

Making the Right Choices: Finding the Instrumental Music You Need

by David Winkler

When I began working with church orchestras in the late 1970's, there was very little published music which was appropriate for such groups. Available music consisted mostly of hand-written, unedited music and poorly copied scores from recording sessions. Directors generally had to be adept at arranging for their own groups, or adapting existing works, such as those published for concert band.

With the phenomenal growth of instrumental music ministries since then, a wealth of new music has been published for a variety of types of church instrumental ensembles. The creation of new music has been aided by the explosion of new technology, first through high-quality photocopies which allowed for “print on demand,” then by the development of notation software, and now by the growth of the internet, where much music is now available in digital download form. The question for the instrumental director is no longer “Where can I find instrumental music for my group,” but rather, “Which music should I buy?”

The first step is to determine what type of piece you are looking for — loud or soft, short or long, based on a hymn tune or a more contemporary song, etc. After checking several publisher catalogs or web sites, obtain a demo recording and/or sample score of arrangements which seem to fit your description (order the music on approval from your dealer if possible). Then, after reviewing the music initially, check the following points to determine whether the piece would be right for your group:

1. **The instrumentation** – Will all of the essential parts be covered by the players at hand? Are important parts for more unusual instruments (e.g., English horn) cued or doubled in other parts? Are substitute parts included – e.g., alto sax for French horn, or synthesizer for strings? If these parts are not available, do you have the resources to create what you need in order to adapt the piece to your situation?
2. **The difficulty level** – Is the piece within the ability level of your players? Important factors relating to the difficulty of a piece include: the rhythmic complexity, the ranges (particularly the high range in the brass), the amount of independence of the individual parts, and the key signature. Consider also how much rehearsal time you will need to work up the piece.
3. **Any special features** – Does the arrangement include a solo for certain instruments, and if so, do you have a player who can cover the part adequately? Is the arrangement fairly “straight ahead,” or are there aspects which, though desirable, may require extra attention or rehearsal time? Will the piece work well in the acoustical environment of your performance area, or will sound reinforcement be needed to make sure that the parts “mix” properly?

Music carefully chosen will be greatly appreciated by your instrumentalists. When they sound good and feel good about the music they're playing, it makes it so much easier for them to make “melody in their hearts” unto the Lord!