

Advice from a Contest Judge

by Richard Strange

10 Years Ago in Bandworld

Although I do not believe that contests where a “winner” is picked are educationally defensible, I enjoy judging band festivals where the accent is on helping students (and band directors) become better musicians, rather than just “racking up” trophies. I hope I am qualified as a judge for the following reasons: first, my many years as a band director/teacher on all levels; second, my many years of hearing and judging bands, both concert and marching, on all levels; and third, my good fortune to travel extensively in my role as a judge, enabling me to compare many band programs throughout the US, Canada, and several other countries. Consistently, during all of these judging opportunities, I have noticed certain characteristics that set excellent bands apart from mediocre ones. All, or most, of these elements are under the control of the band director, and could be changed in mediocre groups if the director realized what was wrong with the presentation. Most of the following suggestions seem self-evident, but come from my having continually observed these common-sense rules being broken by band directors, both young and old, who seemingly do not understand how to prepare young musicians to perform at the peak their ability.

Before the Festival/Contest

1. Choose music to fit the group’s ability

If the band is fortunate enough to have a fine young oboist (or any other instrument), choose repertoire to feature that person prominently at some time in the concert. Even more important, don’t feature players (or sections) who are not musically mature enough to represent the group well in a solo capacity. Be realistic. Challenge your young performers, but do not choose repertoire that is obviously unplayable by the students in the ensemble. Fine clinicians don’t just count the number of notes played when giving a rating. Musicality, tone quality, intonation, and style are much more important than difficulty, in my opinion. On the other hand, it is also obvious to experienced adjudicators when the conductor deliberately “undershoots” the ability of the group in order to “insure” a good rating. This cheats the players by cheapening the learning experience just to gain a trophy (or piece of paper with a “good” number).

2. Utilize sectional rehearsals to check individual and group progress.

Note and rhythm mistakes can be corrected much easier in sectionals. Sectionals enable the director (or coach) to get down to the “nitty-gritty” technical problems of one group of instruments, rather than boring most of the members of the band while spending an inordinate amount of time correcting a small group. Utilize full rehearsals to teach style, precision between sections, and ensemble intonation.

3. Stress the need for private practice on each part; keep the teaching of notes and fingerings to a minimum in full rehearsals.

The great majority of band students almost never practice their parts outside of the band room. They know from past experience that the typical rehearsal will be spent in “scrubbing” the wrong notes painfully out of the parts, not playing the music through for continuity and style. In this type of rehearsal, those few students who learn their parts outside of the class room are doomed to participate in boring “note-check” rehearsals they don’t need. They soon learn to go with the flow, and practice something else at home, if at all.

4. Establish a consistent grading policy based on individual preparation of parts.

One of the best ways to motivate students to practice their parts outside of rehearsal is to establish a fair and equitable policy that rewards private practice with a good grade on the report card. This means that a person in authority at stated intervals must hear each student playing his/her individual part for a grade. Many teachers hesitate to put such a plan into practice because of the time involved; however, they will find that it is time well-spent in terms of freeing up rehearsals for making music, not just finding wrong notes. An added bonus is that teachers who just gave blanket Ab or Bb in the past will now have a defensible grading system that allows them to “prove” to parents and administrators the reason for each mark.

5. Prepare a “handout” listing the rules and responsibilities of all students while engaged in festival activities.

Many students have no idea what is expected in band because no one ever told them. A good, comprehensive handbook listing objectives of the course, duties of the students, rehearsal and concert behavior, trip behavior, grading and practice policy, and the many other aspects of a fine band program gives the students needed advice, and simplifies the unscrambling of the inevitable confrontations that occur when things go wrong. For every trip, issue a supplement to the handbook listing a complete timeline for all events. Carry many extra copies for those who forget.

6. Check all instruments for proper adjustment, and reeds for playability (make sure students have spare reeds; band director must carry emergency extras in a festival kit for all reed instruments.)

Many fine bands make the instrument and reed check a monthly feature of sectional rehearsals. In any case, an instrument and reed check is a necessity before festivals. All directors should also carry an assortment of reed clippers for clarinets/saxophones, and a brass-mouthpiece remover (purchased for them by the school).

7. Pick up all music at the final rehearsal (or when students assemble for the trip), and keep it together until the final warm-up before your concert presentation.

In The Warm-up Room

Have a well-thought-out tuning and warm-up procedure. Following is the one I recommend:

1. Start with instruments assembled exactly the same as when last in tune to the level of A=440 Hz (i.e., barrel joints, mouthpieces, and slides the same distance in or out).
2. Warm up all wind instruments thoroughly to equilibrium temperature (mean bore temperature between room and breath temperature) before beginning the tuning procedure.
3. Sound tuning pitch (Concert F) by electronic or mechanical means (always being certain to use A=440 Hz pitch level). Sound pitch softly to gain students' attention.
4. Have all band members match pitch by humming (it focuses their attention, and puts the correct tuning pitch in their heads).
5. Have each section tune in rotation (except oboes, saxophones, and string bass[es]. Their turn will come later.) Start with low-pitched sections and proceed to high-pitched sections (suggested order: tubas, euphoniums, trombones, French horns (on transposed middle C for the F side, and then 3rd-space C to tune the Bb side of the instrument. Check position of hand across bell opening if sharp.), trumpets, bass clarinets, bassoons, Bb clarinets, flutes, and piccolo[s].)
6. Have all of the above instruments tune at the same time at a mezzo-piano level. Have students tune by playing note lengths approximating that of a whole note, with random attacks and breathing. Random attacks allow each player to differentiate at the moment of attack (pull out from the tutti sound) the pitch and tone of his/her individual instrument.
7. Tune section members individually if needed. Have each individual match the audible pitch of the tone generator. Be sure to adjust pitch by re-tuning instrument if out of tune (train the ears of the students; do not use tuning meter unless absolutely necessary).
8. Sound Concert A (do not hum or sing, just listen; A is too high for many students to sing comfortably), and have string bass(es) tune open strings (band absolutely quiet).
9. Have oboes, saxophones, and French horns (again, this time on transposed first-line E), tune as a section, then one-at-a-time (if needed).
10. If you wish, have all other instruments make one more check using Concert A (good orchestral training).
11. Instructor must check individuals and sections constantly, pulling wayward pitches to A=440 Hz, during the period in the warm-up room.

12. Remind players with keyed instruments to keep the row of keys on top when holding instruments in the lap or when placing them on a chair. This keeps condensed water and saliva from running into the tone holes and soaking the pads. It also prevents gurgles caused by tone holes that are filled with water. All brass instruments should be reminded to empty the water from their horns before solos (when the music allows), especially French horns.

Prepare the students psychologically to play their best by stressing the need for a calm, alert approach to the musical presentation. Above all, focus the attention of the performers on the music, itself. Distractions such as overt nervousness of either players or conductor, inattention to musical matters, and inappropriate horseplay in the warm-up room can only detract from the ability of any group to do its best in front of the clinician and audience. Do not rehearse the music in the warm-up room. It's too late for that. Confine your playing to selected passages that set the tempo and mood of the music to be performed. Nothing new can be taught here; you only have time to warm up the instruments, tune them, and instill confidence in the players.

On Stage

Do not re-tune on stage. All tuning, except for last-minute emergencies, must be done in the warm-up room. It is the height of foolishness to reveal all the tuning and tonal weaknesses in the band by tuning each player individually in front of the clinicians. I am always amazed when the conductor gives me the chance to spot every possible problem before the first note of music is played. Make the clinicians work for their pay; don't hand them the heads of your students on a platter. Ironically, these same conductors (the ones who tune their groups individually on the festival stage in front of the clinicians and audience) seldom fix the problems that are readily apparent to everyone but the player and teacher.

Many times I have watched a teacher hold the tuning meter in front of a student who is badly out of tune, and then ignore the fact that the student made no correction to the instrument after blowing the tuning note. Unbelievable ... Instead of re-tuning on stage, a futile gesture that will not help the overall intonation, the band, through the use of a chorale, must bring the instruments back to the temperature of equilibrium. Then, and only then, if they were in tune in the warm-up room, will they be in tune on the stage. Sometimes the students must reach the stage area by passing through unheated spaces. It is all-important that great care is taken to warm the instruments back up to playing temperature before performing the first adjudicated composition. To reiterate, don't re-tune instruments that have become cold.

With a chorale (or breath alone) bring the instruments back to playing temperature. If at all possible, teach your timpani players correct tuning procedures, so that students can handle the tuning chores instead of the teacher. The only time the teacher is justified in going back to the timpani is when unfamiliar instruments have malfunctioned and cannot be tuned by the student. Also, please teach all timpani players to use single-stroke roles, only. The timpani are not snare drums; double-stroke roles inhibit the vibration of the

large timpani heads, and take away resonance from the tone. For best tone quality, each stroke of the stick should contact the head only at the start of a downward vibration. In other words, the stick should push the head down, not dampen its motion when it springs back upward (as happens when using a double-stroke role). The fine timpanist synchronizes the stroke of the stick with a multiple of the vibration speed of the head (faster strokes on the smaller kettles, and slower strokes on the larger kettles. The ear of the player judges correct single-stroke speed by listening to tone quality. Synchronization produces maximum resonance, while out-of-sync strokes produce dullness (a sort of non-pitched rumble).

Teach the students to come on stage in proper seating order, and take their seats at once. However, do not have them sit on stage like robots while the band director takes care of some problem. This is a good time for each student to adjust seating, stand placement, and take care of warming up the instrument softly in the lower register. Purposeful students who know what they are doing impress judges. Most judges want to see neither extreme military bearing, nor chaos, but only a sense of musical purpose and confidence in both students and director.

And finally ... instill in your students the idea that the most important thing to be gained from the festival is the consciousness of having come well-prepared, and having played their individual and collective best. Regardless of the “rating” the members of the group will feel good about their performance if they have been taught to view the Festival as a wonderful learning experience.