

# Maximizing Contest Ratings 10 Years Ago in Bandworld

by Glady Wright

It isn't how much time you spend rehearsing. It is how efficiently that time is used. A director told me once; the band and I have been holding rehearsals every night after school for three weeks. We've really been working. This ought to get the job done! Did it?

No, because the band was just practicing more on the same mistakes and bad habits. Just playing the three selections over and over will certainly familiarize the students with the printed music score, but it won't get the job done.

Contest acts as a grade on your entire concert program which is why band directors spend so much time polishing those three numbers. Although it may not be always entirely accurate, it certainly is one way to evaluate what the director has been teaching. In recent years in most states, district ratings have generally become Superior, Excellent, and Good. Too much is dumped into Excellent, and if you receive a Good, you better go have a chat with your college band director; you really didn't prepare or did not solve the problems. You need help in evaluating yourself and your techniques. If you don't enter contest because of the stress, at least have someone come over and guest conduct your band once a year and discuss what you are doing.

We all need some sort of evaluation to keep motivated and on target.

Plan your rehearsal each day in detail. Plan for more than you anticipate being accomplished. Get a rehearsal notebook. Keep it in the conductor's folio of scores. Example: March first strain. Take it apart: counter-melody, trombones/baritones play. Have all melodic parts play then listen for unisons. Are we in tune?

Demonstrate again? Then have rhythm parts horn, basses, and percussion play. Listen for emphasis on downbeat and correct notes in horn chords. ALL PLAY TOGETHER. The result of this exercise should show the students how the march is constructed, teach them to listen to how and where their individual part fits in, and listen for intonation in unisons. If there is a short technical passage, isolate it and play it 5 times in a row quickly. If you can play that 5 times in a row correctly, you will be able to play it anytime you concentrate on it

This is how you practice technical passages. Slowly, repeat 5 times in a row correctly, then increase the tempo, repeat 6 times in a row correctly, etc.

What is the most efficient way to organize a rehearsal? Get the notes first, then the rhythm, style and intonation, generally in this order. Strive for contrast in tempi. Dynamics. and style. This is your goal. All directors need a definite detailed plan for each daily rehearsal. Start the rehearsal with tutti exercises, sightread an easy tune, then TUNE. The meató(carefully rehearsed music) is in the middle). Do not keep the band sitting for long periods of time while you are working on one section. This is what sectionals are for! Keep the band involved and interested! End with fun band playing. Begin and end the class on time. Bill Revelli's famous quote "Every rehearsal is a concert" should be carefully considered. Al Wright's well known comment "When you stop the band, tell them WHY you stopped and HOW to fix it" also has considerable merit.

You want the band to be confident in the performances? Real confidence comes from the individual student's mastery of the music. An individual test on individual parts GRADED, scheduled with plenty of time to practice BEFOREHAND, will usually do the trick. Here you can check articulation, correct notes, phrasing, etc. A band part should be played as well as a solo performed at the solo and ensemble contest.

For balance within the large sections of clarinets, flutes, cornets, etc., there is no substitute for sectionals. Maybe you can't have them regularly every week because of athletic practices after school, but schedule a set of them at some time. This is NOT the time to work with an individual. The sectionals should be used for balance, style, phrasing, etc. At the end, the students should feel something ready was accomplished. We don't do well on that Allegro section clarinets and a sectional is mandatory. I'll be there anytime you as a section can set the time midnight on Friday night if necessary. One innovative director, Judy Grimes, set up a practice marathon - 24 hours. Students collected money and then came to band over a week-end and rehearsed. Got a lot of publicity, earned money, and was a generally positive experience. No one played 24 hours straight; just the director conducted (and an assistant). The band came and went, meeting a certain time obligation.

There aren't enough hours in a day to do what I should do nor the staff to do it! Hire a clinician several weeks-like your college band director (from the band fund) prior to the contest to adjudicate and rehearse the band for four hours. Sometimes costs can be deferred by working with several other directors in the vicinity.

Take a score and write down everything that was worked on.

Sometimes we can work so long on a passage we think it has been solved, but it still is weak. Outsiders often demand more from the students. Besides a new face, no matter how beautiful or handsome you are personally, is certainly refreshing to the students. Six weeks before contest, hire private teachers in the area to work out parts in class lessons during band time. Or use qualified parents or people in the community who will often donate their time if you give them enough satisfaction in working for you (like conducting the band).

In fact this is a good idea EARLY in the year while there is still time to improve tone quality by changing embouchures, etc.

When and how often should I tune? Tune individuals and sections as the need arises in the rehearsal Never tune the band until all individuals are properly warmed-up and then preferably by sections. Teach the students the proper method to match pitches, and tune themselves.

How about roll, announcements, etc? Have a trustworthy student take roll. Answer all questions about personal problems with one answer: "See me after class." Rehearsals are for rehearsing. A frequent complaint of students in a poor program is the band directors talks too much. Coming events should be listed on the bulletin board and the most urgent one IN FRONT OF THE BAND on the chalk board. A quick "Don't forget this" just before the last number will draw it to the students' attention.

The band thinks they have it made! Try this! Record a portion; play it back to the band. At the same time, play back the same excerpt from a fine band recording for comparison. Then discuss and analysis the section briefly with the band. Rehearse and correct as many problems as possible. Repeat the procedure. Did the band improve? It is easy to hear the "mud" and "fuzz." You will be surprised at how the members will respond, LISTEN, and mimic what they hear the fine band play. Time limit: 15 minutes per session.

Are you hearing the band like it really sounds? Hold a rehearsal in a gym or auditorium. Give the band a downbeat and go back in the room and have a good listen. Try even pretending it is not your band. You will be surprised at what you hear. You will be surprised at how well the band can play WITHOUT you conducting.

This will also give you confidence and give you more courage to conduct more musically and emotionally now you know the band is NOT going to fall apart. Then try conducting without a score. Do this several weeks before contest.

Trouble keeping the morale up? Be kind and spend half your time complimenting what the student does well. Avoid too many negative comments! For example "That is coming along very well. Now we can improve even that performance by doing the following."

When a section of a composition is played well or a chord balanced correctly, STOP AND SAY SO. "Did you really hear how well you just played that section? A perfect allegro beautiful style! Lightly tongued, detached, phrased! That's a First Division if I ever heard one. Let's do it again and really listen to how well you're playing that section. You folks are really cooking on all four burners today!" Then play it for reinforcement. Or a chord. "Beautifully balanced. I can't believe it. It is so perfectly balanced-full low brass-top woodwinds listening down and tuning-not overblowing-first trumpets not pinching and sharp. That was really great!" Then repeat the chord. Constantly reinforcing as you teach.

Next time: Sonority, and music the week before the contest.