

But Band Festival Is In March

Why go to Festival?

It is a good motivator and “measuring stick.” Accept it for what it is. It is three people’s opinions of how you play three pieces of music, one time, on one given day.

When do I start?

You start on the first day of school. You should not have to prepare in a special way for festival. It should be just another concert that demonstrates the principals and beliefs that you teach each day in your classroom. Start to work on good embouchures, correct hand positions and characteristic sounds on day one. Do not accept anything else. This should really start in middle school and continue, but many bad habits can be corrected in high school.

Use chorales, I suggest the Moravian Chorale Books, to start working on balance and intonation right away. Use them to teach music theory in your full band rehearsal. Work the balance pyramid daily. Seat your students for good balance and help them to get used to what the balance pyramid sounds like. Work for a full, balanced, dark sound. Talk about “bad notes” and how to fix them.

Start working on technique now! Work scales in class, not just one, but at least all of the all district scales including the chromatic. Use exercises that work for you. Some suggestions are scales in thirds, the Clarke Studies, or a good method book that you choose. You must actively work on technique. Just playing though music will not get it done.

Make sure that reed players start with four good reeds and rotate them. This way they all break in and a student doesn’t play one reed until it turns to mush. **Never let them use a brand new reed the day of festival or of a concert.** If they rotate reeds and one is broken, they always have at least 3 more that are ready to play on.

Walk around during your rehearsals checking posture and horn hand positions often. It is amazing what you can find out. Try setting up a video camera in the back of your rehearsal room. Have it running when your students enter and let it run for the entire rehearsal. We all can learn a lot from this.

Use handmade reeds for your double reed players. They make a huge difference and they do not cost all that much more. (Example) Bring people in for clinics for double reeds and other instruments in the fall. If they make embouchure adjustments or correct bad habits early then your students have plenty of time to fix them and will play with confidence by March. Waiting until second semester may be too late.

What about marching band?

Teach your students and make them understand that woodwinds, especially clarinets and saxophones, can not “keep up with” brass and percussion volume wise and produce a good tone quality. The only way that woodwinds can play as loud as brass is to loosen up their embouchures. This causes them to play flat and the tone spreads. The sound is terrible, uncharacteristic of the instruments and will destroy their embouchures. The difference between a concert band sound and a marching band sound is that in marching band the trumpets are the lead instrument and the brass and percussion are more predominant. In concert band the clarinet section is the lead instrument and **everyone must balance to them**. Many people have problems here. You cannot allow students to blow their faces off until December, picking up bad habits, and expect to change them by March. It just does not work that way. When marching band is over basically the brass drop all dynamics one dynamic level, the percussion drop two dynamic levels, except for timpani, and everyone balances to the clarinet section.

Woodwind players cannot perform on flag and in the pit percussion until December and play with any kind of embouchure and pitch control by March. You must find a way for them to play from the first day of school.

You have to know your band and pick music to fit them.

Having a fall concert works great. You can begin to see where your strong and weak sections are. If a section is really weak this gives you time to do something about it. If you have instrumentation problems this gives you time to adjust those also. You can switch someone in the fall, over the summer would be better, and have them contributing to the band by March. Waiting until January will probably not work.

Pick music that is aimed just under your top players. If you aim it at the top players your finished product may not make it. But I want to challenge my top players! That’s why we have All District Band, Honors Band and Solo and Ensemble Festival. Use them as section leaders and let them work with the weaker players.

Do not pick music just because it is your favorite, or because you always wanted to play it, or because you played it in college. Pick music that fits your band! I love the 1812 Overture, but I have never had the high school band to pull it off with two other numbers.

Do not let the students vote on what to play. Be smart enough to know that if it is a piece that they like they will work harder on it, but sometimes we have to educate! Students do not understand all the variables involved in this decision. How many times have they not liked a piece of music at first and then begged to play it later. You are the one with the degree. Use it!

Prepare the score and know it inside and out.

One of the biggest mistakes that we can make is to learn the music along with the band. Score study for festival should start in first semester not over the holiday break or during January. If you use the, "here try this method in January," by the time that you pick your music you may not have enough time to prepare it. On the other side of the coin, do not pick it too early and play it on the winter concert. It will be stale and sound that way in March.

Research your pieces and know about the composer, when it was written, and in what style. You must know this to understand articulations, what trills to use and many other things about the piece.

Have several good recordings that you have listened to. If some of these recordings have different interpretations great. You decide on yours, but make sure it is the correct style and fits your band. Already be prepared for the conducting challenges and know what you are going to do.

Do what works for you. Mark the score, use highlighters etc. If you know that you are missing parts or have weak sections already have parts written out for these. Study each part; know where the pit falls are, and where alternate fingerings must be used. If you explain these when you start the piece then your students will not learn it using wrong fingerings and slide positions.

The biggest mistake that you can make is to learn the music along with the band! Your students deserve better!

Now let's go through the adjudication sheet.

Tone

This is first because it is the most important! If you play with a characteristic, supported tone quality this takes care of a lot of the rest of the sheet. If you don't, no one cares about the rest of the sheet. Let me stress again that your woodwinds cannot over blow and get a characteristic sound. **This category is all about basics.**

Intonation

Your band has to understand how to match pitch. The chorales will really help you here. Your students have to know what notes are "bad" on their respective instruments and how to fix them. Yes, I am talking about concert C's, Db's and B natural's, among others. You must really stress tuning octaves and unison pitches.

A sharp instrument in the bass line, and this includes the timpani, is death to good intonation. It is hard to find and shows up in the middle of the band.

Give specially attention to your baritone sax, bass clarinets and bassoons. Some strange things can go on in those sections.

Let's talk some about tuning. How do you tune? Do you stretch the octaves? Set the middle and stretch up and stretch down. Have the judges ever said that your flutes are flat? Do you know why?

Technique

Having good support, demonstrated by good tone quality, will really help you here. Most attack problems, or notes not speaking, are due to a lack of good support. Working scales and technical exercises all year will also eliminate problems. Be sure that the technique that you use is in the correct style for the piece. Work on attacks and releases daily. They will never improve if you count off for the band all of the time! You will get what you expect out of your students, so why not expect a lot. Please play with musical cut offs! (Examples)

Balance

The beginning of good balance is having a good bass line. Remember, at least one tuba for every 16 players is a good rule of thumb. Work the balance pyramid daily. Remember that you have a pyramid over all, one for brass, woodwind and percussion, and one in each individual section. Make a pyramid in each section. For instance, if you have 3 1st clarinets, then you should have about 5 2nd clarinets, and 9 3rd clarinets. If you had 6 clarinets how would you seat them? You always want more on the bottom than on the top. If a 1st clarinet or 1st trumpet part is divided, and you have 3 on a part, put 1 on the top and 2 on the bottom.

Most importantly remember, the concert band should be balanced to the clarinets. The clarinets are to the band what the violins are to the orchestra. They are the lead instrument. Balance the band to them. If your clarinets have to force their sound to be heard your overall band tone quality and intonation will suffer!

Always make sure that the melody can be heard. That is a comment that I have to make often when I judge. Where is the melody? Who has the melody here? This does not make musical sense to me at all. If the balance is "out of whack" then all of the rest of your adjudication sheet suffers. Make sure that your soloist can be heard. Remember that p for a soloist is different than p for the full band. Always make sure that they play with a good sound even if they have to play louder.

(Comments)

Are the adjudicators in the balcony? Remember that saxophones, bass clarinets and bell front baritone horns will be pointed right at them. You may want to adjust your set up. Will there be shells? Percussion placement is a concern here.

Final comments, **work the balance pyramid from the first day of school.** We are all creatures of habit. The more that students hear correct balance and work on it, the more opportunity you will have for it to become second nature to them.

Interpretation

Play all of the musical nuances; Dynamics, crescendos and decrescendos, ritardando and rallentando. By the way, the last two are different.

Work to shape and make musical phrases. It's easy. Find the peak of the phrase and crescendo up to it and decrescendo to the end of the phrase. **Of course before you can do that you have to phrase.** Mark all of the phrases and where sections are going to breathe. Do not leave it to chance.

Please do not clip phrase endings. (Explanation and examples) This especially goes for cut offs. Do not allow low sounds to drop out before the note is over. They will every time unless you correct it. Remember, the last sound that you should hear is low.

Do some research on your pieces? Is it a British March? Then it should be 108 mm. Is it a German March? 96 mm. What trills are correct for the style of the piece? When was it written? If it is a transcription then the notes are not as short and accents are different than in a 20th century band piece.

A word about tempi; Pay attention to what is marked and get as close to it as possible. If the tempo is marked 152 and you can only get to 144 so be it. As an adjudicator I had much rather hear you play 144 clean than at a frantic 152. Most directors have the opposite problem; they play pieces much too fast. Faster is not always better! Sometimes we rush through a piece too fast to play it musically. Please take your time in slow sections, shape the phrases and "milk the music" for all that it is worth.

Musical Effect

This really sums up everything. Was the piece alive or did it just lie there? All of the above areas affect this area. Taking care of business in the categories above will make this category a piece of cake. If you really make an effort to play musically a good adjudicator will forgive some small problems.

Other factors

This area "can make you, or break you." If your sheet is tied at 3 A's and 3 B's this category decides where you get a superior or an excellent.

Appearance

Any band can look neat. If you do not have uniforms wear a band t-shirt and black pants, or black and white. Most bands perform the same way that they look. Shoes are important if you are attempting to wear uniforms. When you are on stage your shoes show as much as your face.

Your appearance is important too. It says a lot to your students and makes a statement to the adjudicators. Have a spouse or good friend observe you from behind when you are directing at a concert in your concert attire. Is it time to get a bigger coat or larger pants? Ladies must be especially careful here. Everyone make sure that you look professional. Shoes are important too, especially the heels, and take off that great big ring of keys.

Make sure that your percussionists know what to do when they do not have a part.

Posture

Good posture is important and very necessary for correct support and playing with good intonation. (Bassoon story) Every person can be seen by the adjudicator if the adjudicator is in a balcony.

Choice of Music

I feel that my job as an adjudicator is to judge what I see and hear. I will only make comments here if the music does not fit the band, or if you play two pieces by the same composer or of the exact same style. Whenever possible play contrasting pieces. Your students will learn more and so will you. (Comments)

Instrumentation

I will only make comments about this if you have played pieces that you do not have the instrumentation to pull off or if you have not covered the parts by rewriting. (Comments)

A few final comments and suggestions

- Make Fridays recording days. Take the recording, your scores and a legal pad home for the weekend. Make a list with measure numbers of what you hear that is wrong. The following week, work your plan. This also makes a great lesson plan when the administrators come in. You do have lesson plans don't you?
- Practice on a stage the last couple of weeks if possible.
- Teach your timpanist to use a pitch pipe and sing into the drum. Please do not get the note from the tuba and bang on the drum. If you teach middle schools allow them to try first and then you check after them. They need to learn.
- Rotate your percussionist. Teach percussionist not drummers. Yes I will notice.
- Order your adjudicator's scores early. Make sure that they are free of pencil marks and comments, unless you want to help the adjudicators.
- Do not play a chorale on the stage. The place for that is in the warm up room. Just doodle on stage to get reeds wet and air flowing. Make me earn my money.

- Be Professional. Do not yell out your students on stage, or talk to them out loud while the performance is going on, or shush them to get them to play softer.
- Do not invite other people in to work with your band so that you may get back and listen. It is amazing what we can hear when we are not in front of the band. The week before festival have others listen only, and you direct. If someone else changes your tempi it only confuses and frustrates your students.
- Collect all of the music after the last rehearsal and put it all together in a box.
- Do double checks on all of the instruments before you leave on the day of festival. Make sure that the tuba players have packed their mouthpieces and that your percussionist have everything that they need. If you teach a middle school band, you may want to take your bass drum.
- Stay and listen to several others bands at festival if at all possible. This is part of the learning process. You may want to have the students fill out judges sheets or write a critique.

Comments on Sight Reading

You practice for sight reading at festival every time that you read a piece. Have a plan and work it from the first day of school. Sight read a new piece at least once a week. This is the best way that I know of to check and see if your students are retaining what you are teaching. If your students actually practice sight reading and have a system to follow, then they will not feel awkward about it at festival. What system do you use?

General Comments

Make festival a positive experience for your students. No matter what rating you receive, read the judges comments to your students, and after you have previewed them, play at least one of the adjudicator's tapes for them. Do not miss your next rehearsal with them after festival unless it is an emergency. They want to know what you think more than what the adjudicators said. Do not leave them hanging.

Keep your adjudicators sheets and tapes. You may want to refer to them if you perform the same piece again or if you have one the same adjudicators later.

Questions and discussion

What is a superior? What is the difference between a superior and an excellent rating?

When is it time to move up into the next grade level?

Free for new directors and those changing jobs

1. Do not throw off on the director that was there before you. It is unprofessional and will come back to bite you.
2. Do not try to change too much too fast. The first year pick a few things that you just can't live with and save the rest for later.
3. Get to know the secretary and janitor well. They can usually help you more than the principal and they are much more accessible.
4. Find a mentor and do not be afraid to call them.