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On Cultivating Excellent Rehearsals

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On Cultivating Excellent Rehearsals

by Bradley Miedema, D.M.A.

As I write this article, I am enjoying a slower pace of life that follows the busy conclusion of a wonderful fall semester, crowned with another trip to the outstanding Midwest Clinic in Chicago. The timing of that conference affords an ample opportunity to meld my reflections about the semester past with the expectations and preparation for the semester to come. It is rejuvenating to attend concerts, rehearsal labs, and presentations that are consistently staged at such a high level of brilliance. I always come away with a renewed sense of passion and purpose in my teaching and conducting, which is a very good thing in the midpoint of the academic year, and it rejuvenates me for the spring semester.

The common denominator shared between all ensembles that perform at Midwest is the director's vision for excellence. It is tempting to pin all successes achieved by these groups on the size of the program and the school district, or the number and the quality of the private instructors, or even geographical location like Japan or Texas. However, at the heart of the matter, it is the director's relentless quest for developing excellence that shapes these ensembles on a daily basis in the rehearsal room. What does that look like? Of course every director brings different gifts to the podium, but here are some things that I believe reliably contribute to an outcome of excellent rehearsals.

- 1) Stewardship of time – Regardless of the amount of rehearsal time you have with your group each week, every minute is a sacred moment waiting to have its potential fully realized. From the bell that signals the start of rehearsal to the bell that inevitably announces its end, the best rehearsals are ones that are productive and purposeful. Don't allow the minutiae of administering your program to overshadow the real reason students show up every day: the opportunity to make music. Capitalize on the gift of time and make the most of every rehearsal.
- 2) Creation of beauty – Musicians need to experience beauty, brief and fleeting though it might be at times, in every rehearsal. The challenge is that all things worth doing and worth doing well take time, but cultivating a rehearsal culture that appreciates and strives for beauty is essential for any future success in this area. Nurture this quality by insisting that your students never settle for less than their absolute best playing, irrespective of their age level, and encourage them to go beyond the bare minimum of accuracy in their pursuit of artistry.
- 3) Mindless is pointless – I am all for establishing a structured rehearsal atmosphere that is conducive to a logical and reliable sequence of events, but if the director and students merely go through the motions in robot-like fashion, any potential benefits gained from structure are lost to monotony. In particular, evaluate your warm-up and tuning process at the start of rehearsal to determine where ears, eyes, fingers, and minds are operating on auto pilot. If playing can be done without listening or looking or thinking, then what is the point?
- 4) Sound of silence – The number one, undeniably essential component of any rehearsal environment is silence. Not the type of silence brought about by fear or intimidation, but rather the kind that stems from anticipation and curiosity. If a blank canvas is the starting point for the painter, a silent space is the corollary for the musician. Obviously there needs to be room to breathe and freedom to be real, COLLEGE CORNER The Iowa Bandmaster 35 but don't be afraid

to insist that the status quo be one of expectant silence. It is no coincidence that “silent” and “listen” are spelled with the same letters.

5) Quality of repertoire – Of course excellent ensembles should regularly rehearse and perform excellent repertoire, but surprisingly it is far too common for very fine bands to spend time playing less-than-stellar music. I am concerned that some notable works by significant composers are quietly being forgotten, mainly because of the drive to program the “latest and greatest” pieces being churned out by the publishers. Do what you can to assemble a quality curriculum that is appropriate, sequential, representative, and noteworthy.

6) Celebration of success – We have all heard the saying, “Success breeds success,” yet in most cases, students first need to have success celebrated and reinforced before they even know what success sounds like. To be clear, I am not talking about awards earned at contests and festivals. I am referring to big picture things, like characteristic tone in 5th grade band, or a well-balanced chord in 8th grade band, or a sensitively shaped solo phrase in high school band. Always take time to highlight positive achievements in the rehearsal room.

7) Foster focused listening – It is human nature to desire the easier route when undertaking a given task, whether a student in the classroom or a weekend warrior trying to complete a landscaping project. Rather than providing all of the answers for the students in your ensembles in regards to pitch, stylistic concerns, and the like, ask them to evaluate what they hear and to propose solutions. The director’s job should ultimately be to make himself dispensable so that the musicians become selfsufficient and able to make adjustments on their own.

8) Less is more – While the roles of conductor and teacher are highly integrated in any school ensemble director, the less advanced players often need more teaching rather than conducting. There is no reason to stay planted on the podium when your students would benefit from direct instruction. Move around the rehearsal room and lend support to individuals who need it, even as the group is playing, to allow for immediate and personally relevant comments. Your rehearsals will become more efficient and your students will profit from the additional interaction.

9) Role of mentors – I get asked frequently to lead clinics and workshops with bands and orchestras, and I am happy to do so. I truly enjoy the opportunity to work with middle and high school groups as time allows. What I find interesting is that few directors ask for feedback about their conducting or rehearsal techniques; they are more interested in receiving pointers for their ensembles than for themselves. If you already have a mentor in place, consider having that person observe you in rehearsal (not just your band) and ask to be given input about your teaching.

Dr. Bradley Miedema is the Director of Instrumental Music at Dordt College where he conducts the Chamber Orchestra, Concert Band, and Campus-Community Band, and he teaches courses in conducting and instrumental music education. Along with his duties at the college, he also serves as Music Director for the Northwest Iowa Symphony Orchestra (NISO). Prior to receiving his appointment at Dordt, Miedema spent 15 years teaching in middle and high schools in Iowa and Washington, developing

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