

Zero to Concert in 48 Hours

Strategies for Success with Honor Bands

The Midwest Clinic International Band and Orchestra Conference
McCormick Place West
Chicago, Illinois
Wednesday, December 20, 2023
4:30–5:30 p.m.
Room W187

Travis J. Cross
Professor of Music
The UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music
Los Angeles, California
tjcross@ucla.edu

While the most important traits for honor band conductors are great musicianship and teaching, the potent combination of talented students, unfamiliar setting, and not quite enough time presents particular challenges. This session offers philosophical approaches, rehearsal techniques, and logistical considerations to help conductors succeed in the honor band setting—especially those in the position for the first time—and may also be valuable for those who host and administer honor bands.

OUTCOMES

What experiences do we want students to gain and what skills do we want students to develop as a result of participating in an honor band?

- Feel recognized for their talent and effort and motivation for future students
- Meet and learn from students at other schools
- Play in a band with full instrumentation (and no absences)
- Play with students who have a similar level of talent and dedication (fellow all-stars)
- Play with a guest conductor who brings a unique perspective and approach
- Play new, unfamiliar, or distinctive repertoire (that they don't play at home)
- Build endurance
- Build agility (learn, adjust, and adapt quickly)
- Develop ensemble listening and leadership skills
- Perform a great concert (and get a great video or audio recording)

The outcomes we prioritize influence how we prepare for and lead an honor band. The outcomes our hosts prioritize influence what they expect and (hopefully) how they structure the event. An honest conversation about desired outcomes between conductor and host gets everyone on the same page and informs all subsequent decisions.

PROGRAMMING

Besides our inherent musicianship, the repertoire we choose is the single most important factor in the success of an honor band.

Universal considerations

- Quality
- Achievability (one piece should be easier, one piece should be harder)
- Variety (genre, style, historical period, texture, original vs. transcription, major work(s), new music, diverse composers)
- Aesthetic experience

Research

- What has the band played over the past few years, and who were the conductors?
 - ◆ Which programs do the hosts believe were most successful?
 - ◆ Did they actually play all of the music listed on the program?
 - ◆ Will the hosts provide (or can you find on your own) recordings from recent years?
 - ◆ What advice do previous conductors have?
- How many minutes of music?
- Does the budget allow for a rentals or particularly expensive pieces?
- What is the exact schedule, including setup, meals, and breaks? How many hours or minutes of rehearsal are there? How many of those hours or minutes are on the day of the performance?
- How many nights of sleep do the students have between the first rehearsal and performance?
- Do students get the music in advance? Are they tested on the music for chair placement?
- What is the performance venue? Are there any peculiarities or opportunities? How much time does the band get on stage (and when)?
- Are any programming decisions made earlier or separately?
 - ◆ National anthem
 - ◆ Traditional pieces
 - ◆ Student or guest soloists

Honor band-specific considerations

- Can the students learn and understand the music quickly? (Beware transitions!)
 - Do you know the music well enough to solve problems quickly?
 - Can the music “take some hits?” (It will not be performed perfectly.)
 - What solos, auxiliary instruments, and extended techniques are required?
 - Is there enough for everyone to do? (Percussionists, in particular...)
 - Multi-movement pieces give you the option of not performing every movement.
 - Program to be selected from...
 - If the hosts ask for a harder program, offer to add another piece (that you may or may not end up performing).
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ADVANCE LOGISTICS

What can you provide and/or ask for in the months, weeks, and days ahead of the honor band?

Things to provide

- Setup chart (decide and designate where principals sit)
- Photo and biography
- List of all percussion instruments
- List of all mutes
- Breakdown of divisis (especially for trumpets and sometimes clarinets)
- Links to online reference recordings of the repertoire (including source material)
- Warm-up sheet with your exercises and canon groups
- Errata listings

Things to request

- Rehearsal facilitator
 - Music assistant/librarian
 - Percussion facilitator (who has access to available instruments)
 - Multiple options for auxiliary percussion instruments and mallets
 - Blackboard or whiteboard, piano or keyboard, tuner, audio or video playback
 - Legible (large and bold) student nametags
 - Special dietary or meal requests and lots of water
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REHEARSALS

When it comes to the performance, there are no guarantees—except something will go wrong. There simply isn't enough time for the entire group to get comfortable and confident enough with the music and each other to play a perfect concert. This can be liberating! **Instead of obsessing about perfection, you can focus on process and expressiveness.**

Confirm when breaks are scheduled and whether there are any restrictions on when they occur (coordinating between multiple bands, school bell and passing schedule, etc.). Review any rules for bathroom breaks, dress code, cell phones, etc., and whether you or the hosts enforce them. Are there emergency plans?

Write out and practice your introductory comments for quick and confident delivery. Strive to have the band playing (or breathing or singing or buzzing) in **less than five minutes.**

- ◆ Everyone gets the room they need, but especially the horns.
- ◆ Chairs and stands move, and you are empowered to move them in order to see, here or move better.
- ◆ Being here means you're good. So you don't have to prove it to everyone by playing as loudly as you can. Starting now, your goal shouldn't be to demonstrate how good you are as an individual, but rather how good we are as an ensemble.

There isn't enough time to fix everything, so **fix the things that fix other things.** The two concepts that have the greatest "side effects" are **vibrant, consistent airstream** and **listening.** Throughout rehearsal—and especially when I stop—my primary goal is to say or show something that directs, focuses, or reinforces student listening.

Gather the percussion section and meet with them before rehearsal begins. Explain that you'll spend time warming up the winds, and invite them to use that time to get music, instruments, and mallets organized, and then invite them to join the warm-up exercises on keyboards.

A thoughtful and intentional warm-up lays the foundation for a successful process and performance. Use this time not just to warm up their instruments and bodies, but also their **ears** and their **understanding of the level of focus and excellence required.** Set the bar high. If they don't sound great on easy stuff, how do they expect to sound great on the music?

Continue tenacious focus on fundamentals, especially during the first rehearsal blocks. Reinforce **posture, breath, airstream, pulse, and listening** across and down the ensemble. This early investment allows more focus on repertoire and interpretation as rehearsal progress.

Address a percussion sound within the first half hour. Suggest a technique adjustment or hear a passage with different mallet choices. This demonstrates that you hear them, they're an important part of the group, and how they play the instruments and the sounds they create matter.

Get into the hall to listen and/or have trusted ears in the hall and ask for feedback about balance. Often the sound in the room is different than the sound on the podium or the sound from player to player across the ensemble. (And the sound in the hall will be different with an audience, but it's still instructive to hear the band from the empty house during rehearsal.)

Call students by name whenever possible, especially when giving praise. If you're not good at pronouncing ethnic names, ask them to pronounce their names for you (they will usually not speak very loudly), and do your best.

Mind the "feeling tone" of the room. This is important in an hour-long rehearsal, but even more in an eight-hour rehearsal day. Band rooms sometimes get hot, especially if the air is turned off on weekends. Stage lights almost always get hot. Open the doors during breaks.

Take care of your physical health and comfort. **Drink more water** than you think you need—a lot of talking and singing, especially over an ensemble, dehydrates. (Some conductors use microphones and speakers to preserve their voices. Depending on the acoustics of the room, this can actually make it harder for students to hear and understand.) Grab a banana or granola bar at the hotel in the morning. Wear comfortable (but fashionable!) shoes.

Help students take care of **their** physical health and comfort. At the end of each rehearsal block, remind brass players to **buzz down**. At every break, admonish students to **drink water** and **wash their hands**. Before every meal, encourage students to eat something healthy and drink water. The night before the concert, I tell students to drink a glass of water last thing before they go to bed and first thing when they wake up in the morning.

Encourage students to branch out from their schoolmates or existing friends and make new ones. At every break, I tell students to meet one new person, and before meals, I encourage them to look for students who may be sitting alone or aren't part of a group and invite them to join their group. And I remind students to take a small effort to be polite and say thank you to anyone involved in helping them during the honor band, whether a band director or a cafeteria worker or a bus driver or a stagehand. **Promote kindness and respect!**

Mind **endurance**, especially for brass players, and especially on the **day of the performance**. If the concert day has long rehearsal blocks, take lots of short breaks. Strategically use singing, air playing, and even mental run-throughs to preserve chops. Encourage students to be aware of how they feel and be smart about "marking." Remind them that the more tired they get, the more likely they are to get tense and push, and the more they need to focus on breath and consistent airstream.

While in the performance space, **review and practice** the on-stage **warm-up, tuning sequence**, and **standing for bows**. (Figure out and write down solo bows.) Students from different programs do this differently, so don't assume they know how you want it to happen. **Remind them to smile!** (This can be a good chop break during the last rehearsal block in the hall.) Ensure a clear path for your own entrance and exit.

Playing through (or at least walking through) the repertoire in order helps students understand the shape of the program and pace their efforts. It also identifies percussion setup issues that can be remedied before the performance.

Consider how you want to engage with social media during the honor band. Will you post a photo of your "office for the day?" Will you stage a selfie with the entire band? Will you post a thank you for the hosts and students after the event?

PERFORMANCE

Figure out how the microphone works and, unless the person who introduces you is significantly taller or shorter, set the height before the performance begins. If necessary, remember to turn off the microphone before the music begins.

Write out and **practice** what you want to say in between pieces, if you choose to speak, and especially if you're less comfortable. (Speaking between pieces gives students a chop break and allows the percussion plenty of time to make changes.) After the first piece, I always thank the audience for making the choice to be there, and I try to land one good joke to "loosen up the room" and establish rapport early in the performance.

Make a list of people to thank, because you'll almost always forget someone, especially after conducting through most of the performance. Consider some form of brief "benediction" or arts advocacy and endorsement of the honor-band enterprise.

Learn in advance where to greet students after the concert and pose for pictures. And **wash your hands** as soon as you can after shaking more than a hundred. Don't lose your scores!
