

Maximizing Contest Ratings (Part 2) 10 Years Ago in Bandworld

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Part 1 of this series is in the October-December issue (Vol. 21 #2).

How about band sonority? The band sound. This comes along last. Intonation, good tone quality, and proper breath support are the basic ingredients of sound and blend that the students need to produce this great sonority. Bob Wagner, University of Oregon from the 50's through the mid-70's, taught it this way: Have a clarinet and a comet play the same note. When it merges into one sound it is perfectly in tune and produces a sonority. The sonority of his University of Oregon Band at that time was truly great!

This is a gradual, on-going process which only takes a few minutes a day in rehearsal. The band participates in the listening and evaluation with different instruments and students involved each day. IT IS A CONCEPT.

How do I know I am selecting the best compositions? A good warm-up march is critical. It is the first thing a judge hears. Trying to be "arty" by putting the march at the end, replacing it with a short concert piece, or using a very exposed difficult march just puts more burden on your students. The warm-up march has been around for good reason for a long time. It is more relaxing and does what it is supposed to do: Warm up the band, build confidence, and give them an opportunity to get comfortable in the performing hall. Besides, let's face it, the march belongs to the band and should be played. CONTRAST between the two major compositions, like a contemporary and a transcription, is also recommended. Select numbers that emphasize the strong points and hide the weak (Don't use contest as a time to develop an inexperienced clarinet section by playing Poet and Peasant). The selections should be reasonable, technical challenges to the members. (Want to create real boredom? Select an easy technical number to "develop" tone, intonation, and phrasing.) Include these sections within a composition that also has twelve interesting technical and rhythmic actions. The contemporary selection should have demanding percussion parts. Even the grade 3 Festivo by Nelhybel has lots of exciting percussion parts.

Can the parts be adjusted? Within reason. For example, the following techniques are helpful, especially in transcriptions and overscored contemporary compositions.

- 1 . Avoid excessive doubling of the melody.
2. Eliminate difficult technical passages in the back chairs. Give the players simplified parts that fit the rest of the parts and are easy to perform. (Example: Repeated 8th notes on a chord note for the 3rd clarinets in the allegro sections of Poet and Peasant by Von Suppe.

3. Take out trills, tremolos, and other ornamentation for secondary players.
4. Thin-out sections and watch for doubling of:
 - (A) baritone/first trombone
 - (B) saxophones/clarinets
 - (C) flutes and first clarinets.
5. Drop many of your flutes down an octave on the real high notes. A perfectly in tune octave sounds like one note anyway with the top of the overtone series merging into the complete sound. Keep the sound from being top heavy.
6. Don't overdo the percussion, especially in a transcription.
7. Substitute strong soloists for weak ones when necessary (i.e. a good clarinet is better than a poor oboe).
8. Often the 3rd clarinet is in a lower octave by itself with the 1st and 2nd clarinets playing together in the higher octave. Give the 2nd clarinets the 3rd parts and this will balance the sound and clean up the intonation. Higher notes carry better than lower notes which allows the first to carry the part easily.
9. Every student does NOT have to play every note. If a passage cannot be played properly simplify it. (Example: Play the first 8th note of the beat only in a fast technical 16th-note passage. It fits and the student can keep busy and stay involved with the music. The students with proper technique play every note.

Is there a magic seating arrangement? No, just individual preference. Some conductors like the brass blocked in the middle, some like them spread around. Clarinets, however, don't like trumpets blasting behind them. A well-rehearsed band can play in any reasonable seating arrangement. Just don't change at the last minute.

How long should the music be rehearsed before contest? Most directors use a month of dedicated rehearsal. However, sometimes this is what is called a "warm-up number." After the contest, while the band is playing really well, many directors select some possible numbers for next year and read them, even playing one or two for a spring concert. They keep these compositions in mind and read them again the following winter. Such numbers can be worked up quickly and easily because many of the students had an opportunity to digest the music previously. Remember, preparing for contest takes a complete school year. You are always rehearsing the fundamentals of playing, listening, etc. You are only changing the music. If you spend too much time on a few numbers, students burn out. What about the director? If you go to rehearsal feeling you'll vomit if you have to listen to that tune one more time, then that was too much time spent!

How important is the band's image on stage? I have often told my students, "If you are flawless, you can play in your pajamas and get a top rating, but few bands are at that

level." A good image sets the stage for a superior rating, so insist the band members dress carefully and well in their uniforms, sit properly and hold their instruments correctly. (Dressy dresses and suits just don't make the grade.) Only the contest numbers should be in the folio. Avoid tapping your feet, particularly high school musicians. The band should be dedicated and serious in the endeavor. "One rotten apple can spoil the barrel," so students need to help the director keep unpredictable personalities under control as well.

The week of the contest:

- 1 . This is the week you need to concentrate on your personal conducting.
2. Work for the whole concept of the compositions. Forget about the details and keep in mind the whole.
3. Rehearse at least once in an auditorium. Start the band, walk off, and listen for balance particularly between the sections.
4. Schedule a concert no less than a week before contest.

The day before the contest:

- 1 . After the last performance, **YOU CHECK** to see that all the folios are there, putting them in the folio box for transportation to the contest site. This is not some thing to delegate.
2. Play through all the music (without stopping) for the last rehearsal. Use this time as a "dress rehearsal" giving explicit instructions on the next day.
3. Instruct the students to relax and get a good night's sleep so they will be fresh the next day. It is as important as an athletic event to do this.

Next time: Part 3: The day of the contest.