

**Preparing Students for
CMEA Central Section
Band and Orchestra Festivals**
by Ed Hughes

This article offers suggestions to directors preparing students for Band and Orchestra Festivals. Many factors contribute to the overall score. Oftentimes the differences in performances that come close to a Superior, but are less than a Superior, can be due to common and similar areas of needed improvement.

Performances at festivals sometimes demonstrate that directors generally do a good job in preparing correct fingerings, rhythms, and dynamics but often neglect quality of sound. Fingering accuracy, rhythms, and dynamics are areas of preparation addressing technique and musicality, indicated in the second and third boxes on the CMEA Central rating form. Superior performances should also demonstrate an intentional and systematic growth in quality of sound. The components of quality of sound are the performance areas that are listed in the very first box of the CMEA Central Section performance rating form. Quality of sound includes the following: 1) Tone Quality 2) Blend 3) Balance and, 4) Intonation.

The following are some ideas offered to directors looking to improve their ensembles' Quality of Sound.

1.) Tone Quality

Tone Quality development should include daily practice of long tones and slow scales, including a focus on embouchure development, breath support, posture, and diaphragmatic breathing (not chest breathing). The director should instill an understanding of a good characteristic tone for the instrument. One could play recordings and bring in accomplished players to demonstrate tone. It is important to develop student ability to listen critically to their individual sound. Emphasis on Tone Quality development should occur daily in exercises and with continued reminders in preparing the literature. This is more than a warm-up scale. It is daily intentional instruction with explanation, demonstration and guided practice.

2.) Blend

Often times groups at festival may have one or more students dominate the sound. For this discussion we will limit the definition of blend to refer to the extent that sounds produced by the instruments merge together to form a homogeneous timbre so that no one player dominates. Rehearsals should provide instruction that trains students to listen for blend. It is important to instill the concept of what a correctly blended ensemble sounds like. It is normal for students to sometimes play louder than they should so they can hear themselves to check for accuracy, but once the music is adequately learned, students should have the confidence to not need to hear themselves and to concentrate on blending. Consider the idea to "play in-between", meaning to listen to the players sitting on either side and to play neither louder nor softer than them. The students should no longer listen just for their own sound; but rather listen to the sound/blend of the entire section.

3.) Balance

Sometimes groups perform with a somewhat tenor sound, with a lack of lows. In discussing balance this article recommends that directors become familiar with the pyramid of sound identified with the composer Francis McBeth (Effective Performance of Band Music, Southern Music Company, 1972). Set the balance with the low bass instruments as the foundation. Take some rehearsal time to have the lows play alone, then add mid-tones and last the high instruments. Maintain the balance with the lows as each new section is added. Think of it as similar to the idea of pressing the bass boost on a stereo set. Also consider that balance can change with distance. Schedule some time to rehearse in the auditorium or multi-purpose room and find a place to listen that is some distance away, approximating where the judges might sit. As you listen it is important to remember that balance and blend work together. Listen critically for balance and blend as well as other factors such as moving inner lines and the melody.

4.) Intonation

Playing with good intonation is more than just tuning before playing. It is a continuous active process of listening and adjusting. Training students to listen and adjust should be taught and reviewed at every rehearsal. Playing with intonation involves three skills. 1) Being able to listen and hear when you are in tune, what being in tune sounds like. 2) Knowing how to adjust using your embouchure. Every instrument has a strategy for adjusting: i.e. flutes roll their head joints. 3) Matching pitch, which combines the first two skills in order to listen and adjust. The teacher should include the process of playing in tune, listening and adjusting, as an objective in daily lesson plans, using demonstration and guided practice. Of course tune before playing and tune warmed up, not cold. Sometimes intonation problems occur because students may have a pinched or nervous embouchure when tuning, which is different from a more relaxed embouchure used when performing. Develop a procedure for tuning so that students use the same embouchure when they are tuning and performing the music selections. Set tuning slides, mouthpieces and head joints to the correct length. Some directors mark them as a reference point.

Five more tips:

The following are 5 additional observations that may occasionally be referenced in comments for needed improvement. Based on festival performances, some ensembles may benefit from these ideas for preparation. Consider them in context with comments from other adjudicators, as various judges can bring a variety of focus to festival performance evaluations.

1. Secure first downbeat

It is important to prepare for an accurate start. A downbeat for a group that is not ready can result in an insecure start, inaccurate fingerings and uneven tempo. As instruments are brought up to begin, teach the students to wait for a few seconds to think through a brief preparatory mental check list. They could use just a five second delay before the downbeat to think of fingering, tempo, meter, style and eye contact. The students would then take the first breath together for a secure start. Practice this during rehearsals.

2. Dynamics

Dynamic contrast is for everyone, not just for the first row. (And yes, you too percussion.) Sometimes directors can get an inaccurate sense of dynamic contrast when the players closest to the conductor are making dynamic changes but other players are not. The contrast may sound good up close, but not at a distance. Try this; have the first row or two rest while the remaining players play sections that have music requiring dynamic contrast. Check to see if everyone is contributing to the contrast.

3. Legato playing

Playing legato is more than not tonguing. It requires a smooth even breath. Often young players will push with breath while playing legato, causing unwanted emphasis. To assist in learning the concept, try playing and holding only the first note of a legato phrase with one long breath. As you play the held note, think of playing the entire phrase only in your head. Feel the smooth breath. Then play the phrase again and add the fingerings, but continue to focus on the feel of the smooth breath. Listen to the difference.

4. Muddy Middle

Performances at festivals generally show that directors are good at development in the melody and bass line, but the middle voices often get less attention. Take time to have just the middle voices get a check-up. Check for fingerings, intonation and tone quality that may need improvement. Tell the first parts and bass line to rest. As the middle voices play alone the director can then take a listen.

5. Getting to the third selection

Often times groups may have strong performances of the first two selections but falter on the third. If rehearsals are conducted with frequent stops and corrections, and practice each piece in isolation without a festival program run through, students do not get the experience of performing the third selection in sequence with the first two played previously. The third selection can surface new problems if preparation has not included some practice that performs all three selections played through in succession as they would be performed at the festival. Try setting up invitational programs before the festival and invite other classes to attend. Ask other directors or retired music teachers to come and listen. Try to create as much of an authentic festival setting as possible as you play all three pieces.

It is important to note that this is an incomplete list. Mentioned here are those areas of improvement selected for the focus of this article. Refer to the CMEA Central rating form for the other areas of assessment at festivals. Directors are encouraged to consider all areas listed on the form as they prepare for festival performance.

Concluding comments

Of course directors continue to correct fingerings, clean up the rhythms, work transitions and refine uniformity of articulations, working slowly at first and then speeding up. Search for the aesthetic musical qualities that “tell the story”. All of these are important steps exhibited by prepared groups at festival. Along with all those good things, include the development of the Quality of Sound and the other concepts mentioned above to achieve an accomplished performance. By attending to these details, your performing groups are that much closer to joining the ranks of the Superior rating groups.

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