

The Five Requisites of a Successful Musical Performance

by William D. Revelli

Tone, Intonation, Rhythm, Technical Proficiency & Interpretation:

In my education of the many bands and orchestras that I conduct and adjudicate annually, I find myself asking the questions: “What are the elements that make the difference in the performances and ratings of the ensembles, and what factors finally determine the quality of the performances?”

There was a time, and not so long ago, when our school bands and orchestras were deficient in at least three of the aforementioned elements. Today, due to improved musicianship, training, state and national clinics, festivals and contests, videotapes and other sources, our school ensembles show considerable improvement in some areas of performance standards. Particularly in the element of technical proficiency, facility, range and fluency where much progress is evident. However, the elements of tone quality, intonation and interpretation remain the most deficient as they did in the past.

While technical facility, dexterity, range and fluency are primarily mental and mechanical control accomplishments, the ability for one to produce a beautiful, refined, sensuous tone with purity of intonation at all dynamic levels, is and always will be a mental, auditory, physical and innerself reaction which can only be accomplished when the performer can actually hear, see and feel the tone before it is produced, or at least when it is an actual sound.

Good tone quality is the result of correct fundamental preparation and requires the correct mental, auditory conception of beauty and tone; plus the ability to perceive the color, quality and image of the tone to be produced.

It is amazing how effectively this phase of the students' development can be realized; yet it remains perhaps the most deficient of the five essential elements of performance.

Rhythmical accuracy, like technical proficiency, has shown much improvement among our young musicians in recent years. Methods of teaching this element have come far as the composer's polyrhythms and demands upon the young musician. Undoubtedly, America's jazz, stage and marching bands have contributed to this advancement also. Rhythmical accuracy will depend upon the performers ability to accurately distribute the notes within the beat. This is the basis of rhythmical accuracy and can only be perfected through the slow motion process; i.e. – a 16th note is but a fast whole note, whereas a whole note is but a slow 16th note. Subdivision is the key to rhythmical accuracy.

“Never play a rapid passage in tempo until you have mastered it in slow motion.”

Technique: This element is the musician's vocabulary; just as an orator should possess an extensive vocabulary, so must the musician possess a fluent, facile, controlled technique, but never at a sacrifice of the accomplishment to be able to produce a million unmeaningful notes with inferior tone quality, impure intonation, and distorted rhythm; better to play but a few beautiful tones with pure intonation in precise rhythm and meaningful interpretation.

“Better one perfect apple than a bushel of spoiled ones”.

Interpretation is of course the element that musically separates the “music makers” from the “note getters.” It is here where the conductor is no longer the teacher, but rather the re-creator. This is the time when the conductor uses his baton as a painter uses his brushes and brings to life the musical painting, the time when he and his ensemble recreate the composer's score and he inspires and leads his musicians to musical heights they have never known, to places they have never been nor seen, and may never experience again. It is the moment we all eagerly await, for it represents the culmination of many hours of preparation, numerous rehearsals, score study, individual and group practice and, now, the performance – a time to prove and moments to remember.

The band's performance is merely a reflection of its preparation, musicality, attitude of pride, confidence, enthusiasm, dedication, spirit, love, discipline, sacrifice, leadership and more; and finally that never ending goal, the search, the quest for perfection, a goal seldom if ever reached, but worth the adventure in the search; but only if the journey in its quest is filled with joy, pleasure, excitement, thrills and happiness that only music can find in our lives.

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