious nature.

That initial paragraph, while I believe to accurately describe a significant situation in our midst, troubles me greatly; and before I proceed, I wish to clarify a few points. First, I do not mean to imply that every band musician falls clearly into one of these two areas. Many do, and many don't; many fall in-between. Second, labels such as “serious” music, or “entertainment venue” can mean many things to many different people. Of course, the opinions expressed here and mine; others may agree or disagree with me, but I hope to express views and support them with background and experiences, and allow you to draw your own conclusions.

Let's first explore the qualities of “traditionalists” vs. “modernists.” Traditionalists' repertoire generally includes marches, transcriptions of lighter orchestral works, popular music (of varying eras), featured soloists and small ensembles with concert band accompaniment, as well as other works. The music is programmed primarily with the entertainment of a musically untrained audience in mind; works whose duration, sophistication, and scope do not cause such an audience to become impatient or bored.

American composer and bandmaster Karl L. King (1891-1971) championed the traditionalist philosophy. In an interview, he said “...I'm not engaging in anything educational. I'm just out to entertain the public and at the same time, I don't want to do it on too cheap a level...we try to play good music but we want it to be...understandable.”<sup>1</sup>

Another prominent band musician, Leonard B. Smith (1915-2002) had similar feelings. “People attend band concerts because they enjoy music and wish to be entertained.” He continued, “The purpose of a concert is to entertain, not educate. If, however, education rubs off in the process, it's merely coincidental and so much the better. That's a plus feature!”<sup>2</sup>

The most successful bandmaster of all time was America's John Philip Sousa (1854-1932). For thirty-nine years with his own civilian touring band, and for twelve years prior as leader of the U.S. Marine Band, Sousa brought band music to the American public with a passion and success not seen before or since. He succeeded because his philosophy of

programming was dedicated to the pleasure of his audiences.

The modernist philosophy seems to have begun, at least in a formal sense, in the early 1930's. The newly formed American Bandmasters Association (ABA) identified a need for composers to write new, original works for the concert band, detached from traditional band repertoire. Works by composers including Respighi, Creston, Persichetti, and others, were born in this movement. In the post-WWII era, as college and university music departments grew and expanded, the growing modernist movement gained many supporters and practitioners in academia. What compelled a conductor to lean toward traditional or modernist is a subject of speculation, but composer Francis McBeth (1933-2012) stated that in the college/university music world of the 1950's (and subsequently), he and other composers felt highly compelled to write for band as opposed to orchestra or other ensembles. He observed that band conductors in academia were thirsty for new, previously unknown works; and the orchestra conductors were largely disinterested in new music, in favor of classic works from standard repertoire.<sup>3</sup> Many modernist band musicians distanced themselves from repertoire of Sousa's and King's day, in favor of more contemporary works, written expressly for band.

A curious and fascinating documented illustration of this philosophical divide comes in the aftermath of a 1948 broadcast of the Cities Service Band. This ensemble broadcast weekly concerts on NBC radio for eight years, and featured top studio musicians from New York City as well as frequent guest conductors. It's no surprise that the band always broadcast a very traditional program, given the commercial nature of the program. The guest conductor for the first broadcast in 1948 was Edwin Franko Goldman (1878-1956), founder and conductor of New York's Goldman Band, a major figure in the American band movement, one of the founding members of the ABA, and a champion of new band works. Listening to the broadcast was Karl King, who wrote, in a July 26, 1948 letter to his publisher, “...Goldman gave his usual talk about the “NEW” repertoire etc and then they proceeded to play the oldest of the old and to date haven't played a one of the type he spoke about...”<sup>4</sup> Clearly, on the occasion of that broadcast, Goldman felt compelled to select music with the wishes of the audience most in mind.

Another prominent and influential band musician of the 20th century shared similar feelings. Dr. Frank Simon, former cornet soloist with Sousa,

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wrote to King after the 1962 ABA convention (where Simon had been elected Honorary Life President of ABA). Wrote Simon, "You also gave them some sound fatherly advise (sic) regarding the extreme trend in contemporary music that is being imposed on the band loving public. If this continues the band performances will find a mighty slim audience to listen to such a succession of dissonances without trace of a melodic line."<sup>5</sup>

Of course, it's unfair to assume that all new music is dissonant, non-melodic, and potential anathema to audiences. However, it's clear that King, Simon and Smith seem primarily interested in audience acceptance when considering concert programming, and that Goldman was more interested in extending repertoire into newer territories.

In this discussion, it's important to not confuse the quality or scope of a musical work with the quality of performance. Every good musician would insist that music always be performed in as musical and artistic a manner as possible. Leonard Smith constantly admonished his band when the slightest performance imperfection entered into performing "The Stars and Stripes Forever," which we played at every concert, and which every member of the band had played hundreds of times. "Everybody hears a certain piece of music for the first time," Leonard would state, "And they deserve to hear it played perfectly."<sup>6</sup> Of course, it's much easier to assess the performance quality than the quality of the music being performed.

My initial concern with the division between the traditionalists and the modernists is, quite simply, that it is a division. As band musicians, I believe we can best serve our common interest – that of promoting bands – if we were united in our focus. Many traditionalists ignore music of this or the previous generation, while many modernists ignore any traditional band music. These attitudes, I feel, are shortsighted; it's wrong to dismiss an entire repertoire or genre for the sole reason of its vintage. I wish many of the traditionalists would be more receptive to newer works, and that many modernists would be more receptive to traditional works.

A greater concern to me is the effect that programming choices have on audiences who attend our concerts, and what this means for continued support of bands, of whatever focus or purpose. It's no secret that traditional literature is generally more accessible and palatable to "everyday" audiences, and I believe public approval to be tremendously important in the future of bands, as the public is our ultimate supporter. Some conductors seem disinterested in audience approval – some seem disinterested in whether they have an audience at all.

It's important, in this discussion, to look at the evolution of bands of the past century-plus. In the early 1900s, there were a number of professional civilian concert bands, many of them touring aggregations (Sousa, Pryor, Brooke, Conway, Goldman); thousands of amateur and semi-professional town and municipal bands, in places of all sizes; bands attached to factories, police and fire departments, fraternal organizations, and other groups; and military bands. There were very few bands in public schools, and the bands in most colleges and universities were not concert ensembles as much as they were ensembles designed to perform for and support school activities. The band world of the 21st cen-

tury is starkly different. The touring professional band is virtually extinct; military bands are still present, but the loosely organized town bands have been replaced by community bands. The majority of bands today in America are part of the public schools, as well as colleges and universities. What used to be an ensemble designed for community entertainment is now largely educational at the elementary and secondary levels, and an academic and artistic one at the college/university level. This is a broad generalization, of course; but I believe it to be largely accurate. The audiences for public school concerts are mostly parents and relatives of the young performers; while they attend voluntarily (to an extent) they are not there as much for musical entertainment as they are to support their young musician, so programming is less important here (although I believe a great many instrumental music educators would do well to program more thoughtfully.) At the college/university level, ensembles are a function of the curriculum, and whether or not there's an audience often seems largely irrelevant. However, a community band tasked with presenting concerts for the entertainment of local citizens must program in a way to please that audience, or else they won't have an audience for long. No matter what the scope or focus of the ensemble, I feel the conductor has an obligation to keep the audience in mind when developing the program.

Of course, knowing your audience is extremely important. If you are playing a recruiting concert for a group of elementary students, you would program differently than if you were programming a performance for a group of music educators. A community band concert in the park should be programmed differently from a concert for the membership of an organization such as WASBE or the ABA.

The late Francis McBeth said, "There is absolutely nothing in this world more boring than a poorly programmed concert. I hate to say this, but there aren't many band concerts I'd drive across town to listen to because they are so boring. And I love band music."<sup>7</sup> If a band man like Francis felt this way, imagine the great disservice we do to an audience when we subject them to programming beyond the comfort and accessibility zone of the common, non-musical citizen, who attends a concert for an evening of enjoyable musical entertainment.

The concert band is a tremendously versatile ensemble – why not exploit that versatility? At the same time, let's thrill our audiences with the glorious sounds of wonderful music as performed by the band!

- 1) Karl M. Holvik, "The Karl King Story: An Informal Interview" (*Journal of Band Research*, Spring 1967)
- 2) Leonard B. Smith, "On Conducting the Professional Concert Band" p. 45 (*Bovaco Press*, 1992)
- 3) Personal interview at California Band Directors Association conference, Fresno, February 2007.
- 4) Karl L. King, letter to C. L. Barnhouse Jr., July 26, 1948, archives of C. L. Barnhouse Co.
- 5) Frank Simon, letter to Karl L. King, March 13, 1962, archives of C. L. Barnhouse Co.
- 6) Personal encounter, Detroit Concert Band rehearsal, summer 1982 or 1983.
- 7) "The Wisdom of Francis McBeth, (*The Instrumentalist*, March 2012.)