

Set-Up For Success

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It is always disconcerting to hear a band that suffers from a poor set-up on stage. Placement of sections should enhance not detract from the sound projected to the audience. The following are some basic, common sense ideas that can easily be adapted to fit any band.

Never use a wind ensemble (front-facing) set-up for a large concert band as it tends to string the players across the stage and makes the players' hearing each other more difficult. It also tends to give a somewhat "raw" projection of tone quality. Much better for young players is the standard concentric half-circle of rows. The sound tends to blend better, and sections can stay together more easily.

A clear, solid bass line is essential to good band sonority. To that end, it is necessary to bunch all instruments into a bass section, preferably to the right of the conductor toward the center (between one and two o'clock) of the stage. This grouping should include, in separate rows, all instruments playing a bass function: bassoon, bass clarinet, baritone saxophone, contrabass clarinet, tuba, string bass, bass trombone and baritone horn. Even the timpani should be in this group.

Choirs are far less important (e.g. clarinet choir) than function

within the ensemble. This approach will allow the players to hear each other and to tune the line to its best advantage.

Avoid putting the horns on the outside of the stage to the conductor's left, as the bell projects directly at the audience with an inner part (sometimes in the wrong partial!) Frequently providing harmony and counter-melodies, the horns are best in the center of the stage or to the right of the conductor (bells aimed toward the rest of the ensemble). Keep the alto saxophones and horns in close proximity since they are a frequent double, most notably in music at the easier grade levels.

The percussion section should be carefully arranged to provide for the following:

1. easy unobtrusive movement from instrument to instrument
2. timpani near the bass function
3. bass drum in the center of the band
4. keyboard instruments to the conductor's left
5. a traps table for small accessories
6. plenty of room for each player

Never set the whole percussion section off to one side of the stage, as it is visual distraction and inhibits the ensemble's awareness of overall tone. Always "choreograph"

players' movements in relation to placement of the instruments. Be sure to space your players at least a chair apart to allow for resonance of sound on stage. A tight bunching of bodies tends to soak up the tone and take the brightness away from the band (note how carefully our fine military service bands get the performers far enough apart so the tone is not muffled by the players being too close).

Avoid risers if possible. You may get some unpleasant surprises from a very bright 3rd trumpet or an over-zealous trombonist. A shell on stage is ideal to enhance sound projection and the ability of players to hear each other, a key consideration in a tight ensemble. If a shell is not an option, devise a simple system of flats to guard against sound going up into the fly-space and into the backstage area.

Your own visibility to the players is greatly enhanced by keeping the conductor's stand low. The players must see the bottom (ictus) of the beat in order to respond accordingly.

Adapt these ideas to your own ensemble and stage dimensions and make your set-up both visually and aurally effective.

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