

The Amazing Power of Production Values

by M. Max McKee

Two students with white socks.

Out-of-order bathrooms at concert.

Changing music during applause.

No community awareness.

Tuning individuals in front of crowd.

Poor choices for concert music order.

Setup/cleanup not delegated.

Percussion music not pre-assigned.

Concert starts 10 minutes late.

No family ties with students.

What do all of those diverse things have to do with you and your band program? Absolutely everything, and a lot more.

In my 50-plus years as a director, and especially as a producer, it has become crystal clear why so many potentially great programs suffer from poor production values. Most can be easily fixed and will instantly make an enormous impact on the perception of how good your band program is.

Recently I've made it a point to observe what is making things we do at the American Band College demonstrate high class operation and a perception of excellence.

A FEW PRODUCTION VALUES

When you start thinking about what is or isn't working in the program, you soon realize that the list of significant production-based concepts is enormous. From organization, to rehearsal, to score study, to setup, to promotion, to travel, to management and many, many more, it's difficult to know where to start.

OBSERVING THE BEST

Over the years, I have been lucky to interface with dozens of the finest conductors, clinicians and soloists on the planet. I real-

ized that I intentionally decided how to get better by surrounding myself with successful people and observing what it is they do that makes them great. And then I stole absolutely any concept that I knew would make my program better. When I started Western International Band Clinic in 1979, I almost immediately hired Frederick Fennell to conduct a director's band during the convention. I spent every minute watching what he did with that band. Same thing happened years later with Col. Arnauld D. Gabriel. Then Frank Wickes.

Right away my program improved as I used those great rehearsal techniques with my own band. The American Band College master's degree program has over 100 young conductors working with our two 110-member bands each summer. Many of them prepare the music for featured conductors arriving to direct the concerts. Imagine preparing music for Paula Crider, Anthony Maiello, Peter Boonshaft or Arnauld Gabriel and THEN playing in the band after that master arrives! Instantly they find out what they missed and what they can take home to use with their own musicians.

THE CONCERT

Think of the many facets that must be implemented in preparation:

- Proper music selection
- Score study and rehearsal prep
- Rehearsal site management
- Personnel management
- Publicity and promotion
- Concert facility preparation
- Equipment setup and moving
- Concert attire
- Concert music order
- Concert presentation
- Cleanup and organization
- Delegated authority and help

Consider the immense importance of music selection. Does the music fit your band's capabilities? Is the mix of music right for an interesting and exciting presentation? More importantly, which piece starts the program and which ends it? Did your rehearsal time allow the band to be

ready for this concert? Did your score study include a method to assign percussion music so that section is as functional as all the other instruments from day one?

Is your rehearsal room clean every day to demonstrate that tiny but important aspect of the program. Do you know your personnel very well professionally and personally?

How are you working on publicity so that someone will actually show up for your concert? Are all aspects of facility preparation in place so that "lights, camera, action" will be smooth? How about clean/functional public restrooms, ticket sales/takers, house manager, sound system?

At the same time it is important to think through all aspects of needed equipment and how it will get to and from the facility. Have you learned how to assign specific pieces of equipment to each member of the band so that you can stay out of that loop? In my career I soon realized that generically assigning the clarinet section to a duty is no where near as effective as having a specific duty for each and every member. Time for execution shrinks by 75% and you know who to talk to if something has not been handled.

Think about the importance of proper attire for the concert. If the students wear random clothing, there will never be an audience perception of quality even BEFORE they ever hear note. As my great colleague, Mike Bankhead (USAF Commander retired), has mentioned in his many ABC clinics, "Members of the audience hear with their eyes, not their ears." When you have two students wearing white socks, (when black was called for) or wearing hats, all chance at professionalism is gone.

If you start the concert 15 minutes late, it sends an equally bad message. If you talk too much or use bad equipment to communicate, it ruins the flow of your concert. As my father (a band/choir director) used to say, "Shut up and play!" If you have a beautiful printed program (also VERY important) with lots of good info on the

pieces, soloists, and guest conductors, you don't need to talk.

If, before you start the concert you tune individual players in front of the audience, it shows a lack of professionalism and now the audience has ears! And, if there is any piece on the program that is not ready to perform, don't explain that to the audience. Don't play it!!

Now, did you pick the right opening piece? A difficult, exposed piece hardly ever works as an opener. Also, what's last? If you have a "barn burner" next to last on your program and you expect it to "bring down the house," then do not finish with a march. Many times marches are perfect closers but not when they are upstaged by something else.

When a piece ends, be sure that there are no distractions from the appreciation that the audience gives. It is rude and low class to put music away and prepare for the next piece during the applause. If your group is going to stand, have everyone face the audience and attentively enjoy the accolade.

If you wish to introduce a guest conductor or soloist, think carefully about wording. Don't say the name of that person until the final words of the last sentence. If you have a guest conductor and a soloist, that last sentence should introduce the guest conductor and then the soloist.

At the end of your concert, take time in some fashion to individually interact with member of the audience to thank them for coming. It can be an act of going out into the hall or being in the lobby to acknowledge them before they leave. At times in my career, we'd orchestrate the last piece on the concert so that the entire band ended up in the aiseways of the audience area. When finished, each member of the band thanked those around them for coming.

Speaking of the concert end: Be sure that you have delegated duties to clear out everything instantly. Once again, the key is to have a specific job for each and every member of your band. Extra members of large sections can be assigned to specific percussion instruments, music collection, etc. Music stands can easily be given so

that two members of a six-member sax section take just those stands. Two other members deal with chairs. The fifth player might be assigned to your podium and the sixth to your music stand. On tour with an 80-piece symphonic band, we'd fill a huge U-Haul truck and the under compartments on two buses in 15 minutes flat. Many times our equipment even included stage sets, costumes and all kinds of paraphernalia for a children's program. Same result with 90 people: 15 minutes flat!

THE SHOW

When you stop to think about it, band directors are nearly always involved in two types of production: Concerts and Shows. Marching band is, of course, show based. John Philip Sousa knew how to grab the best concepts of show production and implement them to create excitement in a concert. The absolute best at that, which I've been fortunate to observe and copy, for 50 years, is Al Wright. Still living at 100 years of age (June 23, 1916-2016), he was a genius at finding ways to add excitement and long-term recognition of the band program with the Miami High School Band then Purdue University from the mid-50's on. To this day, thousands of people know about his creation of "The World's Largest Bass Drum" and the Golden Girl. While devised for marching bands, Al always found ways to create sparkle in a concert via a soloist, a special presentation or programming magic.

Don't hesitate to get the mayor, the superintendent or a local TV personality involved to narrate a piece or, when appropriate, conduct the band. I even got our university president to dress up as John Philip Sousa and conduct marches. Another university president narrated Lincoln Portrait.

If you are doing an outdoor concert, then think much more in terms of the show. We do a high-end, indoor concert the first week of the American Band College, but for July 4th we've totally converted the presentation to show concepts. I believe the proof is in the pudding because outdoor audiences don't need to hear long introductions and the history of the next piece of music. So, we changed from a master of ceremonies to what we call the Showmaster. That person entertains and infuses himself into various

elements of what is now a show with strong concert elements. He performs, is one of the conductors, becomes a comedian and controls the quick pace of events. We present the 200-piece band, small groups playing jazz or ethnic music, dancers and singers including half the band as a choir. As my father often said to me, "Your band can sing." Oh, how right he was! The result: Our shows and concerts have been totally transformed through the use of proven production values.

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Editor of Bandworld Magazine and co-founder of Western International Band Clinic, he is Professor Emeritus of Music at Southern Oregon Univ. where he served as Director of Bands from 1967 to 1994. He is now Executive Director of The American Band College masters degree program in which over 200 candidates from over 40 states and 8 foreign countries are enrolled. He also continues as a WIBC Board member, has served on the Oregon Arts Commission and in 2014 was elected Chairman of the Board of the John Philip Sousa Foundation. He received the NBA Citation of Excellence and is a two-time recipient of the Sousa Foundation's Sudler Certificate of Merit. In 1999 he was inducted into the Northwest Bandmasters Association and received the Sousa Foundation's highest award, The Medal of Honor. He is an elected member of the prestigious American Bandmasters Association, hosted its 1988 national convention in Ashland and served on its Board of Directors from 2000-2002. Max was also presented the Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic's Music Industry award, the WBDI World of Music award the WBDI's Al G. Wright award and the A.A. Harding award by the ASBDA.