

Under The Microscope: What The Adjudicators Are Looking For

**This clinic is respectfully dedicated to Robert E. Davis.
August 15, 1924 – January 10, 2011**

“The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires.” - William Arthur Ward

Rating I - an outstanding performance, with very few **technical errors** and exemplifying a truly **musical expression**.

The problem: For a variety of reasons, ensemble directors often find themselves spending the majority of their time working on solutions that deal with technique, thus leaving little or no time to address musical expression. The opposite may also be true. Some conductors will work immediately on musical expression and, as a result, the final product reflects a performance that is technically under-prepared.

The solution: Ensemble directors generally realize the need to confront basic technique at the outset of preparing a musical program. Yet, it's highly crucial that we create daily opportunities for reinforcing the technical demands in such a way that we can quickly move on to the “fun stuff” of making music. Creating the appropriate balance, along with the proper approach, will be the key to achieving success when addressing both technical errors and musical expression.

What are the basic expectations of a good band?

Note Accuracy, Rhythmic Accuracy, Articulation, Facility and Precision

These important concepts fall under the category of **technical errors**. They must be addressed in the early stages of introducing the music. Once introduced, the students must take individual ownership for continued improvement by establishing quality practice time outside of the rehearsal. As previously stated, if you spend a great deal of time practicing notes and rhythms in your rehearsal, you'll be afforded little time to rehearse the music.

When does the actual introduction of the piece take place?

The beginning of a rehearsal, commonly called the warm-up, is often looked upon as the most critical stage in the development of a quality band program. Considered by many to be one of the highest areas of recall, it is essential that fundamentally sound performance goals be established during this time frame. These goals, based on high standards of technical proficiency, should transfer to the remainder of each and every rehearsal. Quality warm-ups should occur throughout the school year and should not be reserved solely for the preparation of contest music.

A Must Read Book!

**The Creative Director: Alternative Rehearsal Techniques by Ed Lisk
Meredith Publications**

Forever Shining

(A suggested approach for a warm-up)

Note Accuracy – key centers that are represented in this work
(C minor, Bb major, Eb major and F major)

Rhythmic Accuracy – Measures 160 and 161 applied to the F major scale

Articulation – articulation exercises reflective of the music
(Slur two, tongue two and the continuous slurring of 16th notes)

Facility and Precision – Mea. 47 (ensemble phasing)
sub-division is often the key to success
Meas. 50-58 (upper woodwinds) “Be my metronome.”

Are there other basic expectations?

Tone, Intonation and Posture

“Develop a quality sound in your head and refer to it each time you step on the podium.”
– Donald Hunsberger

The development of aural skills, along with good posture, starts at an early age and must be nurtured at each and every opportunity throughout the student’s musical career. Tone, intonation and good posture go hand in hand. Can we all agree that it’s very difficult to tune a series of notes that are played with a bad tone? The following is a suggested list of performance rules that may be applied to chorales and scales for the purpose of developing improved breath support:

1. Play as many notes as you can, with as nice a sound as you can before you take a breath.
2. When you need to take a breath, avoid taking it in the obvious place.
3. Try not to take a breath at the same time as the person next to you.

What’s the difference between a good band and superior band?

A superior band will do all the above in addition to adding the magic ingredient of making the music **“come alive.”** This vital area of musical concern is driven primarily by the conductor’s creative ability and passionate desire to address the **musical challenges** of the composition.

“The Fun Stuff”

Attitude and Understanding

Never allow your students to be critical of a composition that, in the early stages, isn’t played to perfection. It has been my experience that by the time they can play it well, it often turns out to be one of their *all-time* favorite pieces.

In the beginning stages of score study, it's important to understand what the composer is trying to convey to the performers as well as to the audience. Take the time to address the following questions:

What do you know about the composer?

Have you played any other works by this composer?

What does the title reflect?

Are there program notes about the composition?

Are there performance notes?

Is the music a depiction of a story, a person, or an event?

Is there an intended emotional quality to the work?

Can you or your students bring any personal experiences to the rehearsal that might relate to the piece?

Is it possible to use visual imagery when rehearsing the music?

Style and Tempo

How do the musical and tempo terms reflect the style and character of the music?

Does the band warm up in a musical manner?

*"All music is nothing more than a succession of impulses
that converge towards a definite point of repose."*

Igor Stravinsky

Low searches for high and high searches for low!

A Must Read Book!

Intangibles of Musical Performance by Ed Lisk

Meredith Publications

How would you describe your rehearsals? Do you practice or do you perform?

Do your students need an audience to be inspired?

Is the ensemble able to play the music at the suggested tempo markings?

Remember, it's just as important to play the musical silence, as it is to play the musical notes.

What individual, or group of individuals, is responsible for maintaining tempo?

Sub-division is the key to performing slow music. (Phasing problems)

Balance

If you ask several band directors to define balance as it relates to musical performance, it's quite possible that you'll receive more than one answer.

Please understand that in the mind of a composer, he or she is always writing for the *All-American Band*. With regard to balance, this imaginary band certainly has the perfect instrumentation and can execute any piece flawlessly. Since the music is not custom fitted for each and every ensemble, it is the responsibility of the conductor to serve as a recording engineer and constantly adjust the dials to achieve success with any and all issues that deal with balance. What are those issues?

How the ensemble is seated will greatly affect how the audience hears the band.

The instrumentation of each section is an important factor that often requires adjustments. Each piece has a compositional balance consisting of the following:

melody
bass line
counter-melody
harmonic accompaniment
percussion

The consistency of how loud and soft we play (dynamics) plays an important part in the total performance.

The conductor will need to work hard in order to achieve a specific tone color with his or her ensemble.

Effective Performance of Band Music by W. Francis McBeth
Southern Music Company

“Know your stuff and who you’re stuffin!” – W. Francis McBeth

Chords will need to be balanced.

You need to understand how density affects balance. (Unison writing followed by multi-part writing)

Musical Expression

A Must Read Book!
Casals & The Art of Interpretation By David Blum
University of California Press

“Remember that all music, in general, is a succession of rainbows.” - Pablo Casals

Dynamic Inflection – “When we see piano, the composer means in the range of piano. One has to follow the line of music.” We sometimes refer to this as shaping.

Repetition – “Repetition in music, be it of a single note or of a phrase, is similar to repetition of words or phrases in speech. It is a natural feature of expressive communication that we vary the emphasis when we say the same thing more than once.”

Long Notes – “If the long note stays on the same level it becomes monotonous.”

Interpretation – “When a student would reply that it’s not marked in the score, Casals would say, “It doesn’t matter. There are a thousand things that are not marked! Don’t give notes – give the meaning of the notes!”

Some additional thoughts

Orchestration

I've been fortunate to receive many compliments about my music, but the one that means the most to me is when a director says, "Your music really makes my band sound good." I take much pride in my ability to orchestrate and, in my humble opinion, composing and orchestrating go hand in hand. When selecting music, search for the composers who orchestrate well and understand the parameters of grade level writing.

Some tips that have served me well!

Don't be afraid to bring in an extra set of ears prior to contest. You'll be amazed at what you learn.

"What do ritard and rallentando have in common? They both mean watch the conductor." – James Curnow

Better-accented notes will be achieved if you de-emphasize the unaccented notes.

How short should the stinger be at the end of a march? If we can't hear the chord, it's too short.

Releases on ties and dots are common performance practices in faster music.

If the preparation of breadth is together, then the attack should be together.

"Always remember to work on tuning the cadence points." - Mark Kelly

Have the students memorize the first two measures of a piece in order to ensure eye contact with the stick.

In the first hour of a rehearsal, a guest conductor will divulge all his secrets for success. Will you be there?

Listen to quality recordings and live performances of outstanding performing groups.

Bring in master teachers to work with your ensemble.

Don't spoon-feed your band all the answers. Ask questions and promote the concept of ownership.

"The best discipline you can have is an engaging rehearsal." – Brian Stevens

"Most young conductors worry about their gestures, thus rendering them podium deaf." – Brian Stevens

"Unless specified, all crescendos should start at a lower volume." - Craig Kirchoff

"When I write molto, I mean molto." – Claude Smith

Jim Swearingen
Chair of Music Education
Capital University
1 College and Main
Columbus, Ohio 43209
jlswear@aol.com
jswearin@capital.edu
(614) 236-6261 - office
(614) 875-9729 - home