

FLEXIBLE MUSIC: A HISTORY OF AND
ITS APPLICATION FOR THE WIND BAND MEDIUM
THROUGH AN OVERVIEW OF TWO FLEXIBLE WORKS

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**Flexible Music: A History of and Its Application for the Wind Band Medium
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HISTORY/BACKGROUND

Flexible music is music that can be performed by a minimum number of wind players and possibly a few percussionists. Typically, this music is arranged into four to six parts with specific instrumentation detailed for each part due to satisfying the needs of registration of the part. There does exist flexible music in which any wind instrument can perform any part, but this is a more recent development in flexible music. Ensemble conductors are free to choose instruments for each part and to arrange the groupings of parts based on the needs of the ensemble.

Flexible music for wind bands has existed for nearly twenty years with the first arrangements appearing on music publishers' websites and lists in the early 2000s, with the music publisher Hal Leonard pioneering the new field. At the time, flexible music consisted of arrangements of popular songs and movie scores such as *Theme from Mission Impossible*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, and *Bohemian Rhapsody* by Queen. These arrangements were meant to provide access to music for ensembles that may not have the full instrumentation required of a majority of the literature for the wind band medium. By creating arrangements for four to six parts, smaller ensembles could now perform repertoire originally written for a larger ensemble without losing all of the integrity of original composition. This new type of arrangement quickly caught on with smaller schools and ensembles looking to play more repertoire. Because of this, publishers all over the world began publishing these arrangements.

As flexible arrangements continued to develop and become popular, arrangers adopted classic literature from the orchestral and wind band repertoire to adapt for flexible ensembles.

The pieces adapted for flexible ensemble ranged from Modest Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* to John Philip Sousa's *The Liberty Bell March* to Percy Grainger's *Lincolnshire Posy*. While these arrangements are not considered to be to the same artistic standard as their original compositions, they do give directors and ensembles access to literature of high quality and opportunities to teach and perform arrangements of the great masterworks for wind band and orchestra.

As flexible music continued to develop, it became especially popular in Japan as the reduced populations of students had an effect on the size of school ensembles throughout the country.¹ Due to this reduced student population, many Japanese bands perform with ensembles of less than thirty musicians and sometimes as few as ten ensemble members. Japanese band directors have been forced to adapt and use flexible music to perform with their ensembles.

Flexible music in the United States exists primarily within the sphere of smaller middle school and high school programs or those schools lacking the full, tradition instrumentation required to play a majority of wind band literature. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, flexible music quickly expanded its range to places that it previously had not been needed; in particular, the collegiate band world. Because of the social distancing restrictions in place at colleges and universities, rehearsal spaces could no longer hold all the members of full ensemble at a safe and healthy distance from one another. These restrictions forced conductors to adapt their selection of repertoire seemingly overnight in their preparation for the fall 2020 semester.

While there is certainly a great depth of chamber works for winds, these works are limited in terms of providing opportunities for all ensemble members to play. Most of chamber works exist for a typical instrumentation that relies heavily on oboes, clarinets, bassoons, and

¹ Yo Goto, "So Helpful for Smaller Bands! Practical Use of Flexible Instrumentation," (presentation, The Midwest International Band and Orchestra Clinic, Chicago, IL, December 19, 2018).

horns. This leaves a large portion of the ensemble out of the music making process if ensemble conductors were to only choose this type of repertoire. Some of this can be substituted by including works for brass choirs, saxophone quartets, or percussion ensembles, but flexible music provides a more ample opportunity for ensembles to exist in a similar, albeit smaller, ensemble situation with all members of the band represented in a work.

Another limiting reason is that some chamber works are too technically challenging for younger musicians to perform. While there are easier chamber works that exist, these pieces are not as abundant as would be needed to sustain an ensemble for a full semester or full year of concerts. To reiterate the previous point, performing only original chamber music would not provide performance opportunities for all players.

Because of this new focus on the impact that flexible music could have at all levels, composers and arrangers turned their attention to creating new works and arrangements of previous works for ensembles that would be in desperate need beginning in the fall 2020 semester and beyond. One of the most important collectives of composers has been the Creative Repertoire Initiative that was established at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic to create repertoire for all ensembles and ability levels.

THE CREATIVE REPERTOIRE INITIATIVE

The Creative Repertoire Initiative (CRI) was established in the spring of 2020 by composer Frank Ticheli and conductor/arranger Robert Ambrose. They were joined by composers Omar Thomas, Brian Balmages, John Mackey, Pete Meechan, Alex Shapiro, Eric Whitacre, Steven Bryant, Michael Daugherty, Julie Giroux, and Jennifer Jolley in their effort to

construct a group of composers willing to write in this rapidly expanding medium.² While flexible music has existed for some time, this is the first collective effort to produce flexible music for ensembles of all ability levels, including collegiate ensembles. This group was established to help create repertoire that would fit the needs of the newly imposed restrictions of social distancing in rehearsal and performance spaces for ensembles for the upcoming fall 2020 semester and beyond. Their goal was to write music that would enable conductors to perform music that would keep musicians of all levels engaged in the music making process, despite the challenges and limitations imposed by school districts and health care professionals.

To accomplish this, these composers and arrangers set up four types of flexible music that could fit to the needs of any ensemble facing limited, fluctuating, or unpredictable personnel. These pieces are categorized in four ways:

1. A flex piece is a composition that has instruments assigned to specific parts that are based on range and registration. This type of flexible music is most similar to the previous creations of flexible arrangements for small ensembles that has been done for years.
2. A full-flex piece is a composition offers the most flexibility to the ensemble director, allowing them the opportunity to choose any voice to perform any part, regardless of range or registration.
3. A modular/cellular piece is a composition that is composed of motivic cells that can contain elements of aleatoric and/or improvisatory material and can be performed by ensembles of any size or instrumentation.

² Frank Ticheli, "The Creative Repertoire Initiative: Creating Adaptable Music for Unprecedented Times," *School Band and Orchestra Magazine*, July 15, 2020, <https://sbomagazine.com/the-creative-repertoire-initiative-creating-adaptable-music-for-unprecedented-times/>

4. An improvisatory piece is a composition that focuses on giving students opportunities to improvise in an ensemble setting, similar to a jazz band setting, but with broader instrumentation to include more instruments that are not necessarily standard to the jazz band's typical instrumentation.³

The works of the Creative Repertoire Initiative have been performed many times since their initiation and has helped ensembles at all levels manage the difficulties presented by the restrictions of COVID-19 and social distancing measures. While they are not the only composers who have recently focused on this style of composing and arranging, this group's efforts have been exceptionally beneficial to ensembles and conductors everywhere. Their website includes spectacular resources for composers and arrangers looking to create flexible works for performing ensembles, both from creating original works and adapting previous large ensemble works for a flexible ensemble. The group's social media pages also serve as a springboard for composers of the group and others to promote their music.

AN OVERVIEW OF FRANK TICHELI'S *SIMPLE GIFTS* (FLEX ARRANGEMENT)

Frank Ticheli is a professor of composition at the Thornton School of Music at the University of Southern California and is an award-winning composer whose works have been performed internationally to great acclaim. Many of Ticheli's wind works are considered standard works in the wind band repertoire for both advanced and developing skill levels. Considering his prominent involvement with the establishment of the Creative Repertoire Initiative, it is no surprise that Ticheli has been one of the more prolific composers/arrangers of flexible/adaptable works in recent times. While most of his works for flexible instrumentation

³ "Adaptable Music," Creative Repertoire Initiative, <https://www.creativerepertoire.com/>, accessed February 26, 2021.

have been arrangements of his own works, these still provide great resources for conductors to use with their ensembles. Ticheli's arrangements fit into three (full-flex, flex, and modulatory/cellular) of the four adaptable repertoire categories set up by the Creative Repertoire Initiative.

Ticheli's *Simple Gifts: Four Shaker Songs* has been a standard in the wind band medium since its publication in 2002, performed countless times by groups ranging from middle school to collegiate ensembles. The work can be played as the full set of four songs in their traditional order, any combination of the movements, or as individual movements as stand-alone pieces. Ticheli arranged each movement to be adaptable to a full-flex ensemble, meaning any instrument can play any part that it is assigned.

This adaptation gives the ensemble director the fullest flexibility in assigning parts for the ensemble, providing no limitations to the ensemble's ability to perform the piece based on instrumentation. This type of arrangement also gives students the opportunity to participate and collaborate in the music-making process with their peers and the ensemble director. They can now be involved in making decisions such as instrumentation for sections of the piece, providing them with an opportunity to be more engaged in the rehearsal process.

The fourth movement of *Simple Gifts: Four Shaker Songs* is the most popular movement from this set of Shaker melodies as it uses the beloved "Simple Gifts" melody as its main melodic content. This is the same melody that Aaron Copland uses in his masterwork *Appalachian Spring* and has become synonymous with Shaker culture and Americana. In his arrangement, Ticheli reduces his original score of twenty-four wind instruments down to four parts. He sets up five different choirs of these four parts based on the clef and transposition of the instruments of the typical wind band. He has a C treble clef set of parts for flutes and oboes; a B-

flat treble clef for B-flat clarinets, bass clarinets, tenor saxophones, and B-flat trumpets; an E-flat treble clef for alto and baritone saxophones; an F clef for horns in F; and a C bass clef for bassoons, trombones, euphoniums, baritones, and tubas. He also keeps the original percussion score in his adaptation of this work as these members are not affected as much as wind players by social distancing measures due to their ability to wear masks while performing on their instruments (Example 1).

The image displays two musical scores for the first three measures of 'Simple Gifts'. The left score is the 'Full' score, and the right score is the 'full-flex' score.

Left Score (Full):

- Fl.**: Flute 1 and 2. Flute 1 has a note in measure 1 with the instruction "One player switches to Piccolo for this movement." Flute 2 has a note in measure 1.
- Ob.**: Oboe.
- B♭ Cl. 2**: Bass Clarinet 2 (1 and 3 parts).
- B♭ Bass Cl.**: Bass Clarinet (1 and 3 parts).
- Bsn.**: Bassoon.
- E♭ Alto Sax.**: Alto Saxophone (1 and 2 parts).
- B♭ Ten. Sax.**: Tenor Saxophone.
- E♭ Bari. Sax.**: Baritone Saxophone.
- B♭ Tpt. 2**: B-flat Trumpet 2 (1, 2, and 3 parts).
- F Hrn.**: Horn in F.
- Tbn.**: Trombone (1 and 2 parts).
- Euph.**: Euphonium.
- Tuba**: Tuba.
- Timpani**: Tunings.
- Perc. 1, 2, 3**: Percussion (Mallets).

Right Score (Full-flex):

- Tempo/Beat**: $\text{♩} = 76-80$.
- Fl. & Ob.**: Flute 1, 2, and Oboe (1, 2, and 3 parts).
- B♭ Treble Clef**: B-flat Clarinet 2, Bass Clarinet, Tenor Saxophone, and B-flat Trumpet (1, 2, 3, and 4 parts).
- E♭ Treble Clef**: Alto Saxophone and Baritone Saxophone (1, 2, 3, and 4 parts).
- F Treble Clef**: Horns (1, 2, 3, and 4 parts).
- C Bass Clef (Tuba parts notated 8vb)**: Bassoon and Low Brass (1, 2, 3, and 4 parts).
- Percussion**: Timpani, Percussion 1 (Mallets), Percussion 2, and Percussion 3.

Example 1: Full (left) and full-flex (right) scores of *Simple Gifts* (m. 1-3)

In terms of the form and key centers of the piece, the full-flex arrangement is a copy and paste of the original work by Ticheli. The work opens in a relaxed cut-time tempo in the key of B-flat major with a four-measure introduction before a straightforward and lightly scored statement of the Shaker melody “Simple Gifts” at measure 5. This first statement continues to measure 23 when the second statement is introduced. This second statement adds more colors and voices to the statement and concludes with a four-measure modulation that transitions the piece into the third statement in a chorale style in the key of E-flat major at measure 45. At the conclusion of the chorale statement, Ticheli returns to the relaxed cut-time tempo that began the work and places the melody in the lower voices of the ensemble while the upper voices provide an accompaniment changes from oscillating to brittle then returns to the original accompaniment before transitioning into the final climatic statement. This final statement begins at measure 79 and is a fully scored statement for the entire ensemble with denser harmonic language than the simplistic statements that open the work. The work concludes with a brief coda that echoes a fragment of the “Simple Gifts” melody before cadencing via a plagal progression into an E-flat major chord.

Overall, Ticheli is able to achieve a recognizable reduction of his original work. Through his use of cross-cuing in the original score, most of the work can be easily reduced to four or less voices. However, there are some moments in the original version when the full ensemble is playing that Ticheli uses more than four voices to add color his harmonies and progressions. The first instance of this is in the first half of the chorale statement in measures 48-51. In his original score, Ticheli adds additional color tones, scalar progressions, and harmonic tensions that extend beyond the capabilities that four voices can offer (Example 2).

48 49 50 51

1
Fl.

2
Fl.

Ob.

1
B♭ Cl. 2

3
B♭ Cl. 2

B♭ Bass Cl.

Bsn.

1
Eb Alto Sax.

2
Eb Alto Sax.

B♭ Ten. Sax.

Eb Bari. Sax.

1
B♭ Tpt. 2

3
B♭ Tpt. 2

F Hrn.

1
Tbn.

2
Tbn.

Euph.

Tuba

Example 2: *Simple Gifts* movement four (m. 48-51)

He manages this by simplifying the harmonic progression while keeping the melodic content intact (Example 3).

The image displays a full-flex arrangement of the fourth movement of 'Simple Gifts' by Friedrich, measures 48-51. The score is organized into five systems, each containing four staves. The instruments are: Fl. & Ob., B♭ Cl. Bs. Cl. Ten. Sax. B♭ Tpt., Alto Sax Bari. Sax., Horns, and Bsn. & Low Brass. The key signature is two flats (B♭ and E♭), and the time signature is common time (C). The notation includes various rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests, with some notes beamed together. The arrangement shows a clear harmonic structure across the different instrument groups.

Example 3: *Simple Gifts* movement four, full-flex arrangement (m. 48-51)

While this differs from the original work's color, it does not diminish the effectiveness of the statement in the newly realized harmonization. There are two other noticeable places, measures

57-58 and measures 96-99, that Ticheli simplifies the harmonic progress in the score. Ticheli approaches these two sections in the same fashion as the aforementioned chorale statement. He reharmonizes the melody in the most effective way that four voices can state the harmonic progression. This arrangement is a skillful example in how to reduce a work without losing its original intent or voice.

AN OVERVIEW OF JAMES DAVID'S *MARCH TUMBAO*

James David is the associate professor of composition at Colorado State University and award-winning composer whose works have been performed by many high school and university ensembles throughout the United States and abroad.⁴ *March Tumbao* is an original work completed in November 2020 for flexible ensemble in six parts, plus four percussion parts. This composition fits into the Creative Repertoire Initiative's description of a flex, but not full flex, work as it has assigned instrumentation to each of the six parts. Part one can be assigned to piccolo, flute, and/or Bb clarinet; part two can be assigned to flute, oboe, Bb clarinet, and/or alto saxophone; part three can be assigned to Bb clarinet, Bb trumpet, alto saxophone, and/or horn in F; part four can be assigned to Bb clarinet, Bb trumpet, alto saxophone, and/or horn in F; part five can be assigned to tenor saxophone, horn in F, trombone, euphonium, and/or bassoon; and part six can be assigned to bass clarinet, baritone saxophone, trombone, euphonium, bassoon, and/or tuba (Example 4).

⁴ James David, "About James David," Accessed March 6, 2021, <http://www.jamesmdavid.com/about.html>.

The score is organized into six parts, each with a bracketed list of instruments. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats) and the time signature is 2/2. The first measure is marked with a forte (*f*) dynamic.

- PART 1:** Piccolo (opt.), Flute, B-Clarinet.
- PART 2:** Flute, Oboe, B-Clarinet, E-Alt Sax.
- PART 3:** B-Clarinet, B-Trumpet, E-Alt Sax, F Horn.
- PART 4:** B-Clarinet, B-Trumpet, E-Alt Sax, F Horn.
- PART 5:** B-Tenor Sax, F Horn, Trombone, Euphonium, Bassoon.
- PART 6:** Bass Clarinet, E-Bari Sax, Trombone, Euphonium, Bassoon, Tuba.

Below the woodwind and brass parts are the percussion parts: Xylophone, Percussion 1, Percussion 2, and Percussion 3. Percussion 3 includes a box labeled 'Timbales'.

Example 4: *March Tumbao*, score layout (m. 1)

This differs from a fully flexible instrumentation because there is a set of instruments attached to each part to achieve a desired timbre and color. If the conductor is planning on having more than one performer per part, they must distribute the six parts equally to the full ensemble. For example, if there are three performers on part one, there must also be three performers on every part and a total number of eighteen wind players, in addition to the aforementioned percussionists.

The title for *March Tumbao* comes from the combination of American style marches and the tumbao rhythm, the principal bass rhythm found in Afro-Cuban dance music. This rhythm is as synonymous to Afro-Cuban dance music as swing is to American jazz music. According to David, “*March Tumbao* is an amalgam of rhythmic styles of the Afro-Cuban tradition with the American march forms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.”⁵ He compares this cross-cultural blend of rhythmic languages to the stylings of Jelly Roll Morton, who would incorporate Afro-Latin rhythms into his ragtime pieces. David also states that he borrows other Afro-Cuban rhythmic and melodic idioms such as the cascara, the son clave, and the montuno, placing them in the march form that he constructed for the piece.

The form, according to David, “...incorporates all of the typical elements of American marches and rags including a boisterous introduction, a syncopated binary first section, a tuneful trio section, the break strain or dogfight, and a virtuosic woodwind obbligato in the final trio statement.”⁶ The piece is mostly in a cut time or 2/2 time signature, further fulfilling the standards of both Afro-Cuban and march music, however David will place measures of 3/4 or 5/4 time that sets the pulse off kilter as the music approaches the end of phrases (Example 5).

⁵ James David, *March Tumbao* (Fort Collins, CO: Oakdale Road Music, 2020), 4.

⁶ David, *March Tumbao*, 4.

The image shows a musical score for three parts: B♭ Cl. / B♭ Tpt., E♭ A. Sax., and F Horn. The score is labeled 'PART 3' and covers measures 77-85. It features complex rhythmic patterns with triplets and syncopation. The time signature changes from 5/4 to 4/4 at the end of the excerpt. Dynamics include mp (mezzo-piano).

Example 5: *March Tumbao*, odd meters (m. 77-85)

While these time signatures are somewhat uncommon for marches and Afro-Cuban music, they are more commonplace in the compositional language of modern composers, like James David, allowing them to place their own signature on old forms of music.

As David states in his program notes for *March Tumbao*, the work begins with an energetic two-part section that features heavily syncopated rhythms for the whole ensemble in the key center of B-flat major. After an eight-measure introduction of tutti scoring for the ensemble, David moves to an eight-measure, three-part canon that begins in part one, passes to part two in measure three, and continues in part three by measure five. This canon is accompanied by an ostinato from the triangle in the percussion section that sets up the Afro-Cuban rhythmic language of the first theme. The canon is composed of a two-measure rhythmic cell that features heavily syncopated rhythms.

Once the work reaches measure 17, the first theme of the binary first section appears in part three, along with the first iteration of the tumbao rhythm in part six. The tumbao rhythm lies heavily on beat one, the end of two, and beat four; similar to a two plus three clave rhythm, but only borrowing one bar of the pattern instead of the whole iteration (Example 6).

PART 6

Bs. Cl.
E♭ B. Sax
Tbn.
Euph.
Bssn.
Tuba

Example 6: *March Tumbao*, tumbao rhythm (m. 18-19)

The first theme is a seven-measure phrase, an odd phrase length for a march or Afro-Cuban piece of music (Example 7).

PART 3

B♭ Cl.
B♭ Tpt.
E♭ A. Sax.
F Hn.

Example 7: First theme of *March Tumbao* (m. 17-24).

Each phrase is interrupted by an anacrusis measure that passes the theme between part three and part one. This theme is exchanged back and forth between various parts four times, with each part playing the theme twice. The second iteration of the theme adds harmony in part two to the melodic line, now being played by part one, while the third iteration adds harmony in part five to the tumbao rhythm, and fourth iteration adds the son clave rhythm in part four, filling in the harmonies already established by part five and six in the tumbao ostinato (Example 8).

PART 4

B♭ Cl.
B♭ Tpt.
E♭ A. Sax.
F Hn.

Example 8: *March Tumbao*, son clave pattern (m. 41-42).

March Tumbao continues in its first section with the introduction of the second theme in measure 49 (Example 9), first stated by part five with variations of the son clave rhythm heard in parts two and four.

Example 9: Second theme of *March Tumbao* (m. 49-56)

This theme is somewhat similar to the first theme in its syncopated rhythms but does offer variety by introducing a quarter note triplet in the middle of the phrase. This phrase is also seven measures in length but is only played once before a quick return to the first theme, now accompanied by full ensemble before transitioning to the trio section of the piece. In this full ensemble accompaniment, David brings back the son clave rhythm and adds a new Afro-Cuban element of montuno, written for part one. This montuno pattern is an iconic pattern in Afro-Cuban music, usually played by the piano, and is immediately recognizable to even casual listeners (Example 10).

Example 10: Montuno pattern, *March Tumbao*, part 1 (m. 58-60)

David then starts to the trio section of his piece at measure 66, moving the key signature up a fourth to the key of E-flat major, and placing a four-measure introduction in parts four, five, and six that plays off of the preestablished son clave rhythm and tumbao rhythm. The tuneful trio

melody is introduced in measure 70 by part three and while it is still syncopated, it is less so than the previous two themes stated in the binary first section (Example 11).

The image shows a musical score for three parts: PART 3 (B♭ Cl. and B♭ Tpt.), E♭ A. Sax., and F Hn. The music is in 3/4 time and features a syncopated melody with triplets and accents. The dynamic marking is *mf*. The score is for measures 69-76.

Example 11: Trio melody of *March Tumbao* (m. 69-76)

David continues to keep up the seven-measure phrase length that he established in the first section and the practice of introducing the next phrase with an anacrusis measure in an odd time signature. He states this theme four times, each time being performed in part three. The first two iterations are virtually the same with the melody being played in part three and accompaniment provided by parts four and six, playing a son clave rhythm and tumbao rhythm respectively. The third iteration adds a countermelody in part five and continues in the same fashion in the fourth statement of the trio theme.

David then moves to the “dogfight” or break strain at measure 102 that features ensemble rhythmic statements and canonic statements that harken back to the opening introduction material. However, instead of introducing each new part entrance every two measures as he does in the introduction of the piece, David now introduces the material every measure or every two beats. This heavily syncopated figure introduced in canon causes dense rhythmic textures that can be difficult to hear clarity in the ensemble.

As *March Tumbao* moves into the final section, David restates his four-measure trio instruction statement but with an added montuno rhythm in part one adding another Afro-Cuban flavor to the color palette. Following the four-measure introduction, David launches into a full-blown ensemble colorization of four statements of the trio melody, now being played in octaves

by parts two and four. In addition to the son clave and tumbao rhythms that were played in the original treatment of the trio melody, David adds a woodwind flourish in parts one and two to give more flair to the final treatment of the trio melody. He also adds a fuller percussion section using Afro-Cuban instruments such as maracas, cabasa, timbales, and bongos that gives the piece even more Latin flair as it drives to its conclusion. The work closes with a short coda that plays off the trio section trading gestures between parts two, three, and five before ending the work.

FUTURE APPLICATIONS OF FLEXIBLE MUSIC

Flexible music will continue to be used by small programs that lack the instrumentation to play fuller works. The incredible growth in the number of flexible arrangements over the past year will be the greatest benefit to these ensembles, especially the emergence of original works for flexible ensemble. As the world and ensembles return to normalcy post-COVID, I am hopeful that composers and arrangers will continue to write high-quality flexible works and arrangements for these ensembles as they also return to composing for full ensembles.

Another potential important use for this music will be beginning level conducting classes for undergraduate students at the university level. Student conductors often conduct their peers, but due to the smaller enrollment of these classes, not all of the parts in the selected repertoire can be covered by the ensemble assembled for the class. Flexible music will allow teachers and matriculating conductors the ability to hear all of the parts, regardless of the ensemble that is formed by their peers. There may also be a use for these pieces even when full ensembles return. If a conductor desires to do a piece with a smaller instrumentation but does not want to perform the standard wind band work, this repertoire may offer them a new set of works from which to choose.

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