

# **Festival Preparation**

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## **I. Getting Ready**

### **Ask and Ye Shall Receive**

When I came out of college, I had been given a large dose of music instruction, but I had to learn to be a band director as I went along. I stumbled a lot, but I kept watching other directors and asking questions about how to improve my teaching skills. The key word is “improve” because teaching is an on-going learning experience that never stops. No one gets it right all the time. We are teaching children and each one is immensely complex, not to mention how complex a whole band of them are. The first rule of becoming a better director is: **observe experienced directors and ask them questions.** If you see another director’s band that plays better in tune than your band, find out the why and how. Apply that knowledge to your band and they will play better in tune next year. The same can be said of other aspects of performance, such as tone quality, blend, balance, etc. See who is doing it well and find out how they are doing it.

### **Teaching Takes Time**

Of course, like every young director I wanted to know it all today, but the sum of the whole in band directing is much more complicated than the individual parts. If you plan to make a career of teaching music, prepare for the long haul. If you are planning to teach a few years (and then “Get a real job”) you better be prepared for a short career with a lot of frustration. If you plan to stick with teaching, your goal needs to be just becoming a better teacher each year and applying your new knowledge as you learn.

### **Get Out of Town**

During our normal teaching day we are usually isolated from other band directors. During my first five years of teaching, I taught in a rural county where I was teaching band by myself almost all the time. If a young English teacher needs help, they can usually just go down the hall to observe other English teachers interacting with students. As a band director, I had to go to another county, go at night, take a day off to observe, go to clinic bands, all-state bands, go to other district’s festivals and find ways to observe the techniques of other directors. As a young director, I took a day off to go and observe the director of what most considered the best program in the state. I was impressed by the director’s rehearsal techniques and how he organized his band program. I went back to my band and began to apply that knowledge the very next day. **You have to put in extra time to complete your education.** Festival 101 is not taught in college, you have to go dig it out and teach it to yourself.

## **Festivals are for the Students**

This may seem simple, but occasionally I think we directors need to be reminded that the festival is for the students. Festival is their performance, their participation, their experience, their comments and their ratings. Festival should not be an ego trip to prove who is the “best” director. Nowhere on the judge’s sheet does it mention the director even though we are the key element in this whole experience. Even if your band makes a superior rating, if you did all that work for yourself, you missed the point. You and I are already sold on the value of good music. We need to sell the students. Ratings only last for a year, but the love of good music lasts a lifetime. Like me, you also will eventually “pass the baton” to the next generation. **The students are the reason we have festivals.**

## **Festivals Are Mirrors of Our Band**

At festivals, the judges should hold up a “mirror” so that we can see our bands as they really are, not as we might think they are. Each area of our teaching, from tone to music selection, will be examined. We may not always like what we see in the “mirror”, but it is what is real, or what is really there (as opposed to what we think is there). Each area examined at festival should reflect a lifetime pursuit of problem solving, not a short-term fix for one performance. For instance, we need to teach students how to produce a top quality tone every day, not just for festival, but of course festival is a good motivator to move us faster toward our goal. The same holds true with every category listed on the festival sheet (Intonation, Balance, Blend, Articulation, Precision, Expression, Style, etc.). Students should be taught correct concepts in every composition they play, not just the festival pieces.

## **Judging is a Subjective Art Form**

Remember that “Judge” is just a title we give an experienced director from outside the district. Judges are not infallible. They bring their own preferences to the table. Not all judges are knowledgeable. But, in the long run, only the better ones survive and stay in the system. Sometimes I have had one judge tell me one thing and the other two say just the opposite. Remember, it is only their opinion about your band’s performance, and opinions vary. That is why we hire several judges and not just one to judge the stage performance. That being said, I still paid attention to each judge’s comments. If one judge said my low brass tone was weak, I took that to mean I better work more on low brass tone. My goal was to convince all three judges that my band’s fundamentals and performance deserved their highest accolades.

## **The Subjective Rules**

A good judge's job is to "frame" the areas of strength and weakness, suggest some solutions for problems, and send you looking for help in your weak areas. A good judge will always find ways of praising your group for their strong points. Judges do not always get it right. Sometimes my bands played a "I" and received a "II", but on the other hand, I remember some shaky performances that received a "I". Life is not always fair. Get over it and move on. Here is another chance you have to teach your students about reality in a subjective world like music. If your goal in teaching is to always get a "I" at festival, you may find a lot of frustration in your work. But, if your goal is to help your students learn to love music and be the best performers they can be, you will find festival a positive experience, no matter the outcome of the ratings.

## **Getting Ready**

I always started getting ready for next year's festival the week after this year's festival. After you have gone over the judge's comments and score sheets with your students, take them home and really study them. I don't mean read through them, I mean really study them. I have known directors who don't even listen to the judges' tapes with their band, must less listen to them personally. This mindset leads to a continuation of the same musical deficiencies at festival, year after year. If your band has problems playing the softer dynamic markings on this year's festival music (Marching Band Syndrome – Louder is Better), you should find that out and work on improving it for next year. Each director has their own personal musical strengths and weaknesses and they tend to pass these on to their students.

## **First Things First**

There is a reason that TONE and INTONATION are listed first on the judge's sheet. They are THE most important aspects of your band's sound. Good teaching of embouchure and listening skills are the corner stone of your band's sound. As a young director, Boyd McKeown (former president of the GaMEA) took me under his wing and helped me to understand this clearly. My earlier bands played with great technical expertise, but were weak in tonal concept and playing in tune. Boyd helped me understand that judges can forgive a few technical problems in a performance if the band exhibits great tonal concept and plays in tune with itself. You have to help every student in your band to individually acquire a good tonal concept and learn how to play in tune with the group. There are no short cuts, just a lot of hard work.

Every band has problems in these two areas, and the judge's comments can help you know where to look in your band. **If you fail to address the judge's comments this year, you will probably hear them again next year.** Boyd's philosophy of careful listening, using long tone warm-ups, and playing chorales helped me to sensitize my students' listening skills. When it came to tone production, Boyd was insistent that his students use

the correct embouchure and good breath support. He didn't just tell his students what to do, he showed them individually and made them follow through.

### **And Furthermore**

Other good strategies like bringing in professional players to demonstrate good tonal concepts and playing recordings of good performers can also prove helpful. Also, I took my students to the honor band clinics that the major universities in our area offered. The students not only were able to work with the college's instrumental instructors, but the interaction with other excellent MS and HS players always sent my students home wanting to improve their musical skills. Private instructors are excellent if you have them available. In some places I taught, we had to bring private instructors in to our band room, in other schools, the instructors were available at local studios.

### **Every Detail is Important**

The same holds true of all the categories listed on the judge's sheet. Give the judges the benefit of the doubt. They might be right. If three independent, experienced directors come in and evaluate your band's performance, they probably do not have any axe to grind with you and are just giving you their honest opinion. You may not like it or agree with it. But, study their comments and see the areas where they feel you need to help your band improve. I kept a file of all my band's past festival sheets and referred to them on a regular basis to be sure I was addressing my band's particular needs. My hope was to change negative areas on this year's sheets to positive areas on next year's sheets.

### **Fuzzy Clarinets**

For example, chances are that if your clarinets have fuzzy throat tone sound this year, that problem will be present next year, unless you address it. There are good teaching techniques to eliminate that fuzzy throat tone sound. Find an experienced director whose bands do not have that problem and see how they teach their clarinets. Attend instructional clinics that show you how to recognize and teach good clarinet tone. Take that information home and apply it to your clarinets to change a negative area to a positive area on next year's festival. Another good strategy is to invite an excellent clarinet instructor to come and teach clinic sessions on tone improvement to your clarinets. The point here is, take some action to improve areas of deficiency. ***This year's problems will not just go away if you ignore them.*** They'll be back next year.

### **Recruiting Your Band to Balance**

From day one of recruiting beginners, build your instrumentation to balance. You need more tubas, baritones, trombones, and French Horns in your beginning band class, and you need less flutes and oboes. You will still need a lot of clarinets so you will have plenty to switch over to bass clarinet and contra-bass clarinet. If you don't start Bassoon players with your other beginners, you will also have to switch some players from other woodwinds later on. Also you will only need enough saxophones to leave a few (2-3) on alto and switch several over to tenor and baritone saxophone. One strong oboe (or two

weak ones) can cut through a large band's sound. 'Nuff said. Recruit enough trumpets so that you will have some you can switch to French horn and baritone later on. Recruit trombones and tubas like no other instrument is available. If you are a high school director with no control over your feeder program, take the students you have and switch enough of them to low woodwinds and low brass so you can balance your band.

### **Francis is "Dah Man"**

Francis McBeth, in his book *Effective Performance of Band Music* (Southern Music, 1972) points out the importance of good balance to your band. How your band is balanced affects intonation, blend, control, etc. and determines to a large part how well your band can succeed in playing with a "dark, rich sound". Many groups come to festival with lots of flutes, clarinets, alto saxophones and trumpets but very few bass clarinets, tenor sax, baritone sax, French horns, trombones, baritones, and tubas. Most of the better players play the Flute, 1<sup>st</sup> Clarinet, 1<sup>st</sup> Alto Sax and 1<sup>st</sup> Trumpet parts. One weak tuba player and a couple of trombones or baritones usually cannot balance such a "top-heavy" band. Judges often refer to this type of top-heavy instrumentation as a "bright" or "thin" sound as opposed to the "dark" or "rich" sound of a bottom-heavy, well-balanced group. McBeth points out that we need to set up our band instrumentation on the following principal:

**The lower the instrument's pitch, the louder the sound needs to be.**  
**The higher the instrument's pitch, the softer the sound needs to be.**

McBeth refers to this principal as the "Pyramid" concept, or "Vertical Dynamics." This concept applies to the entire band and to sections within the band. For instance, if you have 6 trumpet players, put three on 3<sup>rd</sup> part, two on 2<sup>nd</sup> part and one on 1<sup>st</sup> part. If you have 12 clarinets, put six on 3<sup>rd</sup> part, four on 2<sup>nd</sup> part and two on 1<sup>st</sup>. In other words, make the whole band "bottom-heavy" with low brass and low woodwinds and also make each section "bottom-heavy" so you have little pyramids of sectional sound functioning in the whole band pyramid of sound. If you don't have enough tuba players to balance your band, a short-term fix is to get a keyboard bass and amplifier. I have seen many middle school and small high school bands utilize this idea. If you use one, be sure to get a good player and keep the volume under control. With a keyboard bass you want to "feel" it more than hear it. In the meanwhile, keep recruiting tuba players.

### **Seating for Fun and Balance**

Your seating arrangement needs to reflect your balance plan. Lots of low brass and low woodwinds in the rear, fewer middle parts in front of them, and even fewer upper parts near the front. But of course, many other factors affect a seating plan, so you often have to compromise. Sometimes you want all your 1<sup>st</sup> part players seated in the middle so they can be heard by everyone in the band. Sometimes your clarinets don't play very loud and need to be put on the front row. Also, in concert settings the trumpet, trombone, and saxophone sounds need to be filtered through the band, so you want to avoid putting them in exposed positions. There is no "perfect" seating plan, but some compromises work

better than others. Pick a plan that suits the music you select. If your festival music demands it, don't be afraid to change seating on stage at the conclusion of each selection.

## **II. Picking Festival Music**

### **Fill Your Ears**

I always tried to go to our district and other district's festivals to hear as many other band performances as I could. It really helped my listening skills to sit and hear other bands perform. I made notations about the music I heard on a copy of the festival program, being sure to mark ones I might play with a future group. I kept these programs in my festival file. It's never too early to start making a list of possible festival selections. If I heard one I really liked, I bought a recording of it to add to my collection. Most recording vendors at district festivals will make you a combo CD or MP3 of several bands. It would be nice if every district would offer a recording of all the bands on MP3 or other format. Recordings are the next best thing to being there. Many music suppliers, like JW Pepper, keep files of sample festival music scores and recordings for you to browse. Mark Records, Florida Music, and other small recording companies are good sources to purchase band recordings. Pepper, Mark, and Florida all have websites for online orders.

### **Use Your Resources**

When you get ready to pick your festival music, don't take a stab in the dark. Refer back to your annotated programs and listen to recordings. Another proven strategy is to ask other directors for recommendations. Find out what music worked for their groups and find out why it worked. While being the first to perform a new piece on the list certainly has its advantages, go ahead and make a list of tried and proven music selections to also draw from. If you are thinking about playing something on the list that nobody else is playing, best that you find out why no one is playing it before you commit your band to learn it. New music can be refreshing, but it has to be worthwhile. **If you pick music your students can't perform, festival will not be a good experience for them.**

### **Evaluate Your Group**

When studying festival music, I always found it helpful to make a list of my group's strength's and weaknesses and compare them to the demands of the music on my festival music short list. Use scores and recordings to see how your group matches up with the music's demands. If a selection calls for really bold low brass and you haven't got them, move that selection to the "maybe next year" burner. If the piece calls for a really fine clarinet soloist and you've got a "blue chipper" at the head of your clarinet section, move that title to the "let's read it list." Extra time spent here will pay off in a positive experience for your students. I hear a lot of bands trying to play music at festival that exposes their weaknesses. **Superior performances at festival begin with smart music selection by the director.** Pick music that challenges your students' musical growth but be sure it is achievable by festival date. Experience is the best teacher of this skill. If you

have no experience, ask for help from the experienced directors in your district. Don't make your students suffer because you are too proud to ask for help.

### **Go For Variety**

When you look for festival music, try to pick three different composers and three different styles. This will allow the judges to do a better evaluation of your students. While John Edmondson has many excellent compositions for young bands, don't pick more than one for your festival program. There are many excellent composers on the festival music list, and you can find more than one. Similarly, don't pick three numbers that emphasize the same style. Try to look for a crisp march with lots of personality, a lyrical piece that emphasizes the subtle aspects of performance, and a final selection that really tops off the performance with lots of gusto. Think of your festival performance as a mini-concert and choose a complete program with your three selections.

### **Pick Good Music**

Since you are probably going to invest a lot of time and effort on your festival music, pick good music. By that, I mean music that will raise your student's level of musical knowledge. Give your students the opportunity to perform the "classics" of the band literature as well as some of the newer schools of thought. I know some directors that pick only new music because they hope the judges are not familiar with it. They have a point. Judges know the classic band selections and have pre-existing standards for them. Still, it bothers me to see band students going on to college without having performed the standard band literature. It would be like sending a student to college without them having read the standard American literature classics. There needs to be a baseline for common educational experiences, both in literature and music.

### **Pick the Right Level**

Never pick your band's festival music level based on external pressures. What level last year's band did, what level your rival band picked, or what level you would love to play are not the best input to level selection. **Evaluate your group each year and decide what is best for this year's group.**

I built two band programs while I was at Wheeler High School in Marietta, Georgia. The first few years we improved to having two concert bands, one in level IV and one in level VI. Our Symphonic Band was selected to perform at the 1984 State Convention. Then a catastrophe befell our feeder program and our feed fell off until it finally hit a low of only 9 freshmen one year. As my student numbers dwindled, we were lucky to take one band to festival in level V. Later, when the feeder program got a new director and recovered, we were able to work our way back up to two bands, one in level IV and one in level VI and stay there. Throughout this experience, my goal was to make festival a positive experience for my students, despite a feeder situation that they had no control over. I had to make some tough choices about grouping and music levels to accomplish that goal. Pick the level that will offer your students the best chance to succeed.

### **And the Winner Is....**

Once you have decided on your group's festival music, locate every excellent recording of that music you can obtain. Begin listening for comparison. Use the score as you listen and make notations about what you like and don't like about each version. You don't have to follow other people's interpretation like a robot, but at least you will have some idea of what has gone on before you. The judges probably already have their own ideas about interpretation of these selections, based on previous performances. *You need to find out what the general interpretation expectations are for each selection.* Eventually you will come up with your own version. You must have a clear concept of each piece before you can teach it to your students.

### **Early to Rise**

If your festival selections are going to "push the envelope" for your band, get an early start. I always choose this path. I know many experienced directors who wait until January to start on their festival music and their bands produce fine performances. They know their students well enough to accurately gauge when they will peak on their festival music. I also watch many of them "sweating it out" that last week. I always liked to have more time to work on tonal exercises, chorales, and sight-reading, so I usually passed out our festival music in late December. We would have an early Christmas Concert and then read through our festival music to get an idea what the demands were. If I had a really good recording of a selection, I would let my students hear it once or twice. Listening to a quality recording gave my students an aural concept and helped us set our musical goals.

A Word of Caution Here: Repetitive playing of recordings of your festival music can be harmful to your students. They can become a crutch that can actually hinder your student's musical growth and inhibit your personal interpretation.

### **Schedule Now – Celebrate Later**

Almost all successful festival performances require extra rehearsals to prepare all the details of the music. Some combination of full group and sectionals are required. Schedule these extra rehearsals early to avoid conflicts. I scheduled mine at the beginning of the year and included them in our annual calendar handout. This handout contained a sheet that required the students and parents to sign an acceptance form and return it to me. That signed form helped us stay on our festival preparation schedule and kept me out of the principal's office many times. You can always cancel a rehearsal if it is not needed, but it can be like pulling teeth to try to add on extra rehearsals in February. When to schedule these rehearsals depends on your school's community, transportation available to the students, and your school's calendar.



## **Check Their Work**

In our test happy schools, **students view work assignments that are not checked as a waste of time**. Unfortunately, music fares no better. We could wish the students would rigorously prepare their festival music to fulfill a burning inner need. Meanwhile, back in the real world, you need to set up a system to be sure that every student prepares their music. If checking them off individually in person is not an option, have the students make tapes for you. If that is not feasible, check them off in sectionals or check off your section leaders and have them check off the students in their section. You might choose to tape segments of the music during their daily class and grade them later. The point is, everybody needs to be checked on. It reassures the students that they are doing good work and raises the group's morale to know that everybody has to do their part.

## **Younger Bands**

I started my career working in junior high, moved to high school, and finished in middle school. The way I prepared for festival at Wheeler HS was totally different than how I prepared at East Paulding MS. Younger bands, both HS and MS, take more time to prepare than older, more experienced bands. Experienced HS bands also have experienced section leaders who can take a lot of the teaching load off you. With my MS bands, I marked notations on their music before I passed it out. Specific phrasings, potential intonation problems, key changes, stylistic changes, dynamics, etc. were some of the areas I would mark. This saved us time in rehearsals. I still had students insert other markings as we rehearsed. My point is, don't expect younger players to progress as quickly as experienced players. Always over-prepare younger players for festival. What may seem obvious to an experienced player is often a mystery to younger players.

## **Pencils Are a Must**

**Make it an iron-clad rule that students must have a pencil on their stand during rehearsal**. If you stop one time to have the students mark a problem on their part, it saves you a hundred times of saying, "what happened, I thought we discussed that." Better yet, they see the same marks when they perform at festival, helping them to be less nervous. Have them write reminders on their part, circle accidentals, circle key changes, write out tricky rhythms, enlarge dynamic markings, etc. In other words, make marks that help them remember the details of performance.

## **Number the Measures**

If you want to save yourself a ton of time, be sure all the student's parts have the measures numbered. Festival music preparation often breaks down to "let's hear the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> beats of measure 119." If the measures are numbered, everybody knows exactly where to look. Otherwise the students will have to stop and count measures.

### **Make Weekly Tapes**

On Thursday or Friday of each week in January and February, make a tape of your band performing their festival music. Evaluate that tape against your score and some reliable recordings to see where you are progressing and where you need to make progress. I always liked to listen to these tapes on Sunday afternoon, after I had taken some time off. That way I could make a list of specific items to work on and get my students involved in setting goals for the following week. True, the quality of the rehearsal tapes won't compare to taping in an auditorium with professional equipment, but you'll still pick up a lot of items for your "to do" list. Make your priority list go from biggest problem to smallest. Don't worry if you don't have time to work on all the items on the list. The ones you miss this week will eventually move up in priority the following weeks.

### **Call in the Calvary**

When I was a young director, I wanted to do it all myself, but as I grew wiser, it occurred to me that it was OK to get some help. I had heard about an idea from other directors about having a guest clinician come in to do a weekend festival music camp with your students. My first experience with trying this idea was so good that I continued to do it for many years. Not only did bringing in a guest clinician give me a chance to sit back and take stock of how my students were playing, but also it gave my students another perspective on the music. Middle school bands could benefit from an experienced MS or HS director. High School Bands can benefit from experienced HS clinician also. At Wheeler HS, I invited college directors as our guest clinicians. The experience was well worth the expense. In addition to helping us with our festival music, the students got to know a college director first hand, and learn about music opportunities at the college level.

### **Get Fresh Ears**

Somewhere, along in February, my ears always got clogged with the festival music. I got so fixated on the little problems I knew we had, that I often missed bigger problems. One good idea is to bring in a fresh set of ears to hear your band. I always scheduled a Pre-Festival Concert about two weeks before festival and invited some experienced directors to come make a comment tape for us. Usually, my commentators would be hearing my band perform this music for the first time and could give me their candid opinions. I would play these comment tapes in class the next day. The students and I would mark suggestions and come up with a priority list of things to work on. This really helped my students to re-focus on the task at hand and polish off those unsolved problems before festival.

After festival, when my students and I listened to the judge's tapes, we made it a point to see how many of those pre-festival problems we eliminated. Not only were the pre-festival comments helpful, but also, doing a Pre-Festival Concert gave us a chance to have a good "dry run" of our festival procedure. I always paid our commentators for coming, so as to assure their presence. If you ask your commentators to give you an idea about your possible rating, have them tell only you. It is not always a good idea to share this information with your students.

### **The Mechanics of Tuning**

Before I go into some of the other aspects of playing in tune, let's examine the primary one. **The students must have an instrument that is capable of playing in tune.** That means a reputable brand that is built to play in tune, and is in good repair. In brass instruments it means valves and slides that work, no large dents in the pipes, tight corks on water keys, and no build-up of plaque inside the instrument. In woodwinds it means tight joint corking, clean tone holes, snug pads, and good reeds for all but flutes. Oboes and Bassoons live and die by the reed. But you should be aware that in all instruments that use reeds, bad reeds can not be tuned. Flutes must have working plugs in their head joint that are air-tight and checked for correctness with the mark on the bottom of the tuning rod (mark should show in the middle of the tone hole when inserted from the bottom of the head joint). And of course that brings me to mouthpieces. Check to be sure your students are using standard mouthpieces that are not dented, chipped or cracked.

### **Playing In Tune Every Day**

Establish a daily tuning procedure that emphasizes pitch matching, not making a needle or wheel stand still. Use your tuner as a starting point and then teach the students to use their ears to match pitches with each other. Tuners are wonderful tools, but they don't play music. I always used the phrase, "the tuner will get you in the ball park." I liked to use my tuner to give the students the reference pitch, then have them hum or sing the pitches before they play them on their instrument. Humming and singing internalizes pitch skills. First get it right in your head, then get it right in the instrument. If your students can sing the pitch correctly, they can learn to play it correctly. When you hear a great band that performs with good intonation, you need to talk with their director and discover their tuning techniques. If they can teach their students to play in tune, you can also. It's not nuclear science. It's just teaching the students to listen. An excellent resource for help in this area is: "*Improving Intonation in Band and Orchestra Performance*," by Robert Garofalo (Meredith Music 1996). By the time this book was published, I had already "found out" a lot of this information by trial and error. Save yourself a ton of time and read the book.

### **Get Specific on Tuning**

Decide on the "specific pitches" you will check each day in rehearsal. For instance, I always checked my flutes on top line "F" and "Bb" above the staff, then had them adjust

to a medium position and roll their head joint in or out to adjust individual pitches. I checked my clarinets on throat tone “G”. It is usually sharp, so I had them pull their barrel joint out until they were on pitch. Then I checked their low “C” and adjust it with the middle joint. Next, I checked their third line “C” and adjusted that with the bell joint. Then I would go back and recheck and readjust to reach a happy medium and have the player adjust individual notes with embouchure and/or use extra fingers. Saxophones only have one basic tuning mechanism, the mouthpiece, so I usually tuned their “G” and taught them to “lip” notes up or down and use extra fingers down or ½ hole pitches. Once you get the student’s instrument mechanical tuning set up, just remind them to re-set it like that every time they play and then check it occasionally.

### **Temperature Affects Tuning**

Most band instruments are manufacturer to be tuned at 72 degrees fahrenheit. Higher temps make band instruments expand and play flatter and lower temps make them contract and play sharper. Also, the normal human body temperature is 98.6 degrees fahrenheit, so when your students blow air into their band instrument, this affects the tuning also. Always have your students play warm-up exercises and chorales for at least ten minutes before you attempt to tune, and after they tune, they need to keep warm air going through their instrument to maintain the pitch center you set up. Directors often note that their band was “in tune” in the cool warm-up room and then when they went out to the hot stage area, the intonation went all out of whack.

### **All Brass Instruments Are Manufactured to Play Sharp**

You are supposed to pull brass instrument slides out to play A=440 (I preferred A=442). Not only do you need to pull the main slide, you need to pull the valve slides. Tuning the slides is a time consuming process at the beginning, but after each student has gone through it, it takes very little time to “re-set” the slides each day. Always remind your brass players to keep their slides greased and to push them back in all the way every day so the slides don’t dry out and get stuck in the out position. Dry slides leak and affect intonation.

Start by checking the main tuning slide on open notes with your tuner (never let the student see the tuner, as they will “lip” the note in tune and you won’t get a true picture). Find a compromise setting for the main tuning slide that allows the student to be close on their open pitches (like low C, 2<sup>nd</sup> line G, 3<sup>rd</sup> space C, etc. for trumpet). Then have the student move to 1<sup>st</sup> valve notes and tune the 1<sup>st</sup> valve slide. Better trumpets have a 1<sup>st</sup> valve thumb slide, which can be helpful. Next, tune 2<sup>nd</sup> valve notes, then 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>, then 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>, and finally 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> -3<sup>rd</sup> combo notes. Remember-----All basic tuning is a compromise. All the notes on any given instrument will never be “in tune” by any method know to mankind. I just use this method to get the students what I call “Mechanically Close” to the pitch and then teach them to “bend the other pitches” to match where you want them to be. Go through the same basic system with French Horns, tuning the F horn side first and then the Bb side. Trombone need only to tune 1<sup>st</sup> position

notes. All others are tuned with their right hand slide adjustment. Baritone and Tuba are similar to tuning trumpet, except for those that have the 4<sup>th</sup> valve.

### **And Woodwinds Also**

Well, at least the flute, piccolo, and the clarinet are built to be sharp with all the joints pushed in. The saxophone general tuning is decided by how far on the player pushes the mouthpiece and to some extent, how thick the cork under the mouthpiece is. Oboe and bassoon are built to play close to A=440 and the reed must be adjusted to compensate for any general sharpness or flatness. My experience has been that oboes and bassoons tend to play flatter than the band's standard tuning pitch, so their reeds often need to be shortened or they need to take more reed into the mouth.

### **Tuning in a Vacuum**

Often I see directors in the warm-up room, tuning students by having them play one note by itself into a tuner. The director then says "sharp" or "flat" and the student starts adjusting the instrument's general tuning mechanism. The student actually has no clue as to what pitch center they are trying to match. **My experience has been that this method produces intonation problems.** I call it "tuning in a vacuum". The student would appear to be in tune on the one note in the warm-up room, but when they went on stage, they were obviously not in tune. If you must use a tuner to check pitch, I recommend the scale method. Designate the tuning note as the 5<sup>th</sup> note in a major scale and have the student play the first five notes of the scale, up to the tuning note and hold it for you to check with your tuner playing the pitch. For instance, if I am tuning my trumpets to second line "G", I have them start on low "C", play C-D-E-F-G without tonguing, and hold the "G" for me to check with my tuner. I find this method gives me a much more accurate read on the student's true intonation as the "G" is not in a "vacuum", it is played in relation to the other scale notes and ends on the student matching pitch with the target note.

### **But They Are Still Not In Tune**

All you did was make sure they were in the general vicinity of one designated pitch. There are dozens of other notes you didn't "tune". Remember that playing in tune means that players are listening to each other and altering their pitch to match each other. There really is no "correct" pitch, since what matters most in a band's performance is players matching pitch. During any performance, the actual pitch centers of notes may float up and down. That's alright as long as the players are matching each other's pitches.

### **Don't Let It Slide**

When you hear a rehearsal intonation problem that is not being student-solved, stop and address it. Make the students aware of the problem by having them play, listen, and identify it for themselves. Then show them how to adjust and listen until the "beats" disappear and they understand how the note sounds when they match pitch. Next, plug it back into the music and show them how it relates to the other parts. Finally, have them

use their pencil to mark the note for special attention. This takes a lot of time, but it results in a much improved performance and higher student involvement in the tuning process. Once the students learn how to play a specific passage better in tune, they will want to apply that knowledge to all their music. Tuning is a life-long learning experience. No one gets too experienced to not worry about playing in tune.

### **Intonation Levels**

I think of the five levels of intonation like this:

Level 5 – Band exhibits severe intonation problems. Director and students don't seem to hear anything wrong. Can't understand how anyone could criticize them about "poor intonation." No effort made to understand or correct the problem. Group often compensates by "playing louder."

Level 4 – Band exhibits severe intonation problems. Director and students hear some of the most flagrant problems but do not seem to know the correct techniques to adjust and play together. Director concedes that there are a "few problems", but for the most part, ignores it or expects the students to "figure it out." This group's rehearsals are often punctuated with the director yelling statements like, "I told you to fix that, trumpets," where upon the trumpets begin adjusting their tuning slides in and out with no clue to what they are doing.

Level 3 – Band exhibits common intonation problems. Director tries to fix each problem. Wastes tons of rehearsal time by stopping the band to personally "tune up" the students involved when an intonation problem is detected. Students are vaguely aware that "something sounds bad," but lack the skills to adjust on their own and wait to make adjustments until the director tells them exactly what to do.

Level 2 – Band exhibits occasional intonation problems. Director has taught the students how to fix most common intonation problems themselves but sometimes has to stop rehearsal to assist in the intonation process. In festival preparation, the students have identified and labeled known intonation problems and are developing the ability to adjust their intonation as they perform.

Level 1 – Band plays with excellent intonation, with only minute problems to be addressed. Students have been well-taught to recognize intonation problems before they occur and have developed the ability to anticipate and adjust before the problems are audible to the audience.

I always hoped that my bands would reach Level 1 by festival. As bands are constantly graduating their trained seniors and replacing them with freshmen, this is an on-going, never-ending process. I found that festival preparation was a wonderful tool to

motivate my students to become better listeners and learn how to anticipate and control the intonation characteristics of their instrument.

### **Oh Say Can You Hear - -**

- - any melody in here? It's a fair question. It's called **Linear or Horizontal balance**. The basic concept is simple but often overlooked. The listener's ear wants to hear the melody with some incidental accompaniment. Sometimes the performance comes out with mostly accompaniment and some incidental melody. Several strategies can assist in correcting this problem. First, try having only the melodic parts play so that everyone can identify what they want the audience to hear. Next have the accompaniment parts play along with the melodic parts. Tell the accompaniment to play their dynamic level even lower than it is marked until they can clearly hear the melody all the time. The solution is not to have the melody parts play louder. That sometimes creates other problems with tone quality and pitch control. The solution is to have the accompaniment parts play softer or – if that still doesn't work, thin the number of players on the accompaniment parts. If the music has a passage where there is no clear melodic part, have the students with shorter, fast-moving notes play louder and those with longer, slow-moving notes play softer.

### **Softer is Better**

It has been my experience that your group can maintain better control of all of the aspects of their performance if you can get them to play on the soft side of the dynamic scale. Often, I hear potentially good performances ruined by a band that plays too loud (MBS – Marching Band Syndrome). Louder is not better. *Judges appreciate concert bands that show control of dynamics and can demonstrate an understanding of the subtle aspects of music.* Even if a passage is marked “ff”, you must help your students understand that they must never go beyond the level of playing tastefully and never cover the melody. I always had my students lower their dynamic markings when playing at a softer level would allow us more control of our tone, intonation, and balance. At a concert festival, “In Your Face” performances are not appreciated by the judging panel. Also take into consideration the size and acoustics of the performance area. Small auditoriums require softer dynamic levels.

### **Thin If You Must**

When you reach the last two weeks of festival preparation, you will have to decide if you want to have everybody in every section to play all the parts, or if thinning down to the best players in certain exposed passages is needed. For example, you have an exposed passage in the flute part that centers around high “C”. Most of your flutes can play this in tune but some can't. If you let everybody play, the whole flute section will be criticized for poor intonation, even though most of the flutes are playing the high “C” in tune. Another good example is that you have a clarinet solo accompanied by low brass, trumpets and saxophones. Obviously, there is a balance problem built into the music. Maybe you don't need twenty-five people accompanying one clarinet, so you thin the

accompaniment to one-on-a-part. If the composer's intent was to set up a "soli" passage sound to contrast with the full band, you will have to thin the parts.

### **Rating or Comments Only**

If your band is capable of making a "I" or a "II" at festival, I recommend you take them for a rating, otherwise, I recommend you go for comments only. **The whole festival process should be about concern for the students and making the festival a good experience for them.** I would be hard pressed to see how receiving a "III" or a "IV" is a good experience for your students. I have been there and it was not a good feeling. It would be better to go comments only and come away with something positive that will help your students work harder. If you are not sure about the probable outcome of your rating, your insecurity is a clue. Follow your gut instinct, or at least have a more experienced director come listen to your band before festival and tell you what to expect.

This takes us back to the Pre-Festival Concert idea. If your commentators at your Pre-Festival Concert tell you that your band is in trouble, pay attention. Receiving a low rating at festival will usually cause your students to react one of two ways. Some will say, "what's the use, we're no good," and drop out of band or quit trying to improve. Other students will see it as a challenge to improve and work harder. With a lot of students, their reaction depends on how you prepared them for the rating concept. Going for comments only may help all the students see the areas that need improvement and their areas of strength without the judgmental aspect of a rating coming into play.

## **III. Going to the Festival**

### **The List**

Make a "Take to Festival" list and set aside a place in your office for festival items.

This list should include: The Band's Festival Folders and Music

The sets of Judges' scores with all measures numbered

The Judges' blank cassette tapes

A full set of extra festival music parts

Your scores and baton

Your personal uniform checklist

Stage set-up diagrams

Tuner (and electric extension cord if needed)

Announcer's Card

Order forms for sound recordings

Percussion equipment list

Carpet to put under the percussion section (if needed)

Bus lists

Student Uniform checklist



Folder Collection Box (with student folders inside)  
Folder collection checklist

At your final rehearsal, have the section leaders collect the music folders and put them in the folder box. Use the folder checklist to be sure everybody's music is in the box. Put the box back in your office with the other festival items.

### **Percussion Plan**

Two weeks before festival, have your percussion section leader make a list of everything they will need for festival. Get a copy of this for yourself. Have the percussion “dry-run” this list by putting everything away before rehearsal one day and let them have only what is on the list. Some bands use the host band's percussion equipment at festival. This is risky. My experience has shown that taking your percussion equipment is best. It gives your students more confidence on the performance. Make your percussion section totally responsible for checking off the percussion list going to festival and coming back, even if you have parents helping.

### **Don't M-M**

Don't micro-manage at the festival. Bring parents to help and instruct them on what you need done and how to do it. **Designate every job you can.** Get someone else to handle the folder box, another person for tuner set-up and take-down, another to check the stage set-up, another to help the percussion, another to handle uniforms, buses, etc. Spend your time with the students and the music. That's the important part. That is your job at festival. **Become the Conductor and stop being the Director for a little while.**

### **Label, Label, Label**

**Label everything you bring to festival.** Label Folders, boxes, tuners, cords, percussion equipment, uniform boxes. Anything that can be lost should be labeled. Every year I notice lots of items left at the festival site with no school name on them. Your chances of getting something back are better if it is labeled. Put name tags on your parents. You probably won't lose any, but it makes them feel important and identifies them to the festival workers.

### **To Watch or Not to Watch**

**I believe that having your students listen to some of the other bands is a part of the festival educational experience.** It not only helps your students get used to the auditorium, but also helps them to learn the procedures of the festival and reinforce what you have told them. Hearing other groups perform gives your students the opportunity to evaluate and appreciate what other students are accomplishing. It also is an excellent opportunity for you to teach your students how to become a great audience. I noted at a recent festival that one of our district bands came very early to hear several other groups

perform. They sat quietly during performances and stood to applaud at the conclusion of each band's performance. I am sure their director prepped them before the festival. I wish I could have seen more bands exhibit this type of positive support for each other. I could see it made the students on the stage feel special.

Some directors fear that hearing other bands will "spook" their groups because the other groups could be really good or really bad. Others fear that their groups might misbehave and cause unwanted attention from the judges. Some directors see festival only as a venue for their group to perform and then go home. I often wonder at directors who have no fear of letting their groups watch dozens of bands at a marching competition, but do not let them hear one band at concert festival. What is the message we are sending our students? Festival should be a "total" experience for your students, a special time to deeply immerse them in listening and performing.

**Don't overlook the value of you listening to other bands perform.** You get to hear other literature, see how the auditorium resonates, or find out if there are any "hot" spots on the stage that over-project sound out into the auditorium or cause tuning problems. Also, you can better judge the stage's effect on percussion projection and full band fortissimo or pianissimo passages.

Listening to the musical performances of other groups is one of the great traditions that have brought our bands to the high levels they now enjoy. Festival should be a special time of the year, set aside for the enjoyment of being a part of what is good about our schools.

## **IV. The Warm-Up Room**

### **Warm-Up Rooms are for Warming Up**

No, I'm not joking. I hear lots of bands go into the warm-up room and play through their festival music. Often times, their performance in warm-up is better than their performance on stage. I believe you should save the performance for the judges. I preferred to come in and set up as if it were a normal day in the band room. Get the students relaxed by doing some long tone scale warm-ups and a chorale, then go through our normal tuning procedures. Next we would play the beginning of the march a couple of times, maybe a short passage or two from the other selections, and then do our tuning of our special notes that I'll explain in the next paragraph.

### **Tuning It**

Some directors don't use a tuner in the warm-up room. I always preferred to use mine because, since we used it to get started every day in class, it re-assured the students that

everything was normal and helped them to relax. **If you use a tuner in class, take that tuner to festival** for the warm-up room. Tuners are not all alike. My experience has been that they are all different. If you have established a daily tuning routine in the band room, use that routine to settle and reassure the students that everything is alright. I found it helpful to have the band memorize a short warm-up choral that was used on a daily basis and use it also in the warm-up room.

### **Special Notes**

While you are practicing for the festival, identify and make a list of the “special” notes or passages in the festival music that you want to check in the warm-up room. Maybe it’s an octave between clarinets and flutes, or a pitch match between baritone and French horn. Checking these notes in warm-up is another way to remind your students about key spots they are responsible for tuning during the performance and reassuring them that everything is going well.

### **Focus the Students**

Before you leave to go on stage, a moment of quiet, a student-led prayer, a few reassuring words from you, or a good joke, all are strategies to get the students to focus on the task at hand. The students are excited and nervous as it is. Do something to calm them down and get them ready to perform.

## **V. On the Stage**

### **Stage Set-Up**

While festivals usually have their own set-up crews, it is a good idea to designate one or two of your parents to go to the stage while you are in warm-up. Be sure they have a copy of the band’s set-up and ask them to assist the stage crew. Assign some other parents to assist with moving your percussion instruments on and off the stage.

### **Percussion Set-Up**

As soon as possible, send your percussion to the stage area and get them out of the warm-up room. **Instruct your percussion to set up every piece of equipment exactly as it is at home.** They need to feel totally comfortable. I recommend that you always use your band’s percussion equipment (imagine asking your flutes to play on the host band’s flutes?). Do not use chairs for the percussion unless they have long passages to sit out. Chairs get in the way and often cause unwanted noise when a percussion player bumps into them during the performance. If you need a trap table, bring yours from home. If the

stage is loud, bring a piece of carpet from home to put under the percussion. Instruct your percussion players to bring dark towels to put on top of flattened music stands to lay their extra sticks and mallets on.

### **Settling the Students**

I always used the same stage procedure at festival as I used at home concerts. That was another way of calming the students and reassuring them that everything was normal. First I made sure the set-up was correct. Then the students filed in quietly and stood in front of their chairs. **When I was sure we were all ready, I gave the signal for everyone to be seated together.** We then made minor adjustments and the students tended to last minutes items such as re-wetting reeds, emptying brass water keys, shifting stands, adjusting music, etc. Be sure your set-up is exactly as “at home” as possible. Students can get distracted if they are not set-up in their usual place.

### **The Crucible**

It has been my experience that the stage area is usually warmer or colder than the warm-up room and we all know temperature affects pitch. So, while tuning up in warm-up is good, your students will still have to be able to adjust to the stage area. Here again, this goes back to teaching your students to adjust and match pitch with each other, not just match their pitch with the tuner. Many times I have listened to a group whose tuning seemed fine in warm-up, only to hear them go out of tune as they performed on the stage. Part of this is temperature change and I think part of it is nerves. Teach your students to relax and adjust to the stage by practicing out of the band room at home to get ready for the festival. Students who haven't performed this music, in public, on a stage, under pressure, with an audience, before festival, may find this experience un-nerving.

### **To Play or Not to Play**

I always preferred not to play a warm-up on the stage. I would usually have the students blow warm air through their instruments. If we played anything on stage, it was just a “noodling” warm-up. I was always wary of playing anything the judges could hear before we performed. However, sometimes the trip to the stage was long or we had to go outside and I wanted to re-warm the instruments and settle the students. Some groups play a scale, some play a chorale, some play a chord sequence, and I've even heard some play the intro to their march (definitely not a good idea). Be sure your students know if the stage will have the curtain closed or the curtain open when they set up for their performance. Whatever you choose to do or not do, be sure the students know in advance and are comfortable with it.

### **Mind Your Manners**

Before you give the announcer the nod to go ahead, be sure everybody is ready. Stand just off-stage for the announcement and enter when the applause begins. Stop at the side

of the podium to acknowledge the audience's applause and wait for the judges to signal their readiness. At the end of each selection, acknowledge the crowd's applause with a bow or nod of your head. While you are waiting on the judges, check to be sure your band is ready to proceed, then take your position beside the podium and wait for the judges signal. **It is impolite to begin playing before the judges are ready** (not to mention irritating to the judges). At the conclusion to your performance have a pre-arranged hand signal for your students to stand and acknowledge the audience's applause. If you had significant soloists in the performance, always recognize them before you have the entire group stand for recognition. How you act on the stage is a cue to your students about how they should act. Everything you do on stage should be meant to enhance, not detract from the performance. Judges always take note of your band's stage discipline.

### **And Still More**

At the conclusion of the performance, have your students to be seated for instructions. Reassure them they have done a great performance and you are proud of them. Make sure they know where they are going next, who they are following, where to drop off their folders in the folder box (don't let them take their folders to sight-reading) and **be sure they understand they are still being observed by the judges**. The verdict is not in. Have the percussion follow to the sight-reading room with only the basic equipment they will need in sight-reading. Have your parent crew pre-programmed to remove the remaining percussion equipment and the folder box from the stage and load them in the equipment truck. Make sure the parents have a copy of the list of percussion they are to load. It is helpful if all your equipment is clearly labeled.

## **VI. Sight-Reading**

### **Have a Plan**

Before you get to festival, go over the Festival Handbook section on sight-reading with your students. **Practice the sight-reading routine with your students before you come to festival**. Make up a set of sight-reading folders and use them in rehearsal to go over the procedure that will be used in the sight-reading room. Talk with your students about entering quietly, paying attention to the judge's instructions, and remaining focused on the task. Remind them that this is an important part of the festival experience and they need to stay on task until they have completed all the judge's instructions and exited the room.

### **Their Eyes Have Seen**

Before you come to festival, you need to teach your students exactly what to look for during the first few minutes as they silently study the music. In the sight-reading room,

you shouldn't help them during silent study. They need a systematic approach that includes quickly ascertaining the key signatures, time signatures, tempos, dynamic markings, accidentals, extended rests, tricky rhythms, style markings, and overall form. I always encouraged my students to "air play"(without sound) through the sight-reading during this time. It helps those who are tactile learners and the busy fingers have a calming effect. Have percussion stick the parts on their leg. Mallets can touch the bars with their fingers.

### **Find Your Way**

During the Silent Study Time, you must pick up on all the items the students are studying and you must ascertain how to recreate the composer's intent. You are the one with the score. The students only see their part. It will be up to you to show them the big picture. Your job will be to tell them about the balance and blend demands, who is featured, what parts play together, who leads and who follows, watch you for this tempo change, how to perform the beginning and the ending, etc. Make up a teaching plan while you are studying the score.

### **Show Them the Way**

During your final minutes to address the band, your job is to walk them through the music and show them what to look for. Don't get bogged down in minute details. Ask the judge to signal you when you have one minute left. Use the first two minutes to move rapidly through the piece and show them the important things to look for. Be sure they know who has the melody or what instruments are featured in each section of the music. When the judge tells you have one minute, take the band through an "air practice" of the beginning and ending of the piece, also any tricky rhythms or tempo changes, then ask for student questions.

### **Let Me Make This Clear**

During the actual sight-reading performance, I used my normal conducting style, except for one addition. I added an exaggerated down beat with both hands at every rehearsal marking. My students called it the karate chop, but it worked. (Don't overdo it to the point it becomes a distraction to the judge.) It was a silent way of reassuring everybody where we were in the music. Some directors call out the rehearsal numbers, some sing the parts, others yell a lot, some use finger signals to count down before rehearsal numbers, and some just conduct with no comment. You might want to quietly ask the judge about your giving vocal cues before you get started. Whatever your style of conducting, be sure the students know what to expect from you before they get in the sight-reading room.

### **Don't Stop**

Of course you hope for a wonderful, musical performance in sight-reading, but if your band should get in trouble, don't stop. Festival rules used to require the sight-reading

judge to lower your rating one division if you stop. I'm not sure now that is in print, but most judges still take stopping into account for the band's final rating. If your band gets in trouble, do whatever is necessary to keep going and get everybody back together, even if it requires yelling out a few rehearsal letters. In any case, prepare your students by emphasizing the never-give-up mentality when you practice sight-reading. Hopefully, you won't have to worry about it, but you never know what will happen in sight-reading.

### **Sight Reading Levels**

After several years of judging sight reading, here is how I rate bands:

- 5 – Not a clue. Can't play through, no concept of melody, harmony, key signature, rhythms, tempo, etc.
- 4 - Band can struggle through the music. May (or should) have to stop and "re-group". Weak concepts of melody, harmony, key signature, rhythm, style, tempo, etc.
- 3 – Band can play through the piece but some sections have obvious key signature lapses, the melody is weak or sometimes non-existent, accompaniment parts are usually too loud, rhythms are sound but occasionally misplayed, style is mostly adhered to, and tempos tend to rise and fall with the difficulty of the technique required.
- 2 – Band plays through the piece with but individual lapses in key signature are noted. The Melody is heard clearly for the most part and accompaniment tries to balance. Rhythms are generally clear and tempos basically maintained. Students comprehend the styles required and make a valid attempt to maintain the integrity of each.
- 1 – Band plays through with apparent ease. No real problems with key, technique, style, tempo, linear or vertical balance. Maybe an occasional minor individual problem.

### **And a Great Finish**

Emphasize to your students that they are not through being judged until they are out of the sight-reading room. Be sure they know to keep silent while the judge gives the final instructions. Then, be sure you and your students thank the judge for being there. Judging Sight Reading is often a tedious and unappreciated task.

Then have your students quietly stand and file out of the room so as to not interfere with the judge's taping of comments. Be sure that your percussion takes all your equipment with them.

## **VII. Celebration**

One of your best teaching moments of the year is when you reveal the results of their performance to your students. After leaving the sight-reading room, you will be going back to the bus and equipment truck area. Have the students wait there while you go to the festival office to pick up the judges' evaluations. Once you have the results, take them back to your students first. It is their performance. They deserve to know first.

### **Remember that your reaction to the judges' scores is a learning experience for your students.**

If you are unhappy with the judges' decision, now is not the place to pitch a fit. Show your students how to handle adversity. Point out the performance areas where the students showed great improvement. Turn a negative feeling into a positive experience for your students. **Never blame the judges or comment on the ratings of other bands.** That is totally unprofessional! Don't teach your students the "sour grapes" approach to life. Remember, you are teaching your students about life here. Take this opportunity to show them your best side.

If you are happy with the results, share the moment with your students. You will never be closer to them than you are right then. For just a few moments, you and your students will be "comrades in arms," rather than director and students. Give them the credit for all the wonderful aspects of their performance and for all the hard work they did.

Remember, you are the teacher.

### **Seize the moment to do some of your best teaching.**

If you wish to contact me for positive or negative feedback on this paper, I can be reached at: [edclackum@yahoo.com](mailto:edclackum@yahoo.com) I always enjoy talking "band".