

# Festival Preparation

## Part II - Preparing the Selected Works

Carl A. Bly

---

*Part I of this series was printed in the June 2004 issue of 'Bandmasters Review.'*

If you are planning to attend a festival or contest with your ensemble, first obtain an adjudication sheet and familiarize yourself with the caption areas. Most adjudication sheets have tone and intonation as the top two categories and there is a reason for this. Producing a beautiful characteristic sound and playing in tune, will affect every other category on the sheet. Performing in tune also gives amazing clarity to the ensemble. It is important that you compare recent festival adjudication sheets and review tapes for musical elements that need improvement. If you are receiving the same comments over and over... FIX THEM! Restructure your rehearsal putting more emphasis on these musical elements for better performance results. If you are listening to a recording of your ensemble, notice if there is a point in the performance where you lose interest. What elements are lacking to cause this?

Exactly how do you approach, or look at your ensemble? When I stand in front of an ensemble, I always consider it to be my

major instrument! An orchestra, band or chorus, all function as one large instrument and must be approached in that manner. When I work with a group, I want to produce a specific sound. I want it to be balanced, well blended, in tune, technically clean and clear. It should have phrases, correct style, musicality, and emotion. Remember: You are standing in front of the greatest musical instrument in the world! What are you going to do to make it sound that way?

Before starting to work on a composition with your students, the most important question is "Do you understand the style?" You are what you listen to! What do you listen to in your car on the way to work each day, when working around the house, or just relaxing? If you do not listen to classical music a certain amount of time, you will have great difficulty bringing in your ensemble and playing Mozart or a Rossini Overture in the correct style! What makes Berlioz have that unique string sound, Howard Hanson a romantic style, or Hindemith have beautifully phrased melodic lines? Contemporary composers have certain idi-

oms you need to understand. William Schuman's *George Washington Bridge*, for example, is a work that is chordal in structure. Are you balancing the work by recognizing the importance of hearing each note in the chord equally, or are you playing a melodic work where the melodic counter lines must be prominent also?

If you understand the style of a piece, consider whether you will be able to get away with playing it in a festival or contest? A great example of this is Robert Russell Bennett's *Suite of Old American Dances*. The understanding of jazz style is so important in performing this work. However, even if you are a jazz musician, knowing the adjudicator's background can be very helpful. Judge I, a strict concert performer, will tell you the work "Swings too much for the concert hall." Judge II, a jazz musician, will tell you the work "does not swing enough." And of course Judge III will love the performance!

Remember that performing a piece in the correct style also includes playing the work at the correct tempo! There are a lot of ensembles that can play Shostakovich's *Festive Overture*

## Festival Preparation, Part II - Preparing the Selected Works

at 120, however that is not correct. The score is marked 152 and I find it lies very nicely at 160. Yes, tempo markings are a guideline and tempos within this marked area will work better for different ensembles. Find a tempo in the range that makes the work sing, have emotion and excitement. While students love to play bright tempos, fast and sloppy is not correct.

When you start to work on a composition, work on the tempo changes and modulations first. These are always the hardest areas for students. Knowing the correct notes and rhythms is so important if they are going to be able to look up and follow your conducting. In the early stages, remember that “things learned wrong take forever to fix.” Rehearse; do not just play through things. When students learn to play incorrect rhythms and notes, it becomes extremely difficult to break them of these habits! This is also a great time to teach them style. How exactly do you want the dotted 8<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> played? What articulation should be used on the triplet? Remember: It is easy for adjudicators to criticize musical elements clearly notated on the score: notes, rhythms, articulations and dynamics.

I mentioned articulation above. It is my opinion that this is an extremely important element of a great performance. For me, “articulation is the diction of the ensemble.” How clear does the ensemble speak to the audience? Think of articulation as proper enunciation. No one enjoys listening to a speaker or musician who cannot properly get their message across because of poor enunciation. The coordination of one's voice, lips, breath, fingers, wrists, etc. is extremely important. Someone who mutters in a monotone voice is boring to listen to! The lower the instrument, the more precise the articulation has to be. Always consider the various ways an articulation

can be performed. Two 8<sup>th</sup> notes slurred together will be played totally differently at 60 and 152. The accents and dynamics give emotion and excitement to what is being said. Do not ignore them!

**Ensemble Fundamentals:** Throughout my years of teaching, there were certain key elements stressed daily in rehearsals. My students soon learned these basic 12 ensemble fundamentals.

**1. Know what is primary and what is secondary.** Primary parts are melodic lines, moving 8<sup>th</sup> notes (in a chorale like sections), and 16<sup>th</sup> notes. The blacker the note the more important it is. Secondary parts are whole notes, half notes, repeated rhythmic pulse, percussion rolls, and trills. Trills must be fast, shimmering, exciting, and in tempo with the music. They are an effect and do not need to be over played in volume. Likewise, percussion rolls need to be in tempo, but not loud. Percussion crescendos should not happen until the very end. They should give direction to the ensemble's musical line. Remember: Rhythmic pulse is extremely important to the stability of the tempo, not volume.

**2. Length of whole and half notes. In any meter, always play long notes full value.** For example, in common time, whole notes should be held all the way to one, not cut off at beat four. A fundamental that I teach is to never breathe on a bar line. Learn where the phrases are in the melodic lines. Often phrases start with a pick-up to the next measure, where breathing can be taught naturally. Playing chorale like warm-up exercises and teaching students not to take the breath at the end of phrases or fermatas helps to develop this concept. Often in a piece in common time with whole notes written in an accompaniment part, I hear the whole ensemble breathe every two measures.

## Festival Preparation, Part II - Preparing the Selected Works

**3. Teach students to stagger breath.** This can help address note lengths mentioned in fundamental #2. If your students do not naturally divide and breathe after different beats, assign them which beats to breathe after. If the piece is in common time, go through the ensemble giving each student a number from 1 through 3. Then instruct the student to take their breath only after their (beat) number. This way no student ever breathes after beat 4.

Your ensemble will now be able to play with this never ending sound, producing a wonderful organ-like effect.

**4. Always crescendo into climatic points.** Remember, crescendos can only happen if you start from a soft dynamic level. Often in order for this to occur, a forte-piano must be added leaving more room for a crescendo. The length of the crescendo (or diminuendo) is important as far as when the effect will take

place. The most common error is to let the crescendo (or diminuendo) happen to early. When this occurs, there is no room to build and the direction of the phrase is lost. The majority of a crescendo (or diminuendo) should happen during the last half of the space! For example, if the crescendo is to take place over four measures then the ensemble should remain soft during the first two measures. This builds anticipation, and lets it happen during the last two measures. Likewise diminuendos should occur in the same manner. Taper the top end of the diminuendo very slowly and then go down dynamically during the last half, not arriving too early with a place to go. Tympani, and suspended cymbal rolls especially, should not occur until the very end of crescendos for that little extra *oomph*. Do not let percussion players over play but rather support the effect.

**5. Accents are miniature dynamics.** Written on long notes, they should be played forte at the beginning and then go down dynamically, out of the way. There will generally be something much more exciting to listen to going on (often woodwind runs).

**6. Staccato means separated.** So often students are taught to play staccato notes short. Thus, they clip the notes too short and in a slow section this can

make the notes sound uncharacteristic to the musical style. They need to have length and be detached. Even staccato notes followed by rests, such as the opening of Rossini's *Italian in Algiers* must have some length to them.

**7. Maintain tempos in fast section.** In allegro, presto, and vivace sections, dynamics can cause a tremendous fluctuation in the tempo. Forte sections are usually

played fast, and when the piano dynamic appears the ensemble usually slows down! For years I have taught this backwards to my ensembles! I teach the students that when the music gets loud to play a little slower and when the music gets soft to play a little faster.

**8. Stretch 8<sup>th</sup> notes in slow passages.** This is so important to maintain tempo. Always make the second 8<sup>th</sup> note long! And make sure 8<sup>th</sup> note pickups are always played long with a nice full sound to radiate confidence.

**9. Always count 1 and 2 and 3 and, etc. in slow passages.** Know the ensemble is counting all the "ands" in the slow sections. As you count each number, you will discover that the word "and" is naturally a long word. This naturally stretches the second 8<sup>th</sup> note as mentioned in fundamental #7.

**An orchestra, band or chorus, all function as one large instrument and must be approached in that manner. When I work with a group, I want to produce a specific sound. I want it to be balanced, well blended, in tune, technically clean and clear.**

## Festival Preparation, Part II - Preparing the Selected Works

**10. Make dynamics with long notes.** Gradually get louder or softer during long tones. This gives the musical line direction and shape.

**11. Make dynamics on repeated notes.** Often there are repeated rhythms in accompaniment parts, or there are three 8<sup>th</sup> notes or five 16<sup>th</sup> notes at the end of a work. Little crescendos under repetitive rhythms give direction and add energy. At the end of a composition, a crescendo definitely adds finality and excitement to the piece. A diminuendo dying away to nothing can leave great peace and serenity.

**12. Do not go flat on decrescendos.** This generally occurs at the end of soft passages, or the end of slow movements. Ranges especially affect this occurrence often because of the lack of breath support. Thin pinched sounds occur in high ranges. In low register students are required to learn to push the pitch up.

Always designate a day as Percussion Day. I had the great fortune of having some excellent percussion sections as well as section leaders over the years. Percussionists were always required to play different instruments during a performance. One was never allowed to play the same instrument on two pieces during a performance. However, even with great leadership in the section, it is amazing how many parts can be skipped if the conductor is not vigilant. On Percussion Day, play through the works following only the percussion score. Stop at every little item missing: castanets here, finger cymbals there, vibe part here, etc. The reply, "I am playing tympani or snare drum on this piece," is not allowed if there are rests during these needed parts! They are percussionists that can cover vibe parts during snare rests, suspended cymbal rolls during tympani rests, etc. Although I am convinced some composers do write parts to keep everyone busy, most composers write creative percussion parts to add textures and specific

tones and colors to their works. Take time with your percussionists to teach them the proper way to play a cymbal crash, hold claves, etc. Feel free in a rehearsal to experiment with different mallets and sticks to produce the tone quality from the instrument you want to hear. Do not settle for a noise at that particular part in the music. **Tone quality in the percussion section is extremely important to tone quality of the entire ensemble!**

The MOST IMPORTANT THING YOU DO is test your students! As most good teachers, I went through a period of having everyone come in my office and play through their music. However I always heard the same old reply, "But I can do this at home!" So, I started letting them do it at home. Have your students make a cassette tape and bring it in by a specific date. It is amazing how many tapes you can grade while driving here or there. Of course, you know whether the good players are playing something or not in class, especially when there is only one on a part. Therefore, you do not have to listen to the complete tape. In a large ensemble it is easy to hide in the middle of the flute or clarinet sections. This is a great opportunity to write a couple of lines to each student when returning their tape. You will be pleasantly surprised how some of your students are making progress, and disappointed in others who should be ripping off the parts. Once the students have the right notes and rhythms down you can spend the remainder of the time talking about things that make music: tone, pitch, balance, blend, style, articulation, dynamics, phrasing, etc. **Tapes should always be turned in halfway through the preparation period for the next performance.** I promise you there will be marked improvement in the ensemble the day your students turn in their tapes! Tapes were always a major grade in my class—with equal importance

## Festival Preparation, Part II - Preparing the Selected Works

given to the performance. Every student must receive a grade of B or better on their tape, or they got to re-record! Let's face it, who wants to listen to an ensemble with students getting Ds and Fs!

Once in a panel discussion on "Preparing Your Band for Festival" at a National MENC Conference, I made the statement, "I never tune my band in January" (a colleague responded, "Its Too

Cold!") My colleague and a few friends have never let me live that down. However, there is a point to be made here. I have watched teachers spend 15 - 20 minutes at the beginning of a 45 minute period tuning their ensemble; then perform unrecognizable compositions. If the students do not have the pitches in their ear, they cannot play their parts in tune. Once the students have the

notes under their fingers and are knowledgeable as to what the work sounds like, they will be able to play in tune! Have your students sing in class also! If you cannot sing your part, you do not have it in your ear, and will not play it in tune.

A few other items to consider. You may try reseating the ensemble according to the strengths and weaknesses of the sections. Experiment: Find a seating arrangement that works. It may be different every year, or for each concert. Here is a fun item: A week or two before Festival, randomly put players all over the room. I used to put 3 x 5 cards with their names on the music stands prior to the rehearsal. Put some people in the first row you really want to hear play. The first row may consist of 3<sup>rd</sup> cornet stand, 2<sup>nd</sup> trombone stand, 3<sup>rd</sup> clarinet stand, baritone sax, and a 2<sup>nd</sup> stand of flutes. Mix the group entirely throughout the room. You will know you have

accomplished that one item you've been harping on for the last six weeks, if when your students leave the rehearsal you hear them making comments like, "I never heard that part before!"

*Dr. Beat* is a fine and useful tool to establish a consistent tempo, but only on occasions. My groups could never stand the ridiculously loud volume to which I set it; thus, they would lock things in right

away so I would turn it off! I used to love to make them play through works without me! Get off the podium, walk around the room, get a different perspective on the balance, and make them listen to one another while locking in that tempo. If you train them well they will be great without you! Lastly, when you enter the stage at that festival or contest, come on with dignity. How

the group enters the stage can tell an adjudicator how professional, or unprofessional the group is before they play the first note.

It's performance time! Remember: "A good coach yells at his players on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and then lets them play on Friday. A bad coach lets his players play on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, and then yells at his players on Friday!" You cannot fix it now... relax and have fun! When you have completed your performance, gather your students somewhere immediately and let them know (nicely) how you felt about their work. If the group is making progress and getting better, that is all you should be asking of them. Remember. They value YOUR opinion most!

**Take time with your percussionists to teach them. Experiment with different mallets and sticks. Do not settle for a noise at that particular part in the music. Tone quality in the percussion section is extremely important to tone quality of the entire ensemble!**

*Reprinted with permission from their web site: [www.educationalprograms.com](http://www.educationalprograms.com) and Carl A. Bly. © Copyright 2003 Educational Programs Network. All rights reserved.*