

Choosing Music for your Winter Guard

Beginning, young or relatively inexperienced programs

The music that you choose for your winter guard is one of the most critical decisions you will make when creating your program. The music is the vehicle that motivates the performers and the audience, sets a thematic overview and creates the opportunity for the development of ideas. You will have boundless choices with respect to music. In this paper, we will discuss many of the important factors that require your careful consideration before you make this critical decision.

The decision to choose a top 10 tune, a well-known classical piece or some obscure piece of music requires a great deal of information and should not be made in isolation. Examples of the type of information to be considered include, but are not limited to the following:

- Do the students understand the music?
- Do the staff and design team understand the music?
- Do the students understand the intent of the music?
- Does the music provide you the opportunity to build highs and lows?
- Is the tempo one that the students can count and understand?
- Is the staff able to count the measures of music?
- Does the music provide inspiration?
- Have you listened to the music enough to assure you really love it and want to live with it for an entire season?
- Do the performers like or love the music?

Understanding the Music

There are many reasons why a particular “type” of music is sought out for your program. You may be looking for a very soft and fluid approach, or conversely, you may be looking for a harder “rock n’ roll approach. Both choices can be correct but you as a staff or design team must be able to understand the music completely and the students must also be able to understand it at the same level.

Simply choosing a piece of music you hear on the radio without the appropriate study of that music can set you up for a very challenging season. Your choices should be made based on the complete understanding of the following:

As an instructor, teacher, designer

You must	You must not
Know and understand the experience level of the students	Assume students will be able to understand any piece of music
Be able to count through the piece of music and understand how the music is designed	Choose music without considering how to count the piece
Know if the length of the piece of music is appropriate for your program	Choose music that is too long and without an ending
Understand or learn about the editing process of music	Assume you can cut and paste music and think it will just work
Understand that speed changes can alter the pitch	Assume making music faster or slower will work just fine
Create a clean and dynamic ending	Force the ending of the music without consideration of how it will "fit"
Understand how to effectively fade music out	Assume just fading the music will work within your plan
Understand or learn about music mixing or piecing one piece of music into another in a logical manner that is aesthetically pleasing	Drop one piece of music on to another without regard for the pleasure value

Speaking with professionals in the field of music editing is necessary for this process to be positive and work towards your benefit.

Beats and Measures

By understanding the music, you must study the tempo, rhythm and intent of whatever piece you choose. In order to understand all of these factors you must be able to count the music. That may sound simple and obvious, however counting through measures of music is critical to completely understand that piece of music. If you are counting four beats per measure and that is constant throughout the piece, then your students will have the highest opportunity to understand their responsibilities. If as a staff you are having difficulty counting because the piece changes from 4/4 to 3/4 to 7/8 time, then the student's opportunity to understand is greatly diminished.

Because music is heard over a period of time, one of the main ways music is organized is by dividing that time up into short periods called beats. In most music, things tend to happen right at the beginning of each beat. This makes the beat easy to hear and feel. When you clap your hands, tap your toes, or dance, you are "moving to the beat". Your claps are sounding at the beginning of the beat, too. This is also called being "on the downbeat".

In "four four" time, there are four beats in a measure and a quarter note gets a beat. A beat is a regular accent in music. In music with 4 beats per measure, the normal tendency is to accent beats 1 and 3 etc., or every odd beat. Four is the most common number of beats per measure, although three is not unusual.

When choosing a piece of music for a winter guard that is young or less experienced, choosing music with a 4 /4 beat is recommended. It is predictable, comfortable and constant. Less experienced performers need the support of this type of music to assist in increasing their level of performance. If they are having difficulty counting through phases then their concentration is taken away from what they are doing and focused on understanding the music. Many very experienced and successful teachers support this position.

Music Tempo

Tempo is the speed of music. It is a steady constant pulse, like a clock ticking. Tempo can be slow, fast, or in-between and it can change during a song. The tempo influences how music sounds and feels to the listener. The same piece of music will sound different if you play it slower or faster. As mentioned previously speed changes can alter the pitch of your music. If you choose a piece of music that you feel needs to be faster or slower, you can certainly make that choice. The difference is how much you choose to change the music. Affecting the pitch can have a very negative effect on the music, the appeal of the music and the possible clear recognition of the piece. Consulting with professionals is again a critical factor.

The speed of the music you choose is also critical to the experience level of the performers and the staff. Beats per Minute or BPM are used to calculate the 'Timing' of a song and acts as a guide to the speed it should be played. i.e., 60 bpm = 60 counts in 1 minute = 1 beat per second. If you choose a piece of music that is slow, then the performers must have the experience and training to understand sustained motion that can be fluid. If the performers are not at that level of experience and training, then moving slow will appear heavy and distracting. Should you choose a piece of music that is fast, then the performers must have the experience and training to understand the muscular training to move fast without losing control of their bodies.

In beginning and less experienced programs, a good recommendation would be to choose music that falls in the range of 124 to 135 BPM. This is a comfortable tempo allowing the students to move at a pace that is considered comfortable. You will find the development of skills a more successful endeavor than with music that is too fast or slow for their developmental stage.