

Reflections on District Honor Band

When I attend events such as honor band or all state, I always make it a practice to sit in on a rehearsal block or two to observe the clinicians in action. I'm not talking about the obligatory "walk in the room, wave at your students, shake hands with the other band directors, listen for 5 minutes and move on to the next room thing"... I'm talking about really sitting down and watching how the band and the clinician are working together.

I've learned a lot during these sessions. I've picked up great rehearsal techniques, wonderful analogies, and some solid ideas about pacing a rehearsal. I've watched our students react to different teaching techniques (both positive and negative) and seen how quickly they can learn or how much they struggle with certain aspects of performing.

We all try to give our kids advice on how to be better players. We schedule extra rehearsal time, if possible we bring in area professionals, and sometimes have guest conductors come in to help us refine the performance material. We strive to produce fantastic performances...and we often achieve this goal.

Then there are the other things...as I watch and listen, I realize that there is more to it than just playing a particular set of music. Am I teaching my KIDS or am I teaching THE MATERIAL? What have I forgotten? What else do they need to know? How can I better prepare them to deal with the big picture of music making instead of just getting through their parts? How can they become better "music citizens"?

Here's what I observed this year and what I plan to teach my students:

1) You are a part of an honors group because you deserve to be there. You worked hard, played your instrument with enough proficiency to be selected and deemed worthy of attending the event. There is no need to try and "outplay" your neighbor. There is no need to posture and strut or to speak negatively about others in the group. It isn't important that you placed ahead or behind them at another honors audition...also, it isn't cool to label others based on the school they attend and its perceived success or lack thereof. Boasting about all of the various groups that you are a part of doesn't elevate you...it can actually make you appear arrogant and might turn others away.

2) When you have the opportunity to meet other students who share your

interest in music, take advantage of the opportunity. Try to develop new friendships beyond those who attend your school. Hang out with different students during the weekend...you will find that you have lots more in common than you initially suspected. Who knows, you might end up college roommates or performing in the same group there.

3) Meet your guest conductor/clinician. Introduce yourself. Thank them for working with you. Music is also about networking...you might apply to their university. They might sit on an audition or a scholarship panel and see your name. If you simply sit in the section and play...you are one of hundreds of faces they will see this year. If you go up and say hello, you stand out...in a positive way!

4) Impress those around you by being a great ensemble member and demonstrating your desire to get the job done. While we are all impressed that you can play orchestral excerpts (or for goodness sakes a marching band cheer) very loudly, that might not be appropriate during break times. Especially if you can't play all of the parts in front of you for the imminent performance. Take care of the business at hand rather than trying to impress others. When it's so obvious that your guest conductor calls you out on it, it's really too much!

5) We need to better understand what the symbols on the page mean. Increasingly, our bands struggle while sight reading. Basic on-beat/off-beat patterns are unrecognizable...even in the most advanced groups. Once the rhythm is sung or counted for the group, they assimilate it quickly...but it's like learning a new language by memorizing phrases phonetically. Are we doing too much rote-teaching? Are we spending enough time on fundamentals? I owe it to my kids to teach them to read...not to memorize the story. Note to self: Fundamentals can't be minimized in order to spend more time on literature.

6) Teamwork and ensemble are more important than getting through the individual parts. Blend, intonation, balance, phrasing...these are the things that take music from being a technical study to being an artistic experience. Yes, we need to be able to play our parts...but that's step one...we then need to LISTEN and cooperate with each other as a team in order to unify our message. Again...it's not about out-playing your neighbor or being the first to master a technical figure...it's about taking music from notes on the page to expression and communication.

7) How you behave speaks MUCH louder than your words. No cell phones during rehearsals...pay attention...stop when the conductor stops...sit up...eye contact...no hats...it's all a part of being a great member.

8) Rely on a pencil rather than your memory. There is too much information being exchanged too rapidly in an honor band situation for you to remember every detail. Write things down...mark your parts! Obviously do so in a clear and concise manner...no need to draw giant dark circles around everything or write in "85 point font" so that it obscures the notes...just some small marks to reinforce what your conductor asks for in the music. The fewer repetitions needed to solidify a concept, the more time can be spent on other aspects and refinement.

9) It's OK to ENJOY the experience! Smile! Look like you are glad to be there! Celebrate your accomplishments! You are a member of a high quality group...be PROUD!

So, now I feel like I have more to teach...and that my students will benefit from knowing that there is more to making music than playing your parts. There is more to being in an ensemble than passing the audition. There is more to being a good member than simply following instructions. What we do operates on many levels...and it can't be measured by a multiple choice quiz. It's about interaction, decision-making, and follow-up. It's about taking a set of material and working to make it more than symbols on a page. It's about helping those around you achieve through your own cooperation. It's about creating experiences that go beyond learning a few techniques. It's about communicating emotion and experiencing an art form that uses sound to tell its story. It's about learning lessons that will help you in life.