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# A grading catalogue of selected works for solo trombone and piano

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# A GRADING CATALOGUE OF SELECTED WORKS FOR SOLO TROMBONE AND PIANO

A Thesis Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Designation  
University Honors with Distinction

Brent Michael Mead  
University of Northern Iowa

2016

This Study by: Brent Mead

Entitled: A Graded Catalogue of Selected Works for Solo Trombone and Piano

has been approved at meeting the thesis or project requirement for the Designation University

Honors with Distinction

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Date  
Music

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Dr. Anthony Williams, Honors Thesis Advisor, School of

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Date  
Program

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Dr. Jessica Moon, Director, University Honors

## **Introduction**

The study of music can be overwhelming for students and teachers alike. Pouring out one's soul into a piece of music is almost as exhausting as the process of learning how to play the piece. Most musicians spend multiple hours in a practice room each day perfecting every part of the music. Each week, music students usually work on multiple pieces of music including etudes (or short technical pieces), ensemble music, and solo pieces.

Over the course of a semester, the solo for trombone usually is the most challenging piece of music that a student trombonist plays. For high school students, a solo is usually worked on for most of the school year and culminates their year of work at state solo contests in April or May. For college students, a solo work for trombone and piano is usually the piece to be performed as a final for applied lessons. Music professors and teachers must take great care to select appropriate solo repertoire for their students. A solo work should show off a student's technical virtuosity, lyrical beauty, and overall musicality. It should challenge the student but not be too out of the realm of difficulty in order for the student to be successful. Selecting a piece that is at the appropriate difficulty level and is interesting to play can be challenging.

The literature selection process is difficult because of the vast amount of pieces from which to choose, lack of familiarity of repertoire, and the unreliable grading system in which most solos are evaluated. There are a few places to find literature: music publishing websites, state solo contest suggested repertoire lists, and professional organization journals. Each year, there are several new compositions written for each instrument, making it nearly impossible to be familiar with all compositions written even for a single instrument. Hickey's Music Center is one of the largest music publishing companies in the United States. On their website, there are 31 pages of solo trombone and piano works with 50 entries on each page. However, this only

includes the most popular pieces written by famous composers. Numerous compositions written by lesser-known composers and less familiar publishers come out every year. With the vast amount of repertoire, most trombonists do not become familiar with a large amount repertoire. This lack of familiarity with repertoire encourages professors to look up new repertoire. However, problems arise during the search because publishing websites do not include enough information in each entry to determine the difficulty level. In most cases, each entry will include a difficulty grade, usually ranging from Easy to Advanced or on a level from 1 to 6. No more information is given, making it difficult to gauge whether or not a student could play this piece depending on the student's playing ability. Generally, most teachers have an idea about the student's playing ability, but the grading system is too abstract to make an educated guess. This is one of the most challenging parts of being a teacher, in addition for those who teach themselves.

## **Problem**

The current system of solo repertoire grading is vague, poorly organized, and inconsistent. Most grading systems use short descriptions that are either numerical or qualitative but offer no description how the grade was given. Because of the abstract concept of an "easy" piece versus a "medium easy" piece, there can be a wide spectrum of difficulty in a single grade of solo literature. Usually, this one word or number description is what most publishing companies or state music association's lists use to grade solo literature. This is not enough information to decide if a certain musical piece is right for a student to play. In addition, the grading scales are organized poorly because they do not have enough different levels. Most grading scales include too many pieces in the same category. This problem is analogous to teachers grading tests for middle school students by using three grades, 0-33%, 34-66%, and 67-

100%, for a test that covers material covered from birth to every doctoral degree offered in the world. With the extreme variety of difficulty levels found in trombone literature, it is naive to assume there are three levels of talent in trombonists. Even six levels of grading does not give enough separation between the difficulties of the variety of literature. Not only are grading scales vague and poorly organized; they are inconsistent with each other. Several grading scales use numbers while others use words. Those that use numbers often use 1-6 but some use 1 as the most difficult while others use 6 as the most difficult. Qualitative grading scales either from beginning to advanced or those that reflect their academic status (elementary, middle school, high school, college, professional). The inconsistency of scales creates issues between publishers. Musicians do not know whether a Medium Advanced piece from JW Pepper equals a 3 or 4 out of 6 on Hickey's website.

In addition, there are an overwhelming number of pieces from which to choose that are scattered across different publishing websites. There are a few sources to find compilations of solos, but all of these lists fail to describe the difficulty level using an effective quantitative method.

## **Purpose**

Given the ambiguous and insufficient materials describing varied musical works for the solo trombonist, I created a catalogue of pieces for solo trombone and piano. I graded these selected pieces on a scale containing four different criteria (range, rhythm, flexibility, and multiple tonguing), after which I took the average of these scores to create an overall score.

## **Central Theme**

The current status of graded repertoire lists for trombonists is almost nonexistent. Selecting works for students can be difficult especially when you are unfamiliar with the large

body of solo literature. I created a list of solo trombone works all graded with the same system in which students and teachers could utilize when selecting new pieces of music to perform.

Teachers could more readily find new pieces for their students to study by using this grading scale. It can be difficult for trombone teachers to find easier solo literature for students because of the fact that most works that are performed and recorded frequently are above the abilities of most high school and college students. This catalogue will serve as a tool to bridge that gap.

To decide the criteria in which I graded the solo literature, I selected the four questions that I asked myself most often when selecting a piece for a student. These four questions are often the deciding factor whether a student can play a certain piece. Is the student capable of playing all of the notes in the piece? Does the tessitura, or range in which most of the piece is played, remain in a comfortable range? If not, the student will have little success learning the piece. Are the rhythms too difficult or complex? If so, the student will not be successful. Are there modern or extended techniques required for this piece? The answers to these questions affect a student's ability to perform. Considerable amounts of time, thought, and discussion will be spent to ensure an objective grading scale for this project. Before any research of solo literature begins, a grading scale must be created. This project relies on a detailed, effective, and well thought out grading scale.

## **Form of the Project**

This thesis project includes a proposed grading scale for solo trombone works, examples of how this grading system differs from others, and reflective thoughts on the project. Each entry will include the following information: title, composer, publisher, grade of difficulty including short descriptions (range, rhythm, extended techniques, and flexibility), and performance notes. The performance notes section will serve as a place to describe the piece in a few sentences and

comment on any information that cannot be covered in the grade of difficulty section, which could include musical maturity needed to perform the piece. A goal for the future will be to get this grading system implemented in a catalogue to be published so trombone teachers and students can use this to become familiar with more repertoire. The reflection will include a summary of how the project might have changed, how the process was different than I expected, and what I could do differently in my Master's thesis.

## **Source Review**

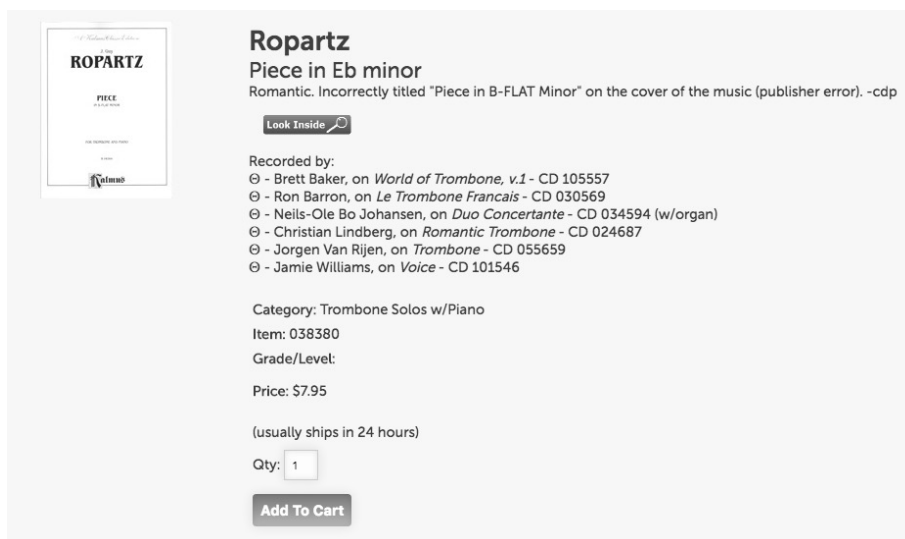
Currently, there are a few sources that teachers can use to find solo works for their students. The most accessible lists are music publishing websites and state solo contest lists. Music publishers such as JW Pepper, Hickey's Music Center, or Hal Leonard Corporation either have vague grade levels in each piece, or none at all.

JW Pepper has two different progressions of difficulties. One describes the difficulty level and progresses as follows: Very Easy, Easy, Medium Easy, Medium, Medium Advanced, and Advanced. The other describes the age at which the musician plays and progresses as follows: Beginning, Early Intermediate, Intermediate, and College (JW Pepper, 2015). There is no stated reason why a piece is graded in either track. Presumably, they take the suggestion of the composer or arranger. In the "Advanced" category, there are solos that the author played as a Freshman in high school in addition to solos performed as a Senior in college (JW Pepper, 2015, Advanced Trombone Solos section). Considering the large amount of musical growth that occurs over seven years of intense musical study, this technique gap in the same grade of literature is enormous.

Hickey's Music Center is less organized than JW Pepper. Grades are listed by number, words, both numbers and words, or no grade at all. Some pieces, like the Telemann *Sonata in F*



*Minor*, have multiple listings by different arrangers that have different grades. The Mortimer edition grades the sonata as a “Grade 6 - Advanced” but the Ostrander/Veyron-Lacroix edition grades the sonata as a “Grade 5 - Early Advanced” (Hickey’s, 2015, Trombone Solo with Piano section, p. 25). This also happens in the listings for Handel’s *Arm, Arm Ye Brave from Judas Maccabeus* (Hickey’s, Trombone Solo with Piano section, p. 12) and Barat’s *Andante et Allegro* (Hickey’s, Trombone Solo with Piano section, p. 2). Unfortunately, Hal Leonard is not much better; there are no grades listed on their website (Hal Leonard, 2015). Publishing websites, especially warehouses, are not organized enough in their grading systems for them to be effective.



Shown above is a screenshot from the online database at Hickey’s music center. This is a normal view of an entry at a publishing website. Information shown is the title, composer, publisher, a short description about the piece, price, item number, grade, and sometimes discography. Musicians need more information on the difficulty level of the piece in order to have an idea they could play it.

In addition to publishing sites, there are state lists for solo and ensemble contests that have grades listed for each piece. Sometimes, there are not enough different grades to efficiently

divide the repertoire into distinct difficulty levels. The Missouri State High School Activities Association (MSHSAA) has a list of prescribed solos to choose from for state solo contest, each solo being graded either A, B, or C (MSHSAA, 2015). “A” solos, the most difficult grade according to the MSHSAA, has too wide of a difficulty range in one grade, much like the “Advanced” category in the JW Pepper catalogue. On the other hand, even when pieces are split up into more than three different grades, the grading system still has severe flaws.

In the Virginia Band and Orchestra Directors’ Association (VBODA) Solo/Ensemble Music List, there are many publisher discrepancies and too wide a range of difficulty levels in each grade. In the VBODA list, there are pieces or movements that appear more than once in different categories. The Second Movement from Kazimierz Serocki’s *Sonatina* from the G. Shirmer/Hal Leonard collection “Solos for the Trombone Player” is a grade 4 but the European American Published version of the same movement is a grade 5 (VBODA, 2015, Music List Brass Trombone section). Most state lists have these same issues.

Not only is the grading system poor, but there is also no explanation as to how each piece is selected into a grade, nor is there any explanation what the expectations are in each grade. The current grading system is almost useless because of this lack of information. Searching different types of resources can be helpful, but they also lack critical information. The International Trombone Association publishes a magazine every quarter. In each edition, a portion of the magazine is devoted to literature reviews of new pieces. Each review includes a brief description of the style of the piece, duration, and quick remarks about technical considerations (Hall and Stern, 2015). Without hearing the piece, this review cannot help teachers determine whether or not this piece is playable by their students or even themselves.

This is the same case in *Solos for the Student Trombonist: An Annotated Bibliography* by Vern Kagarice, longtime trombone professor at the University of Northern Texas. This short bibliography includes works for tenor and bass trombone organized into 6 grades. Each entry includes the title, composer, publisher, length, difficulty, piano difficulty, note range, a paragraph description, and suggested recordings. The paragraph description includes performance considerations such as mutes, fatigue, style and form of the piece, and any errata (Kagarice, 2015). This is the best source of solos but it does not include a lot of pieces and uses the uninformative grading from the publisher. In most of these reviews, the information is insufficient. The current repertoire grading system for solo trombone works is severely lacking in organization, consistency, and detail.

## **Findings**

After literature research and review, I came up with a grading scale divided in four categories: range, rhythm, flexibility, and extended techniques. The criteria for each category was determined by reviewing existing rubrics and based on my experience with students. I hoped to answer the questions found in the previous Central Theme section of this paper. For the range category, I ranked different ranges on a scale from 1-8. The notes for each specific range were chosen based on my experience with students. The 5th level requires an intermediate or professional trombone with an F-attachment, which most students acquire during high school. For rhythm, I utilized common elementary music method curriculum to create a hierarchy and progression of rhythms. Most elementary music curricula do not include cadenzas, or passages in music that are arrhythmic, so I included it in the last level of rhythm. To create a rubric for flexibility, I created a slight exponential curve of leap distance from note to note. I also included arpeggio and scale distances that require similar skills as the leaps described above. For extended

techniques, I ranked several extended techniques (multiple tonguing, multiphonics, playing only parts of the instrument, split tone and microtones) in order of difficulty by the frequency that each technique is used. The more a technique is used, the lower difficulty level it received. Multiple tonguing is the technique where an additional backwards tongue motion, like the motion required to say the syllables “gah” or “kah,” is used paired with traditional forward tonguing (“tah” or “dah”) that is commonly utilized in brass playing. Multiphonics is the addition of humming to normal trombone playing that creates two separate pitches. Split tones are similar but are created by a spot in your lips that does not buzz. This splits the likes into two different buzzes, hence the term split buzz. Microtones or quartertones are pitches that fall in between the standard 12-tone Western music scale most commonly used around the world. These pitches are often found in modern music or Eastern, mostly Arabic, music. These standards were created with the goal that each level is a small but significant technical leap.

This grading scale reflects a percentage difficulty level of a piece. With a range of possible scores from .8 to 100, this scale shows the approximate difficulty level of a piece. A weighted percentage formula is used to account for the importance of each category. By using a weighted percentage score, each category will get a decimal that will be converted to a percentage after calculation. For example, if a piece has a range of F1 to G3, a score of 3 out of 8 would be given for range. To input this into the grading scale, multiply the value 3 out of 8 by 35. This equals 12.13 after rounding. Other three category scores would then be calculated in the same manner. After each score is calculated, add each score together to get the final grade. A score of .8 is possible because the extended techniques category has the possibility of scoring a zero. The higher the score, the more difficult the piece would be to play. If any important information is disguised in calculation, the performance notes should take these factors into

account. For example, if a piece has simple rhythms, range, and hardly any flexibility but has an incredible demand for extended techniques, it would receive a low score. I would not, however, give this piece to any beginning student because it has a low score. This is why the performance notes section is important. This scale is not perfect because of the possible lack of consideration for contemporary music, a genre of music that usually requires several extended techniques. However, the high level of quantitative and qualitative information, mathematical calculation, and wide range of possible grades provide more helpful insight into whether or not a musician can play the graded piece of music.

Each category is divided into levels. The grade is determined by finding the highest criteria in each category.

Range (Pedal C = C, Low C = C1, First line Bass Clef G = G1, Middle C = C3)

1. Ab1 – C3
2. F1 – E3
3. E1 – G3
4. E1 – Bb3
5. D1 – C4 d below staff to C above high Bb
6. C – D4
7. Bb – F4
8. F – Bb4

Rhythm

1. Whole, Half, Quarter & respective rests
2. Add pairs of 8ths, dotted quarter notes
3. 16th notes, 8th note anacrusis or single 8th note rests, syncopation
4. Dotted 8th 16th, eighth note triplets, duples in compound meter
5. 32nd, grace notes, 16th anacrusis, quarter note triplets
6. Half note triplets, Cadenza, odd – tuples

Flexibility

1. Step wise motion, third diatonic leaps
2. 4th-5th diatonic leaps, single chromatic leaps under 4th, Major diatonic arpeggio 1 8ve
3. Octave diatonic leaps, single chromatic leaps under 6th, minor diatonic arpeggio 1 8ve
4. 12th leaps, Arpeggios spanning up to 8ve, no more than 5 consecutive leaps of 5th or higher, trills
5. 15th leaps, 2 8ve arpeggios, trills

## Extended Techniques

None

1. Multiple tonguing on single note in 1 consecutive beat
2. Multiple tonguing on single note more than 1 consecutive beat
3. Multiple tonguing on diatonic scalar notes, arpeggios
4. Multiphonics sustained 1 note, incomplete instrument
5. Multiphonics changes, circular breathing
6. Split tones, microtones

Total = (Range x 35) + (Rhythm x 15) + (Flexibility x 30) + (Extended Techniques x 20)

## Comparisons to Existing Grading Criteria

This grading scale is different because it uses a weighted percent formula to determine the difficulty of a certain piece. Not only can a musician see the total grade score for the piece, but an individual score for each category, showing why the piece is difficult. Often, I look at publishing websites and see a grade and ask myself why this piece deserved the grade. The customer is left to wonder if the range, overall technical challenge or tricky rhythms forced the publisher to give the grade. Given the grading scale suggested, students and teachers could both decide if the piece is playable. Also, customers know how the grade was assigned. In the future, I would like to create an extended catalogue of selected trombone works that highlight this grading scale in order to show how several different pieces compare with each other according to my grading scale and different publisher's scales. In order to demonstrate my grading scale's usefulness, I've included a few example entries:

### **Concertino for Trombone by Ferdinand David**

Range 5/8 F1- C4

Rhythm 5/6 mix of 16ths and triplets, quarter triples, 16th anacrusis

Flexibility 5/5 2 octave arpeggios, 15th leaps

Extended Techniques 3/6

Total:  $(5/8 \times .35) + (5/6 \times .15) + (5/5 \times .30) + (3/6 \times .20)$

21.88 + 12.5 + 30 + 10

74.38/100

This popular repertoire choice is a Romantic concerto that is performed frequently. Featuring several arpeggios spanning the entire range of the instrument, this piece requires a strong command of the trombone. The end of the allegro maestoso first movement includes a small cadenza that leads into the second movement, a haunting funeral march in C minor that includes an optional pedal G at the end. The third movement features the return of the theme from the 1st movement that ends in a rousing finale.

Other Grades: Grade 6/6 Advanced (Hickey's), Advanced (JW Pepper)

### **Elegie by Gabriel Faure**

Range C1-C4 6/8

Rhythm 4/6

Flexibility 3/5

Extended Techniques 0/6

Total:  $(6/8 \times .35) + (4/6 \times .15) + (3/5 \times .30) + (0/6 \times .20)$

26.25 + 10 + 18 + 0

54.25

Grade available: N/A

### **Piece in Eb Minor by Joseph Guy Ropartz**

Range F1-C4 5/8

Rhythm 4/6

Flexibility 4/5

Extended Techniques 3/6

Total:  $(5/8 \times .35) + (4/6 \times .15) + (4/5 \times .30) + (3/6 \times .20)$

21.88 + 10 + 24 + 10

65.88

This French Romantic song features two sections, a slow lyrical opening section and a faster, dramatic second half that requires multiple tonguing in several passages.

Compared to the one line grade and short qualitative descriptions from other publishing websites, my grading system provides substantially more information concerning the possibility of performing a piece. Publishing websites should want students to know if they can play their music. Due to the increase of music piracy and sheet music theft, it is obvious that fewer people are willing to pay for music. This catalogue will give people one less reason to not buy sheet music. The proposed catalogue and grading system would give the consumer additional information in order to make repertoire decisions easier.

## **Reflection**

This project has been rewarding. Trying to come up with a new grading system helped me see the difficulties music publishers have had when grading solo works. As a teacher, I have struggled in the past assigning repertoire. Looking at new literature, it can be difficult to know whether or not the piece is playable. This forces teachers to only assign pieces that they already know. With the large amount of repertoire available, it is difficult to assign only pieces with which the teacher is familiar. This catalogue could be used to find new literature and learn how the difficulty compares to pieces teachers already know. In the future, edits can be made to add or subtract levels in each category. Also, the weighted formula could be changed after further review. After study and further consultation with other professors and pedagogues, this scale could help the entire trombone community make informed decisions when planning to perform solo repertoire. A catalogue of works graded by this scale would show how each piece compares to others using the same grading scale. This grading scale reveals the difficulty level of pieces to teachers and performers alike. This is the initial step for the catalogue. Eventually, I will submit the finished catalogue for publishing consideration by the International Trombone Association. This catalogue will be easily translated to other brass instruments. Currently, there



is a similar project in the tuba and euphonium professional community also. Brass musicians could all adopt a similar grading scale in order to create a universally accepted evaluation method. I plan on continuing this project over the next few years. Grants or volunteer work could be utilized in order to expand the catalogue to a publishable length.

Following the works cited page, there is an example format of the catalogue. I have included an introduction, purpose, and a few entries. This is a condensed version of the catalogue that I plan on submitting to the International Trombone Association for publishing.

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# A Graded Catalogue of Selected Works for Solo Trombone

Brent Mead  
University of Northern Iowa, BME, 2017

Completed December 2017

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## **Purpose**

In my few years as a private trombone teacher, I was frustrated at my lack of familiarity of repertoire and the several different grading scales publishers have on their websites. After consulting other professors in the music department, I realized that there has been little literature and research done to help young music instructors learn repertoire and know the relative difficulty of each piece. I decided to come up with my own grading scale due to the lack of transparency in how publishers grade each selection on their catalogue or website. I was frustrated at the small range of levels in each grading scale, grouping together too many pieces that are not in the similar difficulty level especially in the most difficult repertoire. I decided to create my own grading scale and create a catalogue of solo repertoire.

In my initial brainstorming, I decided that I wanted a scale from 1-100, weighted based on four categories: range, rhythm, flexibility, and extended techniques. These four categories are the four main considerations I make when choosing a piece for a student. I chose the percentages to weigh each category based on the order in which I prioritized the four categories.

# Grading Scale

Each category is divided into levels. The grade is determined by finding the highest criteria in each category.

Range (Pedal C = C, Low C = C1, low Staff G = G1, Middle C = C3)

1. Ab1 – C3
2. F1 – E3
3. E1 – G3
4. E1 – Bb3
5. D1 – C4 d below staff to C above high Bb
6. C – D4
7. Bb – F4
8. F – Bb4

## Rhythm

1. Whole, Half, Quarter & respective rests
2. Add pairs of 8ths, dotted quarter notes
3. 16th notes, 8th note anacrusis or single 8th note rests, syncopation
4. Dotted 8th 16th, eighth note triplets, duples
5. 32nd, grace notes, 16th anacrusis, quarter note triplets
6. Half note triplets, Cadenza, odd – tuples

## Flexibility

1. Step wise motion, third diatonic leaps
2. 4th-5th diatonic leaps, single chromatic leaps under 4th, Major diatonic arpeggio 1 8ve
3. Octave diatonic leaps, single chromatic leaps under 6th, minor diatonic arpeggio 1 8ve
4. 12th leaps, Arpeggios spanning up to 8ve, no more than 5 consecutive leaps of 5th or higher, trills
5. 15th leaps, 2 8ve arpeggios, trills

## Extended Techniques

None

1. Multiple tonguing on single note in 1 consecutive beat
2. Multiple tonguing on single note more than 1 consecutive beat
3. Multiple tonguing on diatonic scalar notes, arpeggios
4. Multiphonics sustained 1 note, incomplete instrument
5. Multiphonics changes, circular breathing
6. Split tones, microtones

Total = (Range x 35) + (Rhythm x 15) + (Flexibility x 30) + (Extended Techniques x 20)

### **Appermont, Bert Colors**

Range 7/8  
Rhythm 5/6  
Flexibility 5/5  
Extended Techniques 3/6

Total = 83.13

This new composition by Dutch composer Bert Appermont has become a popular piece in the trombone repertoire. Each of the four movements, *Yellow*, *Red*, *Blue* and *Green*, are depictions of a color and are tied together by the motive “C - D - G”. This 15 minute work has a few sections where multiple tonguing is necessary.

### **David, Ferdinand Concertino**

Range 5/8 F1- C4  
Rhythm 5/6  
Flexibility 5/5  
Extended Techniques 3/6

Total: 74.38/100

This popular repertoire choice is a Romantic concerto that is performed frequently. Featuring several arpeggios spanning the entire range of the instrument, this piece requires a strong command of the trombone. The end of the *allegro maestoso* first movement includes a small cadenza that leads into the second movement, a haunting funeral march in C minor that includes an optional pedal G at the end. The third movement features the return of the theme from the 1st movement that ends in a rousing finale.

Other Grades: Grade 6/6 Advanced (Hickey's), Advanced (JW Pepper)

### **Faure, Gabriel Elegie**

Range C1-C4 6/8  
Rhythm 4/6  
Flexibility 3/5  
Extended Techniques 0/6

Total: 54.25

This early 20th century composition is a lyrical piece written for trombone. With some complex rhythms and demanding range, this piece is suitable for a college student or talented high school musician.

Grade available: N/A

### **Ropartz, Joseph Guy *Piece in Eb Minor***

Range F1-C4 5/8

Rhythm 4/6

Flexibility 4/5

Extended Techniques 3/6

Total: 65.88

This French Romantic song features two sections, a slow lyrical opening section and a faster, dramatic second half that requires multiple tonguing in several passages.

### **Weber, Carl Maria *Romance***

Range C - C4 6/8

Rhythm 5/6

Flexibility 5/5

Extended Techniques 0/6

Total: 68.75

Weber's *Romance* is a slow lyrical piece that requires a wide range and incredible flexibility. While the tempo is slow, arpeggios, grace notes, and wide leaps make this piece difficult for the amateur trombonist.