

# **Bandworld View**

## **Editorial**

### **The System is the Solution**

**by M. Max McKee**

Back in 1986 (year two of Bandworld Magazine), I wrote the following editorial. I believe it is even more true today than it was 20 years ago.

The System is the Solution. Ma Bell's slogan wasn't such a bad one, was it? The system she had in place before the breakup of AT&T sure beat the devil out of the one we now have!

What's that got to do with bands? A lot.

As I observe the work of struggling young directors and hopelessly entrenched older directors, what happened to America's phone system often comes to mind. The focal point of quality control was easy to determine. Knowing who to contact when something went wrong was straight forward. More importantly, (like it or not) there was a philosophy, a plan of operation...in short, a system which everyone recognized.

A great many band programs are like today's phone company. The system is there, but focus and long-term purpose are lacking. The end user (in our case, the bandsman) finally just gives up in one way or another.

I learned early on in my own career that a lack of innate talent could be almost totally overcome by systematizing: Organize, organize, organize. The concept is so simple that most people overlook it.

I'll never forget a statement made to me many years ago by my good friend, Bill Moffit: "For every minute you want to save on the football field, expect to spend one hour of preparation outside rehearsal time." Now that doesn't mean that it will take 50 hours of preparation to get ready for the next 50-minute rehearsal. It does mean, however, that adequate preparation will save valuable time while inadequate preparation will surely waste it...by the bucketful.

And there is another side effect. Good organization is perceived by others as quality control. It, in fact, is. If, for example, daily warmups are directly related to skill development which are in turn connected to current and future music selections, this has to be thoughtfully organized. Quality and the development necessary to achieve it are controlled through a regimen. Result: Quality via organization.

This systematizing can extend to anything: Intonation, rhythm, instruments, music storage, uniforms, publicity, recruitment, fund raising. And...the less experience and confidence a director feels about a particular area, the more preparation and systematizing he or she must do.

Can't tell 5 cents flat from 5 cents sharp? Study the intonation tendencies of the instruments. Memorize them. Make the students memorize them. Sha-zam! Intonation improves. Can't get a halftime show to sound good and look good? Stop. Figure out why certain tunes make your band sound bad (too complex, difficult key, needs lots of low brass, etc.). Determine what part of the entrance and exit look lousy (end zone entry, ranks too long). Eliminate those. Simplify. Systematize. Find something that will make the students proud. Zap! Halftime shows improve.

No matter what the area, if it's just not working, then organize it. Sound too easy? It is. But if you try it, you'll soon find that the system is the solution.

P.S. All of this got installed into our American Band College masters degree program starting in 1992. There are now 342 grads from over 40 states. MANY of them will tell you just how true they found the above after studying here in Ashland, Oregon with dozens of the world's most successful teachers, composers and conductors.