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Creating an Inspired Musical Experience: 21 Tips for Success at Festival

Performing at concert festival is an inspiring musical experience for both music students and conductors. Concert festival is more than an assessment event, it is an opportunity to challenge students to achieve at their highest level. In addition to the learning experience, it is an occasion that helps clarify goals for a student, ensemble, or program. Festivals have contributed much to improve the quality of groups and the musicianship of students over the last 70 years. As thoughtful music educators, it is a topic worthy of our deepest consideration.

Following is a collection of tips for enhancing the festival experience. This advice focuses primarily on the actual day, not the musical preparation. Many of these tips are subjective opinions, some of which evoke various levels of agreement among professionals. Consider these tips first, then imagine the event as you want it to create the inspired musical experience your students deserve.

Stage Presence

- Enter the stage professionally. Judges and audience members are influenced by the way a group enters the performing area. Percussion enter the stage first to set up equipment in an efficient and professional manner. For bands, it is generally accepted for students to move from the warm-up room to the performing stage in order. The leader of each row should traverse the arc between the stands and the chairs. He or she should not move directly to his or her chair as this creates a traffic flow problem around the stands. It is also acceptable to enter the stage individually in the manner of a professional orchestra.
- Provide your own setup crew. Your ensemble should set up on stage as closely as possible to their rehearsal positions. A trained crew has the best chance of accomplishing this. If this is not possible, provide a detailed setup chart, drawn to scale, and enlist a trusted colleague to supervise. You will not be allowed to provide a setup crew in a union house; however, professional stagehands will welcome polite directions.
- Have performers adjust chair position and stand heights when they enter the stage. Do not accept the setup you have been provided. If the setup is not correct, the performers should quietly move their chairs and instruments to the correct position. This should be done with confidence and not await instructions from the director. Raise stands to the proper height.
- Play a tuning note on stage in lieu of a warm-up. Usually you have just enjoyed twenty minutes in a warm-up room. Unless there is a significant time lapse between the warm-up and the performance, forego the group warm-up on stage. A couple of tuning notes should be enough for the students to get used to the acoustics and make sure they are ready to play.
- Play a Bach chorale as a warm-up. If you decide to warm-up on stage, choose a phrase from a beautiful chorale. You do not have to play the entire chorale; remove repeats or end on an authentic cadence. Choose a chorale that the group sounds good playing. It should be in a solid key, such as B flat major, E flat major, or F major for bands and G major or D major for orchestras. Do not play exercises, particularly any that resemble a marching band warm-up. Groups that have tone and intonation problems might reveal these to the judges (and audience) during the warm-up. Opinions are formed during this crucial period.
- This is a festival, not a concert. Certain concert protocols seem awkward at an assessment event. Usually, groups are introduced by an announcer. Conductors may remain close to the podium with a relaxed, yet professional demeanor. Break the ice with your students with a smile, but avoid jokes and banter. At the conclusion of all the selections, the entire ensemble should stand to receive and acknowledge applause. It is not necessary to recognize soloists as in a concert, but if you do, be efficient and do not draw it out. Musicians should sit before the applause ends.
- There must be total professionalism at all times. There can be no talking or other distractions during the entrance, performance, or exit. Performers should exhibit relaxed concentration throughout their time on the stage.
- Move with the music. Musicians should feel free to move naturally to enhance the nuances and phrases in the

music. Music is inextricably linked with motion. Therefore, it is unnatural to remain rigid. Move to express the character of the music. However, remind your students to tap their toes inside their shoes, instead of tapping their feet.

- Dress well. Musicians' performance wear should be clean, pressed, and neat. Wear black socks and shined, black dress shoes--no running shoes or sandals. Concert black looks professional and is increasingly the norm in many areas. Females should not wear dresses more appropriate for the prom. Concert attire covers the shoulders, chest, arms, and legs. The attention should be drawn to the music, not the attire. While individualism is honored in daily life, the needs of the ensemble should be considered in regard to jewelry, bows, scarves, hair clips, unnatural hair color, and so on. Exceptions for religious beliefs are always allowed. Band uniforms that are designed for the concert hall are appropriate. The Marine Band looks terrific in their traditional uniforms.

The male conductor should wear a solid, dark suit or tuxedo. Sport coats and trousers are not formal enough. Tailcoats are traditionally worn after 6:00 p.m. Tails seem out of place in the morning and afternoon. Conductors should check the hem length. Do not sit while wearing your jacket, as the wrinkles are unseemly to the audience. Wear suspenders, not a belt, for proper hang of your trousers. Female conductors have more freedom in their attire, but generally may wish to adhere to the performer guidelines mentioned above.

Literature Selection and Performance

- Play only quality literature. Play a variety of repertoire and play only music you are passionate about. Solicit the opinion of mentors you trust well in advance of making a final decision. Demonstrate song style (chorale) and dance style, including marcato or march style. It is appropriate to perform an overture, tone poem, or suite; a chorale-style selection; and a march (for bands). If you have a fanfare or an overture, it usually best to open with it. You can begin or end with a march. Novelty numbers are better left for the spring concert.
- Use the most authentic instrument available. Honor the composer's intent if at all possible, including utilizing the instrument she chose.
 1. Do not use electric bass unless it is written in the score.
 2. Celeste parts may be played on piano, up an octave, if no celeste is available.
 3. E flat soprano clarinet can be eliminated if the part is doubled. If it is an independent part, essential to the composition, it must be played.
 4. E flat alto clarinet can be eliminated if the part is doubled.
 5. If no harp is available, the part can be played on an electronic keyboard. However, please make sure it sounds authentic and blends well with the ensemble. Do not put the speaker in front. Electronic sounds should play through the ensemble to assist with blending their sounds into the acoustic sonority.
 6. If you are missing an instrument, make sure any independent parts are played by another instrument. Do not leave out parts. Indicate this change in the judges' scores.
- Use your own percussion equipment. You must respect the space and time limits of the contest. However, your percussionists will perform better on equipment that they are familiar with. You will have confidence that your own snare drum and bass drum are tuned properly. Use your best judgment regarding timpani.
- Percussion often overplay the hall. When percussion rehearse in a dry acoustic environment such as a carpeted rehearsal room, they often overplay when performing concert halls or theatres with acoustic shells, wood floors, and highly reflective and reverberant acoustic characteristics. Many times suspended cymbal, crash cymbal, bass drum impacts, and snare are too loud. They should be prepared to adjust immediately.
- The timpanist should tune the timpani. Part of the musical education of the student timpanist is to tune the instruments. The director should not assist in the tuning in public.
- Double bass adds warmth to a band sound. A good sounding double bass player and an in tune timpani can make a big difference in the overall sonority of a band.
- The piano lid should be fully extended and reflect the sound into the audience. The piano sounds best with the lid up. The lid down or on short stick is to assist with balancing solo instruments in recital. Use an acoustic piano, no electronics.
- Tone and intonation is the most important element of music. Work on tone and intonation daily. Sing often.
- Define all styles that should be spaced or connected. At the minimum, marcato style is spaced and chorale style is connected. Dances should dance. Listen to the body and release of the note, not just the beginning. The more reverberant the room, the more space required between notes.

Educational and Ethical Issues

- Listen to other groups. Students learning how to listen and honor other musicians is an essential part of the

experience. Provide adjudication sheets to each student or require a written response to the performance. Some states require listening blocks for each participating ensemble. This is worthy of consideration in all areas.

- Prepare students for a clinic experience. If there is a clinic, be sure the students are prepared for learning. Avoid the emotional let down after the performance. Students should be receptive to the comments and ideas of the clinician. There should be direct eye contact, nods, smiles, and absolutely no talking. Percussion should be particularly mindful to listen and avoid the habit of setting up equipment while the clinician is speaking. The director should allow the clinician to engage the group without interruption, take notes, and be ready to provide information (not excuses) about the ensemble if asked.
- Provide original scores. Purchase a score for each adjudicator and clinician early. Buy the additional scores when you select the music. You can use them for guests in your rehearsals.
- Be 100 percent copyright compliant. Use all original music in rehearsal and performance. Respect intellectual property rights and teach your kids to respect copyrights. Students trust you and your ethical choices. It is your responsibility to know the law and be an excellent role model. The Music Publishers' Association provides excellent resources at www.mpa.org. It is embarrassing in front of all your friends and colleagues to appear at music festival in obvious violation of law.

To protect your original music, invest in black folios. If you use card stock folios, turn them on their side and avoid showing music store advertisements during the performance.

Coda

The concert ensemble is the centerpiece of your program and the concert festival is often the culminating experience of this group. Use it to set goals, achieve excellence, and move your program forward. Create an inspired musical experience by attending to every detail and asking for excellence in all areas. Set high expectations for your preparation and performance at concert festival and you will be richly rewarded with higher levels of musicianship and commitment. Expect excellence in all areas of your participation to create an inspired musical experience at concert festival.

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