

Supporting Music Education: Concert Thoughts

Too many excellent presentations are tainted by failure to *take care of the many details of a production*. We must take full advantage of the opportunities awaiting our students. The concert is our students' opportunity to show their parents or community audiences what they can do.

Pre-Concert: Calm or Chaos?

The most challenging part of a concert is the half-hour before the performance. How you manage that time is critical for a successful concert.

- **Students should know** where and when to report. They should also know what your procedural expectations are well ahead of concert day.
- **Be sure that concert requirements** regarding reporting times and locations, rehearsals and concert dress are shared with parents. This will require multiple methods of communication, including letters home, inclusion in school-wide newsletters, e-mails, postings on school Web sites, phone calls and countless announcements to students.
- **Arrange for the necessary help to address** all of the last-minute crises that are inevitable before each performance. Call on a colleague (or parent) for assistance and be sure to acknowledge and thank your helpers appropriately.
- **Rehearse in the performance space.**
- **Develop a concert production procedure or checklist** so everything will run smoothly. Include entering and exiting the stage, tuning, standing for bows, transitioning between selections as well as between the various performing ensembles.

Concert Length

- **At the elementary and middle school levels**, concerts should last no longer than one hour. If you cannot get through all of your ensembles in this time, consider having a second concert. Leave audiences wanting more so that they will return for future concerts.
- Although the ideal concert length is one hour, **high school programs often run 90 minutes** so that all ensembles may perform. As much as possible, give each group an equal amount of performance time so that one ensemble does not monopolize the program.
- **For school assemblies**, work with your colleagues to write out a minute-by-minute performance script and stick to it. Be sure to assign time for student movement and applause.
- When performing school assemblies, **plan an upbeat program** that is appropriate to the purpose of the assembly. Consider that students are performing for their peers and want to perform well for their friends.

- **This is your big opportunity** to impress your students and staff. Consider producing the concert with a different mix of material for the students during the day than you would for the parents in the evening.

Who is Running the Show?

- **Someone must “control” or “produce”** the presentation at all times. If your building administrator is not available throughout the performance to set the correct concert tone and ensure it will be maintained, you must:
- **Assume leadership of the situation.** You have the most to lose.
- **Discuss directly with the audience** your high expectations for their behavior.
- **Watch out for the transitions.** Someone needs to be assigned to cover as groups move about and set up for their performance. Have “sponge” activities planned to “sop up” the transitions. This can be done through student solos, announcements, echo clapping or sing-a-longs. These are excellent opportunities to mention links between music education and high student achievement. Inaction will usually default to boredom. Once you lose the audience, you seldom get them back.
- **Comment on and reinforce good behavior** at the conclusion of the program. Print audience expectations in the concert programs on a regular basis.
- **Give out public thanks** appropriately and acknowledge your school administration and school board for their support of the arts programs.

Concert Behavior

- Good concert behavior is learned and it is the music educator’s job to teach audience etiquette. Good concert behavior **cannot be taken for granted.**
- Good concert behavior **needs to be taught** in all arts classes (classroom and performance).
- Good concert behavior **must be taught, reinforced, rewarded and re-taught.** This may be the only time in a student’s life that this concept is addressed.
- **Remember: If not us, then who?**
- **Parents need as much direction** in the evening concerts as students do at the daytime assemblies. Since many parents do not know the proper responses, simply guide them along appropriately. (At the beginning of a multi-movement work, for example, you could simply explain that it is the

practice in these types of pieces to hold the applause until after the final movement has been performed.)

- **Establish the proper concert atmosphere** through a short speech or concert program comments that can be used district-wide.

Programming Considerations

Your performance literature is your course of study.

- **Is it quality material** that serves as a good teaching tool?
- **Is it at the appropriate level of difficulty?** It is easy to justify music that is too easy. It is very difficult to justify a work that can never sound good because it is beyond the students’ ability level. We all over-program, but do you make a habit of it?
- **Does your program have variety?** (Fast-slow, loud-soft, classic-contemporary, secular-sacred, languages, etc.) Have you included material for your students, your audience and yourself?
- **If you are sharing a concert,** how does your programming complement that of your colleagues?
- **Have you scheduled adequate rehearsal time with the accompanist** to ensure that you, the students and the accompanist are thoroughly prepared for a quality performance?
- **Do you include “informances” as part of your programming?** Taking a section of the concert to inform the audience about the process is a critical component of community arts education. This can be done through sight-reading a work, explaining with musical demonstration the musical development of a specific section or the rehearsal of a small section from a work to be featured in the next concert.
- **Have you asked your principal or a board member to give the Opening Remarks?** This provides an opportunity for one of your educational leaders to talk in front of a friendly audience.
- **Have you asked students to share what skills they have acquired in preparing for the concert?** Choose students to talk about what they have learned when introducing each selection. The audience will be pleasantly surprised at how much it really takes to perform well.
- **What is the perfect concert length?** The program where the audience leaves feeling that they would have liked to have heard one more number!

Production Considerations

Microphone Use

- Take the time to prevent possible sound problems.
- Have your students been instructed on how to use a microphone?
- Have they successfully practiced using a microphone?
- Are the levels set properly?
- Have you checked how they will sound from the back of the room?
- Have you asked someone else to listen to ensure quality control?
- Have you enlisted necessary assistance?

Technology

- Become totally familiar with the technology you are using—sound board, lighting board, tape recorders, CD players, computers, video recorders or projectors.
- Make arrangements to videotape the assembly or concert.
- Share the recordings with your students.
- Use the recordings for your personal assessment and growth.
- Know copyright regulations when recording concert material.

Program

This is another way to inform audience members about your school's music education program.

- The audience program must be visually appealing, neat and free of errors.
- Include your mission statement.
- Include advocacy information about the importance of arts education for students.
- Make sure someone is assigned to hand out programs and direct the audience to seating or restrooms.

Hands and Shoes; Attention to Festival P's and Q's

Courtesy of Marcia M. Neel, retired Supervisor of the Secondary Music Education Program of the Clark County School District, headquartered in Las Vegas, Nevada

Many of you have heard me talk about my "Hands and Shoes" philosophy. It has to do with attending to details—specifically with regard to musical performances, but also with regard to the many non-musical items which contribute to, or detract from, the performance. Festival is so much more than "performing the music." With this in mind, I would like to make several recommendations—a checklist, if you will—to use in preparing for your next performance. This list comes from items that have been observed at this year's festivals, so please keep a copy on your computer for next year so that you can review it with your students or even

place the appropriate sections in your student handbook. I still see Festival as a Formal Concert Event and ask that you treat it with that in mind.

1. Conductor Attire

Directors should wear appropriate attire when conducting. For formal festivals and concerts, women should wear a longer dress or skirt rather than something above or even at the knee. Formal pants are also appropriate. Men should wear a suit or tux. Accompanists should be dressed in black or in the same uniform as the performers. They should also wear black shoes. (Don't forget to wipe the dust off your shoes—it can be seen from the hall.) At the All-City and JV Festivals, directors may wear the same uniform—or a matching uniform—as the students. Basic black is always appropriate. Ladies should err on the side of conservatism.

2. Student Attire

Students should wear appropriate attire that provides a uniform appearance. This instills a sense of pride in their ensemble. Black pants require black socks and black shoes for performers. In many cases, students can get away with just wearing black socks if they forget to wear their black shoes. From the hall, you can't tell the difference. You can, however, tell if students are wearing white socks or black socks with athletic shoes. Some schools have purchased extra shoes to have available for students who need them. There is always a way to do this—visit with your supervisor if this is an economic issue at your school.

If possible, girls should wear either all pants or all skirts. Long black skirts can be purchased at a variety of locations at a variety of prices. Determine what works best for your situation but remember that uniformity is extremely important. Encourage your students to "hand down" their uniform as they progress into the next ensemble. You might want to visit with your administrator for financial assistance if needed for some students.

Hair should be worn off the face. This includes both students and conductors. Whether singing or playing, it is important that nothing get in the way. Students do not realize how many times they are pushing hair out of their faces with their hands or with a toss of the head. This is extremely distracting during performances. **NO SUNGLASSES.**

Students should wear their uniforms similarly. Take time to discuss with your students how to wear their uniform. T-shirts should be tucked in.

When wearing t-shirts or polo shirts, make a decision about the pants (for example: either all black, all jeans or all khaki). Decide whether the shirt should be buttoned all the way to the top or not. If boys are going to wear a t-shirt under the polo shirt, the t-shirt should be white.

TIP 22

It goes without saying that gum chewing, wearing sunglasses, chains and “nuisance items” are not appropriate. A uniform appearance (not to be confused with expensive uniforms) is expected and adjudicated at Festival.

3. Jewelry

Earrings and necklaces should not be seen unless they are part of the uniform. (Earrings that do not hang off the ears are appropriate and necklaces may be tucked in so long as they do not show.) Large jewelry pieces take away from the uniform look of the ensemble.

4. Audience Etiquette

This is considered to be a Formal Concert Setting and it is important that your students, and their parents, know what that means. Be sure to address audience etiquette ahead of time and often. If students know what the expectation is, they will behave appropriately. As you know, I reinforce this often at Festival. This past year, there were schools that received audience penalties in their scores because of such poor behavior. Please reinforce the fact that Festival is as much about learning how to be in the audience in a Formal Concert Setting as it is about the performance itself. The following is thus expected of students while they are listening to performances.

- Students should sit tall in their seats.
- Students should be quiet listeners and focus on exemplary elements of the performance.
- Students should remain seated during the entire performance.
- Flash photography should not occur during the performance. (Photos are permitted at the All-City and JV Festivals since these are considered to be entry-level events.)
- Cell phones should be turned off or put into the silent mode.

5. Applause

I find that students/audience members do not know about applause. Below, please find the expectation in a Formal Concert Setting. If you begin teaching this from the beginning of the year, students (and eventually parents) will know what to do by the time Festival occurs in the spring.

The audience should applaud for the first 8–10 performers who enter the stage and the same when they exit at the conclusion of the performance.

Applause should occur whenever someone is announced or recognized.

After each selection, applause should occur when the arms of the conductor have come all the way down to his or her side after the final cutoff. The selection is not over until this point.

6. Stage Etiquette

Be sure to address stage etiquette. The adjudication begins the moment the first student steps onto the stage. Discuss with them how to “take the stage.” Once students are on the stage, they should not speak to one another unless absolutely necessary. Laughing on the stage is never appropriate.

Rehearse getting on and off the stage quietly, that is, where to go on the risers, when to stand/sit when the conductor enters, etc. All of this is part of the performance experience.

7. Performance Etiquette

The performance evaluation begins the moment the first student steps onto the stage, rather than when the first note is played, so please ensure that your students understand this. They are to enter the stage; go directly to their location; then demonstrate proper instrument rest position. **STUDENTS ARE NOT TO CARRY ON CONVERSATIONS DURING THIS TIME.**

Conductors should turn around and acknowledge the audience when they applaud for the ensemble’s performance. Students should be taught to look at the audience and smile during the applause. Do NOT allow them to turn to the next selection during this time. There is nothing worse than applauding for an ensemble whose members are turning to the next piece during this time. Students should bring up the next selection only after the director has turned back to face the ensemble. In jazz band, soloists should definitely acknowledge applause with a smile or nod when the audience applauds for the solo.

THE BIG PICTURE: ATTENDING TO MUSICAL DETAILS

Be sure that you are teaching musical skills through the music itself rather than just teaching musical selections. This is why music is our textbook. In the past, too many ensembles have “performed notes” without attending to the “how to” of singing or playing. If you need ideas on how to teach good tone, for example, ask for pedagogical assistance. There are many resident experts who are happy to help. If you are not sure what music might be appropriate for your ensemble, ask. Don’t settle for a “good” performance. Debbie Brockett, principal of Silvestri MS, was awarded the NMEA Administrator of the Year Award and in her acceptance speech, she said, “Good is the enemy of great.” Each day, students must grow in some facet, and it is up to us to never compromise on our expectations.

Want more tips on keeping music strong in your schools?

Visit the site devoted to all things music advocacy: www.supportmusic.com

TIP 22