

Involving Students and Parents 10 Years Ago on the Bandworld ABA Page

by Stan Michalski

Standards for a performance organization, unlike standards that are introduced periodically (on a seemingly whimsical basis) by numerous local, state and national organizations, must have merit based upon local financial support, scheduling considerations, conductor enthusiasm and, above all, the purpose of the organization within the school music curriculum.

Obviously, the structure of any organization should follow the purpose and function of the intended or established organization. In an attempt to sustain musical acceptance, far too many conductors attempt to imitate organizations which are deemed successful by a variety of standards. This fallacy creates undue hardship since it is impossible to replicate success without considering the factors that support and promulgate successful performance organizations. For example, is the administrative support as generous in one school district as another? Is the financial support as lucrative from one district to another? Does the teaching staff include qualified and dedicated personnel to support a similar program? Is the schedule for applied lessons and rehearsals conducive to maintain a successful program? Finally, is the conductor as enthusiastic and willing to exert the necessary energy to develop a successful performance program?

Therefore, it is obvious that when comparing performance organizations, numerous factors must be considered to insure accurate and indisputable similarities. Financial support, staffing, scheduling, equipment and physical plant considerations are just a few items that need to be taken into account. However, the factors that genuinely influence the success of a program are those involving people and this necessitates a plan of action far more elaborate than success in attaining a large budget or increased rehearsal time. The four areas of concern—student, parent, administration and conductor when working as a team—can virtually guarantee a successful performance organization within any educational setting. With the earnest involvement of all four interests, a performance organization can strive for success with the knowledge that support is being rendered by interested and active participants.

Of utmost importance are the goals that are established within each area of involvement. Goals must have a common thread that embody the spirit of growth, development and accomplishment of a performance organization, and, as such, must be acknowledged by all in terms of organizational matters. Without this basic understanding, acceptable standards of performance and overall accountability are difficult, if not impossible to achieve.

Student Involvement

Since students are the primary reason for the existence of performance organizations, their involvement in organizational matters is necessary to maintain high musical standards and personal support. It is not sufficient to train students as musicians in the early grades and then ódue to a lack of planning and interest in their behalf - fail to observe their desires in terms of continued membership. It is a conductor's domain to provide the musical and personal guidance, program justification and realistic goal setting as guidelines which serve as the driving force for student development and musical accomplishment.

Rehearsal and performance schedules must be realistic, firmly established and followed. It seems strange that an athletic program can set schedules for several years in advance and generally follow the schedule without any undue interruptions. Why shouldn't concert and rehearsal schedules for performance organizations be entered on the school master schedule in a similar fashion? Of course, once accepted as part of the printed schedule, performances must be presented in a timely and professional manner.

Students should be constantly challenged in their musical development, both as individuals and as an organization. Can growth be identified? Athletic programs can accomplish this with won-loss records. What system is in order to quantify the musical growth of the individual and the group as a whole? Can students identify the benefits of the program? Are results and accomplishments publicized? Is the literature selected based upon student musical growth or other extrinsic factors such as festival participation, competitive events or current popular television thematic materials?

There should be a form of a mastery learning system in place to insure musical growth as the primary purpose of participation in a performance organization. It is necessary to identify development of musical skills when selecting literature and to indicate progression from one level of achievement to another in consideration of the musical standards developed for the organization. Finally, the literature, programming and concertizing considerations should be based upon the student abilities and the objectives of the organization. Conductors must constantly demonstrate a concern for student involvement and musical development and not lose sight of the primary purpose of any performance organization: the performing student.

Parent Involvement

Although it is highly significant and necessary, fund raising by many parent groups seems to be the dominant factor for their existence. More importantly, parents should be made aware of the goals of a particular performance organization and, in turn, provide the necessary educational and musical support and then, if needed, the financial support. It is imperative that parents be informed of the overall schedule of activities and events of a performance organization, and most notably, the actual amount of time that will be involved.

Scheduling concerns are a factor that cannot be avoided in present day societal forces that involve working parents, students with part-time employment and pressures for academic

achievement. A breakdown in communications in this area gives cause for much misunderstanding and discontentment. Conductors must vigorously strive to develop and nurture the support of parent groups which often times have short-lived purposes current participating students. Additionally, conductors have an obligation to develop working relationships that have long term results as the primary objective rather than short lived successes that are, in many cases, difficult to replicate. For instance, attendance at a nationally renowned parade is important and, of necessity, expensive. Is it the wishes of an organization to utilize parental involvement for a huge once in a life time activity or should there be an established plan for musical growth and planned performances over an extended period of time? Obviously, some communities can do both because of the demographics of the area and the goals of the existing program. However, this type of activity should not be dependant on the organizational membership or considered the norm. Its replication by most districts is not feasible, desirable and/or realistic. Parent involvement can and should be a major factor in supporting the purpose of a performance organization, the standards of performance and fulfillment of goals.

Administration Involvement

It is the privilege of the author to meet many administrators when serving as guest conductor or as an adjudicator for festivals throughout the United States. In every instance, members of school administrative staffs demonstrate sincere efforts to support the musical activities in progress and the efforts being exerted by the host director and/or participating directors and student musicians. In a most recent guest conducting assignment, the superintendent of the host school observed the rehearsals on three different occasions and then attended both Friday and Saturday night festival concerts. Administrators must be given the opportunity to evidence the endorsement of a particular music program. As such, it is the responsibility of the conductor to provide the administration with as much information as possible to insure a total awareness of the program. Above all, the administration must be informed of all performance dates. Failure to inform the administration of student achievement at music festivals, director accomplishments, statistics and relative information regarding program development and the activities sponsored by the performing organization is one of the most flagrant acts of omission. Obviously, the administration can read about the results of an athletic contest in the newspaper. Unless similar means of public information outlets are available to the music program, it becomes necessary for the conductor to inform all administrators of the activities associated with a particular performance program.

In addition, the dissemination of newsworthy items should be made to all community leaders, school board members, school employees and teaching staff on a planned periodic basis. This necessary function of a conductor's responsibility assists with establishing positive student image, program image and, of course, conductor image. It is not a form of self aggrandizement! (For models check the 6- to 8-page sports section of any daily newspaper!). It is a form of public information that unfortunately is lacking in a preponderance of music performance programs. It is a fact that conductors are so busy preparing for a performance that, in many cases, they fail to inform the public about the performance itself. Administrators welcome positive news items and especially

information about the effectiveness of a performance program and the accomplishments of the individual student-musicians.

Are the goals being met? What recent achievement by the students and/or the conductor can be noted for publication? What future activities can be highlighted for release to the administration? How can a member of the administration become personally involved in an aspect of a music program? Can a superintendent or principal present awards at a concert or other school program, serve as an announcer, narrator, conductor, or chaperon? Administrators find time to attend many other school functions and would welcome the opportunity to be part of the music program, if their demanding schedule permits and, above all, if they are asked to do so.

Finally, do not consider every request for funds, equipment purchases and/or permission to travel privileged requests. Conductors must realize that there are other active staff members, other important curricular requirements and other immediate equipment needs within the academic program. Administrators are prone to be much more cooperative if it can be demonstrated that requests will support a performance program that is truly part of the overall educational mission of the school district. Consequently, conductors need to maintain an overview of the total educational process within a particular educational setting and involve administrators to cultivate a working relationship to achieve the established goals of a performance organization.

Conductor Involvement

Because conductors have so many responsibilities associated with large group activities, this area of involvement is often relegated the least amount of attention, not by desire or negligence but by time constraints. Once again, when comparing a large organization to other organizations within a school program (particularly an athletic program), conductors do not have the luxury of an athletic director (music supervisor) to develop schedules, travel plans, preparation of rehearsal and performance sites, budget proposals, etc. They have no sports information specialist (assistance band director) to publicize the events and the activities of individual performers or several assistants (secretary, woodwind specialist, brass specialist, percussion specialist, band front coordinator, equipment manager, instrument repair specialist) to assist with various sections within a large performance organization. It is, by necessity, the responsibility of a single conductor to maintain the development of musical growth for a large number of students within a performance organization.

It is incumbent for all areas of involvement to be aware of this disparity and provide the means to allow for the necessary performance skills to develop within a performance organization. It would then be feasible for conductors to spend more time on task, to effect more efficient rehearsals and instruction and to become tuned in to school and community desires, ideals and concerns rather than spending time on mundane activities which are truly necessary but very time consuming (fruit sales, uniform distribution, budget preparation, scheduling, instrument repair, ticket sales, program printing, etc., etc.).

In the area of curriculum development, conductors should become concerned with establishing courses of study that are school and community oriented. Following nationally established goals is justifiable. However, the outcome must be based on local school objectives, support and financial resources.

Conductors must nurture the talents of currently enrolled students in an efficient manner and encourage study with available private teachers, promote small ensemble participation, solo activities, festival participation and, of course, the participation in community and school concerts. Above all, the conductor must develop an image within the school and community that does not manifest a sense of isolationism or aloofness. The location of many music wings of large buildings promotes this type of detachment, not by desire but by the necessity of accomplishing all that is to be done in a particular school day. Conductors, by virtue of their visibility within a community, must endeavor to become earnestly involved in the many facets of the educational setting in addition to their usual responsibility as mentor, conductor, teacher, and advisor to the students for whom they are held responsible.

Conductors are accountable for the productivity of a performance organization that reflects the overall school curriculum. The administration, parents, students and community must be constantly informed of the musical growth of the program, the continued development of the program and, of the course, the needs of the program. Therefore, to be accountable to and for a performance organization, conductors must accept total responsibility for the involvement of students, parents and administration to insure a successful music program based upon high performance standards and achievable goals.