

Producing a Successful Percussion Ensemble Concert

by Ben Maughmer

What do you consider a “successful” concert or performance? Some may consider the number of people in attendance to gauge the success of the event. Others may define success by the experience for the audience, performers, community exposure, even money collected at the door. I would like to offer some ideas that combine these elements while focusing mainly on the performers and audience. Providing a positive experience for the student performers and audience is my goal. Was the concert enjoyed by all? Did they learn something? Have they been exposed to new things or new ways to envision percussion? Keeping these ideas in mind when preparing for your concert goes a long way in achieving these goals.

When selecting the music, try to use a wide variety of styles and idioms. There are many to choose from: ensembles with keyboards, ensembles with no keyboards, novelty ensembles, solos, ethnic ensembles, pop ensembles, ensembles with electronics and brass and guest performers or groups. If you have private teachers on your campus, they might be interested in performing for their students. I have had members from our high school theater department perform “Stomp-like” skits on the concert that are very entertaining and provide yet another level of variety. The programming of contrasting selections along with the creative use of lights and microphones can help enhance the effect of each performance. Exposure to different styles, sounds and instruments should maintain a healthy interest for your students and audience.

I have experienced very positive results by mixing age groups in performances. If you are fortunate enough to be able to bring in a professional, college ensemble, or even yourself to perform with your students, the musical experience for your percussionists is greatly enhanced. Younger percussionists performing with more experienced players on an easy pop tune can prove to be very rewarding and is a memorable and exciting event for middle school percussionists. Both professionals and college students find it refreshing to perform with such young and enthusiastic student percussionists. Parents LOVE it!

In addition to effective programming, the physical flow of the concert will have a great deal to do with how the audience responds. Try to think of the total experience instead of each individual percussion ensemble. Working out the mechanics of moving equipment in advance helps to avoid dead time between selections. Utilize different parts of the performing area to maximize the flow of the concert. For example, one ensemble could be setting up behind a curtain while another group is performing in front of the curtain. If making the audience wait is unavoidable, raffle a prize or provide information about your program and upcoming events. Or just brag about what wonderful kids you have to work with.

If you need to raise money, charge a few dollars at the door. Some ideas to help boost audience attendance include traditional advertising with flyers and posters. One incentive to attract people to the concerts is to ask a local music store to donate some items for raffle, or even sell you a big-ticket item at a discount to raffle. An idea that has worked great for me is to purchase an instrument that would be desirable to one of your campuses, such as a set of crash cymbals, congas, bongos or even a snare drum. Then offer to give that item to the campus that sells the most tickets.

Band directors will scramble to get all of their students and parents to attend in hopes of getting the big prize! The same idea works for the individual who sells the most tickets. A guest artist performing on your concert may seem like quite an undertaking with all the travel and lodging considerations, but you might be surprised how willing businesses are to help out with some of the costs. Some music stores will provide educational funding for concerts and clinics. Hotels in your community can be very generous when it comes to helping out with lodging. Just a few phone calls and personally delivered letters can result in discounted or even free rooms for guest performers!

Putting together a concert like this is no easy task. It takes organization and effective planning, but if you start a few months in advance there is plenty of time to take care of the details. Procure help from parents and you can balance the load. Above all, make sure the performance is enjoyable for the students and audience alike. Your percussion program will reap the rewards.

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