

Preparing Your Band for Festival

It's an honor for me to have been asked to provide an SCSBOA newsletter article exploring the preparation of school bands for festival. Festival participation is held in the highest regard by our association. Indeed, other significant instrumental music curriculum components (e.g. marching band) are often justified by the opportunities they provide for the development of many of the fundamental skills required for successful concert and festival performance. The SCSBOA Festival Philosophy maintains that festival participation offers excellent opportunities to complement classroom pursuits of high standards of music performance, provides powerful encounters with enhanced musical perception, responsiveness, involvement and discrimination, and affords unique supplemental aesthetic and cultural experiences.

Much of the information offered here regarding the preparation of a school band for festival may be applicable to other school music ensembles as well, but may be of limited immediate use in late March and April. Nonetheless, some of these ideas may enrich the benefits of your groups' festival participation by providing a useful context in which you utilize the comments you receive from adjudicators.

You begin preparing for festival the first time a future ensemble member hears your current group perform, or hears somebody talk about your group! The attitudes and standards of musical performance and behavior of any group define their festival performance potential. The director must insistently and consistently inspire the students to the highest musical standards. These standards are defined by the director's musicianship, personality and attitudes, the professionalism of the program's organization, the attitudes of the students and the school community, and the characteristics of the school environment. Pragmatically, this translates to specific strategies. Include in the design of your life continued involvement with playing and making high-level, high-quality music. Lead by presenting the highest possible example of commitment, enthusiasm, preparation, responsibility and integrity, and encourage those who cooperate. Guide and nurture the development of positive, reasonable, ethical and mature attitudes. Continually pursue the most efficient tactics for every organizational element of your program. If something is too challenging, time consuming or expensive- fix it. Establish high expectations for the maintenance of your facility and equipment (rehearsal room, office, storage facilities, instruments, etc.) and insist on a perpetual mode of respect, manners and courtesy. The psychological impact of clutter is distraction, which diminishes the potential for focus, and tolerance of disrespect of any kind will retard all musical efforts. As philosophical as these standards may seem, the level of achievement of the musical parameters of tone, pitch adjustment, rhythm, balance and expression will be defined by the levels you establish of these standards.

The selection of literature for festival performance is a process that requires careful consideration. The key to success is the coordination of literature selection with the realistic assessment of eventual performance mastery by each student. The instance of the presentation of literature beyond the ability of the performers to master is rampant at festivals. The difference between the director's and the adjudicators' assessment of mastery will be the essence of the value of the ensemble's evaluation.

Instrumentation is another factor that will significantly affect your establishment of musical standards, your day-to-day music making, your selection of literature and the assessment of your groups at festival. The recruitment and development of bass instrument performers is crucial for bands of any classification, and should be considered one of the highest priorities. Bands hoping to successfully present mastered A and AA literature must also first meet the challenges of maintaining a supply of proficient double reed, low reeds, French horn, baritone, and concert percussion performers. The director must make these facts known at the beginning of each school year, and constantly promote appreciation for students willing to play these important instruments.

Successful directors are continually searching for quality literature because the instrumentation and mastery potential of their groups are constantly changing. Fortunately, the availability and variety of quality wind band literature, especially at the mid-level (Grade B) has improved significantly in recent years. Although an exact definition of quality literature is elusive, generally recognized characteristics include the presence of additive counterpoint, distinctive articulation style, sequential and evolving musical texture, and melodic and harmonic intrigue. One of the most effective ways to select appropriate literature is to collect and review recordings of pieces on the SCSBOA Festival Literature list in which you recognize these (and other) characteristics. Other lists, published in journals and

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Bill Hoehne, Citrus College (*continued*)

periodicals, or as ensemble literature resource books, can also be useful for the exploration of literature and the collection of recordings. Make sure that you are receiving the annual recordings freely distributed by wind band music publishers, and listen to all the music that is appropriate for the level of your groups. Your fellow directors are also constantly searching for and trying new music, and will have many pieces to recommend. Remember, however, that their standards and the characteristics of the group that enjoyed success with a favorite piece may not necessarily match your current group and situation. Finally, design your festival literature presentation to include pieces that are contrasting and complimentary: fast and slow, legato and articulated, traditional and contemporary, etc.

The SCSBOA Performance Adjudication Form specifies the association's select and prioritized criteria of festival performance evaluation: tone quality, intonation, technique and fundamentals, musicianship, balance, and interpretation. These values constitute an essential list with which a director can define program standards. The collection and implementation of daily strategies to develop the requisite musical skills in each of these criteria are the secret to the successful elevation of program standards. Develop a "warm-up, toning and tuning" ritual, with many variations, that begin every rehearsal meeting. All the standards described above (behavior, focus, respect, etc., as well as tone quality, intonation, etc.) and your established levels of these standards must be consistently demanded during every "warm-up, toning and tuning" ritual. Constantly support the students' aural contributions and adjustments, and inspire them to simultaneously listen and relate to the contributions and adjustments of other ensemble members. "Slow to fast" is an invaluable strategy for learning literature and developing technique. Learn music section by section, but also repeatedly rehearse musical transitions. Once you have selected your festival literature (which should happen as far before performance as possible) design a preparation schedule. Work to keep all pieces at approximately the same level of preparation. Provide regular run-throughs, regardless of the current state of preparation, after which you offer your positive but frank evaluation of the ensemble's achievement of its standards. Convince the students that true performance mastery is achieved only when all participants are able to perform their technical functions effortlessly, while simultaneously expressing their individual musicality in the context of the contributions of other ensemble members (by listening!)

Collect sight-reading books, unison rhythm and melodic studies, and prepare a folder with a number of pieces that are one and two grades below the classification of the ensemble. Keep this folder set in your library and don't permit the students to practice the music it contains. Once per week early in the festival season quickly distribute the sight-reading folder near the end of the rehearsal and practice the SCSBOA sight-reading procedure. As festival day approaches, increase the frequency of this activity.

Finally, remember that the musical standards expected at festival will not be achieved at festival unless they are pursued every day in the class room. Festival performance is but a brief, concert-dress, presentation of the music we make with our students every day.