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WINNING ISN'T EVERYTHING

How to prepare for jazz competitions and festivals.

As jazz passes the century mark, it is interesting to think that not too long ago the idea of a jazz competition would have only produced images of cutting sessions or battles between great big bands. Today, you can't swing an eighth note without hitting a national competition, college festival or student music award to prepare for. Where opportunities abound, so does a sense of uncertainty of how to prepare—for students and directors alike. Learning simple techniques on how to prepare can alleviate much of the anxiety.

DIRECTOR PREPARATION

Dwight Eisenhower once

stated that preparation for any battle begins with the commander. Where a jazz festival might not be as dramatic, the level of preparation each director must commit to is just as involved. Accordingly, this preparation involves much more than purchasing charts and conducting.

An important goal for each director is to set a positive and enthusiastic mood for his or her students. "It is the responsibility of the director to infuse the students with a sense of reality, letting them know that it is the art and the hard work of getting to the festival that is important," explains Bart Marantz, director of jazz studies at Booker T. Washington

High School of the Performing and Visual Arts in Dallas, Texas. "Directors get caught up in ratings and trophies, and consequently their students produce an all or nothing attitude when it come to competitions. Winning is not the objective. It is about infusing students with a sense of wonder about jazz."

To this end the director faces hours of preparation and research. "Good directors study scores, listen to recordings and research the history of each piece they program," says Dr. Gene Aitken, professor emeritus and former director of jazz studies at the University of Northern Colorado. "They learn basic recording tech-

niques and record every rehearsal. It's a full time job."

Directors can learn from each other. Budgeting time, once at a festival, to listen to other bands and talk with other directors can bring the even the experienced educator a wealth of knowledge. If possible, have fellow directors come clinic your band or ask the jazz director from the nearest university program to come and work with your students.

Today there are numerous books and resources geared specifically for the novice director. In many instances the competitions and festivals themselves offer help and advice. Nyala Wright, a manager of public programming

BY PAUL HAAR



for Jazz at Lincoln Center's Essentially Ellington High School Jazz Band Competition and Festival concurs: "For those directors interested in participating in our festival we offer numerous resources such as a band directors academy, rare charts, recordings and a monthly newsletter. If that is not enough they can always call us. We want you to succeed and expose your students to jazz music." Likewise, organizations such as the International Association for Jazz Education offer tips and advice on a whole host of competition topics on its Web site, iaje.org.

Beyond the musical preparation a director must be aware of the administrative duties involved with participating in festivals and competitions. "It may sound silly," Wright says, "but the most common mistakes that eliminate bands from consideration are the most simple ones: not following the rules and incorrectly filling out the paperwork."

Aitken adds, "Many ensembles don't get invitations to perform or awards because of a simple oversight by the director. One would be surprised how many times the University of Northern Colorado received awards or invitations to perform just because we took the time to follow the directions and

complete the paperwork asked by the sponsor."

Aitken offers one more administrative tip: "Most directors procrastinate. If this is your habit when submitting for events then get to know your UPS or Fed Ex representative. The US Postal Service will let you down every time. Use tracking numbers and make sure your submission gets to the people who need to hear it."

PREPARING STUDENTS

No matter how well prepared the director is or how long he or she has been directing, the success of an ensemble will always depend upon its players. One of the keys to success in preparing an ensemble for competitions is to make its members feel like key participants in the process.

"First, the students need to want it," Marantz says. "If they say yes to the challenge, then it is the director's duty to instill an understanding of what is going to be asked of them. The success of our program is built on the fact that every student involved knows what he or she need to be doing in class as well as outside of class. Walk the halls of our school and you will find our students with headphones on studying music."

Nyala Wright reinforces this view. "Directors who have been successful in the past [with the Essentially Ellington Competition] have absorbed themselves and their students in the music of Duke Ellington," she says. "This goes beyond notes, it involves history and theory, showing the students the role each chair plays in the ensemble. We even had one director who named each member of his band after the members of Duke Ellington Orchestra. The students were responsible for researching each member and studying that player's style."

Students retain more information when they are involved in the process of discovering it. With the advent of the Internet, students have greater access to resources pertaining to jazz than ever before. Creating assignments that involve research combined with organized listening and student-run sectionals give them an active involvement in the process of learning and thus sustain excitement and interest.

Another important aspect that many directors overlook is the psychological preparation of their students. It is common to have a group perform well in the comfort of their band room only to get to a competition and fall apart on stage. Over the series of weeks leading up to a competition, students not only build musical skills, they develop a comfort zone and familiarity with their surroundings.



One of the most puzzling aspects for directors is gauging what judges look for in a successful group.

Performing in a new environment, having microphones placed in front of them and subjecting them to judges sitting at tables can intimidate the most seasoned ensembles. To help students with the transition from rehearsal to competition, the following advice can be offered:

Record rehearsals. The recordings will not only help the director find problematic areas in the music, it will also help adjust the students to the presence of microphones.

Perform in different environments. Schedule pre-contest concerts and rehearsals in a variety of rooms and settings. Performing in a large auditorium will acclimate the ensemble to the sound of a large room. Performing in a small classroom will replicate the sound of sight-reading or warm-up room at a festival.



Reproduce the environment of a competition. Festivals and competitions are often quite specific as to such aspects as stage setup, warm-up and performance sequence, equipment, etc. With these guidelines in hand, a director can take an ensemble through the various stages of a competition, from warm-up to sight reading, thus familiarizing them with the pace and expectations of the event. A group of schools could even create a mock competition in which directors serve as mock judges.

PROGRAMMING

Finally, there is a question of programming. Usually with only 20 minutes to set up and perform a group has to balance many factors, including chart variety and exposure for soloists

as well as the basic skill of the ensemble. "Programming is essential for a festival," Gene Aitken says. "The charts must be presented in an order that makes sense." To this end Aitken offers the following advice:

Don't overprogram. Usually a group has minimal time to perform at a festival. A director should plan for at least three charts in a variety of styles. If the pool of quality soloists is small or the charts are short in duration, one could program four. However, if you have strong soloists, showcase them and give them the opportunity to demonstrate their talent.

Create an effective and interesting program. If an ensemble opens with a medium swing or shuffle and demonstrates strong ensemble playing and time, it give the students time to feel comfortable and lets the adjudicators know the band understands of the fundamentals of a good jazz performance. Then you can program a ballad and a Latin or uptempo tune. People usually judge an ensemble by the first and last charts. Both the first and last selection should have a strong ending and tell the listener about the musicianship, energy and quality of the ensemble.

Be practical when programming. Literature will determine the success or failure of any jazz performance. The literature must be challenging, but not out of the reach of the ensemble. Choosing a piece that requires the lead trumpet to play an F6 when he can go up only to C6 spells disaster for the player and the ensemble. Additionally, program for the entire band. Too often music is selected with the horn players in mind giving little consideration to the rhythm section. If your drummer has a strong funk groove but has difficulty maintaining time in a Latin style, you may need to adjust your program to cater to the student's strength.

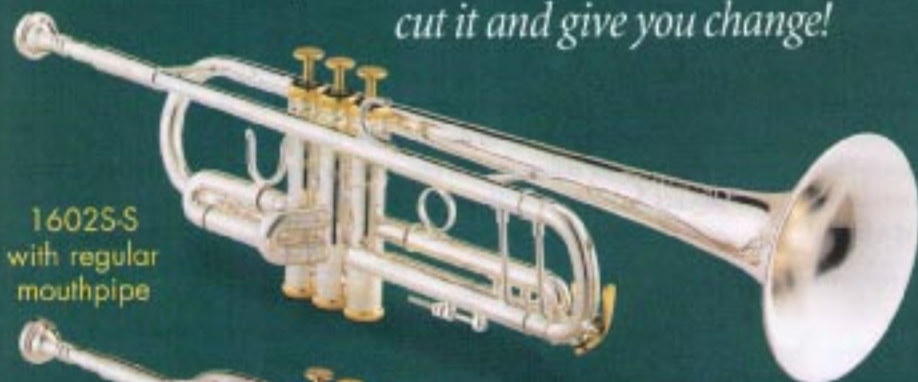
UNDERSTANDING THE JUDGES

One of the most puzzling aspects for directors is gauging what judges look for in a successful group. Understanding the nature of the competition, its objective and the type of groups involved will often hold the key.

What does a judge or a panel look for? "Musicianship!" says Steve Baker, executive producer of the International Association for Jazz Education. "Our submission panel focuses on all of the elements of a quality musical performance. We

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are also interested in the level of improvisation in each submission. Finally, we listen for recording quality. We want to hear the depth of the group without having to fight through noise or excessive postproduction."

A "funnel" approach is commonly used when judging a performance. First, an adjudicator looks at the ensemble as a whole. They listen for balance uniformity, pitch, dynamics, phrase markings and cutoffs.

Then the focus narrows to particular sections within the ensemble, again listening for balance and blend. Finally the focus narrows to individual members of the group, or in the case of small-group judging, on the individual soloists. Bart Marantz offers, "With a small-group I am more focused on the mechanics of the soloist, if they have learned the music vertically, horizontally and patternistically."

Additionally, judging can be affected by the objectives of the festival. "With usually 400 to 450 performance submissions for our annual IAJE Conference, we have to consider the overall needs and objectives of the conference," Baker says. "The tremendous diversity of our membership and their needs often play a factor in the number of selections we choose. In the past, some truly outstanding groups and performers have not been selected to ensure a greater variety and diversity for the conference."

Last, a judge's mind set can change from festival to competition. Marantz says, "My focus changes according to what the goals of the festival are. I don't compromise musical integrity, yet my approach does change, say, between a small community college festival and a national jazz competition. If the purpose of the festival is to further the awareness of jazz in a small community, one can not expect me to judge the groups with the same criteria as I would the Iowa Jazz Championships."

Accordingly, the experts all agree that the greatest success comes not in the awarding of a trophy or in a score, but in the musical journey that each group experiences in preparing for the event. Your group may experience a disappointing loss at one competition only to be vindicated and awarded in another instance. What the students acquire in the process of preparing for the competition is infinitely more valuable than the score they receive. **JT**