



Hit the Highest Notes

Tips from the Coordinator &
Conductor for Hosting a Successful
Honor Ensemble Festival

**Lori Schwartz Reichl
& Robert Sheldon**

“It takes less time to do things right than to explain why you did it wrong.”
— Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Lori Schwartz Reichl and Robert Sheldon met in 2017 during a weekend-long honor band festival where Reichl served as the coordinator and Sheldon as the guest conductor. The duo perceived the festival as successful for all stakeholders due to the expectations collaboratively established from the lens of both the coordinator and conductor. Reichl was cognizant of the essential tasks required to host a large musical event and she gave attention to the needs of the conductor, staff, and performers. Sheldon appreciated the organizational preparations prior to his arrival, which allowed him to focus on the musical product and engage students throughout the festival.

As the founder of [Making Key Changes](#), Lori Schwartz Reichl is committed to mentoring and motivating music educators through unique and inspirational ways to refresh their music programs. Robert Sheldon, of [Robert Sheldon Music](#), is one of the most performed composers of wind band music today. Both Reichl and Sheldon actively serve as guest conductors, clinicians, educators, and presenters. Based on their respect for one another, combined professional experience, and mutual perspective of administrative and performance standards, Reichl and Sheldon believe many could benefit from guidance as to how to examine details for preparing and producing an honor ensemble festival. In collaboration, the duo has created this resource to inspire others to meet the highest standards of hosting a festival – educationally, musically, and organizationally. Even if it is a music director’s first time or twenty-first time hosting an honor ensemble festival, there are always details that can be refreshed.

“After conducting several hundred honor bands in the United States and abroad for the past 40 years, I believe I have experienced pretty much everything and anything one could ever hope to encounter or want to avoid. And yet, every season there seems to be something new and different to add to my list. My most memorable experience recently was the honor band during which the power went out immediately before the concert, and we went on to perform by having the honor choir members shine their cell phone flashlights on the band music. After all – the show must go on! But for most occasions that do not involve power outages, natural disasters, or apocalyptic intervention, there are definitely things all hosts should consider, and about which all guest conductors should inquire in order to avoid any number of unpleasanties.” – Robert Sheldon

“Having hosted many large-scale music events throughout my career and also serving as a frequent guest conductor and clinician, I can speak to the responsibilities required for both the role of coordinator and conductor. The conductor can best accomplish the job when the coordinator has successfully organized all aspects prior to the event and accurately communicated all details to all stakeholders – conductor, educators, staff members, parents, and performers. Ensuring that the conductor feels welcomed, respected, and comfortable is crucial to the overall success of the event and musical experience – most important, for the benefit of the students’ development, learning, and performance.” – Lori Schwartz Reichl

In 1986 Southern Music Company published *The Complete Honor Band Manual: A Guide for the Preparation and Organization of Honor Band Clinics* as written by W. Francis McBeth. Reichl and Sheldon have reviewed it and through this project they have made updates, elaborated on certain components, broadened it to include all performing ensembles, and invited other colleagues to share their experiences. Allow this resource to help you “hit the highest notes” in your next coordination, hosting, or conducting of an honor ensemble festival!

ADAPTATION

Education as we knew it changed forever in March 2020 when schools shut their doors due to the global pandemic as brought on by the spread of the coronavirus. Each school system, institution, and organization set its expectations and standards for remote instruction and service differently. Initially, as musicians and music educators, we grieved many losses. We grieved the loss of routine. We grieved the cancellation of performances, adjudications, festivals, and trips. We grieved the inability to collaborate socially, connect emotionally, and create musically. Whatever the initial directive, it became increasingly clear that the effects of the pandemic could extend beyond spring 2020. For many educational and performance systems, the building closure time has seeped into the 2020-2021 academic year and will continue to impact the frequency and logistics of musical performances for an unforeseeable future.

As of August 2020, some schools, institutions, and organizations around the world have begun to move forward with musical rehearsals and performances. These events are often being modified in various ways and may continue to be altered until a vaccine is globally available. However, at some point – be it weeks, months, or years down the road – we are hopeful that the rehearsal, performance, and festival formats that musicians have come to know, enjoy, and benefit from, will reconvene. Until then, we will make the necessary adaptations. We can also utilize this time to more effectively plan, organize, and advertise a large music festival.

REFLECTION

For events such as honor ensemble festivals, often there is a coordinator who organizes the event and a fellow music director who may host the festival at their school or facility. For this project, we will use the word “coordinator” to represent both the coordinator and host. Should there be a separate host for a festival, that person should be privy to all information, cognizant of all requests, and included on all correspondences between the coordinator and conductor prior to the onset of the responsibilities.

Before any planning and preparations begin, coordinators of honor ensemble festivals for band, choir, or orchestra must reflect on all organizational tasks associated with such a massive logistical undertaking and understand how decisions will impact all stakeholders. Consider the following thought-provoking questions:

WHY?

Why was this honor ensemble festival created? What is its history and how will that influence the decision making process? Who originally created the festival and who has maintained it through the years? Has gratitude been shown to these dedicated people? Why have you been selected to administer the festival? What unique strengths do you bring? What limitations might you have? Why have you agreed to coordinate and host this event? Why is it important to you, your students, colleagues, and musical community that this festival continues?

WHAT?

What are the festival's traditions, opportunities, and purpose? Is the festival a showcase of musical talent, a representation of effort, an educational opportunity, or does it serve multiple functions? What does this event mean to all involved? What attempts have been made to promote awareness, respect, and responsiveness to diversity on and off the podium, in composition, and through performance? What are the festival's benefits and disadvantages and how will you enhance or overcome them?

WHEN?

When will the festival take place? Did you cross-reference calendars for district, county, state, and national academic, athletic, fine arts, and other musical events, so if at all possible, to not place the students in the middle of participation decisions? Did you create a schedule that has adequate time allotted for set-up, review of behavioral and musical expectations, meals, breaks, and ample rehearsal time with the conductor? When will you coordinate all of this?

WHO?

Who will fulfill specific responsibilities for the festival? Who will be the musicians, staff, conductor, and audience? Are the student musicians recommended as representatives from each school or do they audition for the honor ensemble? Who will select the music for an audition and/or the ensemble? Who will organize the music folders with accurate seating and appropriate divided parts? Who will decide when the music will be distributed to musicians? Will students have sufficient time to learn their assigned parts prior to the event or will they be given music at the event and expected to sight read it? Who will organize which tasks? Who will you turn to for guidance?

WHERE?

Where will the preparations, rehearsals, and performance occur? Where will the participants and conductor eat and be lodged? Will there be preparatory sectionals or rehearsals before the guest conductor takes the podium? If so, where will these take place, what is the time allotment, who will conduct them, and will they be mandatory? Will there be consequences for responsibilities not upheld by students? If so, where will these consequences be stated?

HOW?

How will the festival be funded and advertised? Have you considered budget line items such as payment for the venue, equipment, music, staff, food, lodging, mileage, transportation, programs, advertisement, gifts, etc.? How will all participants be transported? How will you

clearly communicate the expectations and consequences to the performers, their parents, and directors? How will the event be advertised? Will the performance be recorded? If so, how and by whom? How will you manage all of this? How will you know if you are successful in completing all necessary tasks?

OVERVIEW

Reichl and Sheldon began this project with the intent to offer a simple article on how to improve an honor band festival. As the project unfolded, they kept adding to the list of suggestions, and expanded their vision! Eventually, they also decided to ask several prominent conductors for their most treasured tips. Some offered a long list of suggestions, while others recommended one or two specific things that they have come to appreciate or wish more coordinators would consider. In addition, some of these conductors offered anecdotes regarding their best or worst guest conducting experiences. Many of their suggestions, specifications, and anecdotes are quite similar and are sprinkled throughout this resource.

Anecdote from Lee Sellers:

“All-county, all-city, all-district, all-state, honor band – many names for essentially the same thing: bringing students and teachers together for an enriching experience with a clinician. When selecting literature for a group, check out what they played over the last several years AND talk to the previous conductors. Do not assume the selections on the previous programs went well and were easy to put together. More times than not, I am asked to select a more challenging program and I ignore that request every time. More times than not I get comments like “this was the best all-county band we’ve had in a long time.” That’s because I’m able to teach concepts, help address and correct bad timbres and other fundamentals. Of course, if you’re not “chasing notes,” you’re able to do that AND make music. ONE TIME I allowed myself to over-program and I was miserable. I felt like I was in error detection mode nearly the entire time. It went fairly well and the concert performance was effective, but I was not able to make the impact I would have liked to. Be a concept teacher and have fun with the kids! Ask yourself: if I were a student, would I want to be in all-county next year after this experience? Light them up! Show your enthusiasm for what you do and what music means to you.”

Diversity and Inclusion

- Supplemental Resource:
 - ["Mirror, Mirror on the Wall. Am I Providing Opportunities Reflecting All?"](#)

Diversity may include: ability, age, culture, ethnicity, gender, language, learning style, nationality, race, religion, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. Are coordinators and conductors

reflecting on these differences in preparation and performance? Students require both mirrors and windows so they can see themselves and see into other cultures reflected in a position, performance, and experience. It is essential to implement this educational philosophy when considering who to include as conductor, clinician, composer, performer, and audience. This belief system is necessary for acceptance, development, and unity. Superior music, exemplary musicianship, and motivational leadership exist in all capacities. As educators it is our duty to acknowledge this, educate ourselves and others with an awareness and understanding, and provide a diverse representation of role models, repertoire, and reality as a reflection of all students.

Preparation & Organization

Coordinators should have all information, schedule, materials, musicians, and staff organized well in advance. Upon arrival, the conductor should only be concerned with making music and teaching. Make sure that the rehearsal schedule specifics are shared with the guest conductor far in advance so that they may accurately plan and prepare for proper programming and effective rehearsals. Stick with the schedule! This keeps the students focused and engaged and allows the conductor to adhere to the lesson plan.

Anecdote from Lori Schwartz Reichl:

“A few months after one of my children was born, I was asked to guest conduct an honor band that required traveling away from my infant for several nights. I was nursing at the time and required private moments every few hours. In the gentlest way possible, I notified the host that I would require a short break in the morning and afternoon, a private room, and a chair. I was flexible with the time the break could occur, but would require 15 minutes. The coordinator and I easily synchronized the rehearsal breaks well in advance. When I arrived to the school, I checked with the host to ensure that what I requested was indeed available. The host pointed to a hallway and responded with, “I thought that bathroom would be fine.” It was a one stall bathroom with barely any room to move, was not clean, and didn’t have a chair on which to sit or a place to rest my personal belongings. I walked back to the band room, carried a posture chair to the bathroom, and made certain all nursing items remained sanitized.

At two separate guest conducting events, I was not provided a lunch nor notified that I would be required to bring my own food. I watched as the participating directors ate the delicious take-out food they had ordered during the morning rehearsal. Thank goodness I had a protein bar in my bag both times! However, at other guest conducting events, I have been given a basket of delightful goodies, sent a menu in advance to select a meal, provided ample bottles of water, and continuously asked if I needed anything. Hospitality goes a long way, not just for feeding your appetite, but for demonstrating kindness and gratitude.”

Communication & Hospitality

Coordinating an event of this size can be exhausting, but the coordinator must understand that the conductor is often traveling from a distance, stepping away from their own professional duties, and sacrificing time from their family to commit to the event. Effectively communicating all plans and expectations with the conductor in ample time and providing a welcoming atmosphere will have a positive and domino effect on teaching the students and preparing for the musical performance. Avoid sending multiple emails with varying information. Attempt to place the most current information in one final communication.

Coordinators should ask what the conductor needs and not assume.

- Discuss the following items:
 - contract
 - tax forms
 - stipend
 - mileage reimbursement at the current national reimbursement rate
 - transportation
 - lodging
 - meals and food preferences
 - repertoire selection process
 - musical expectations
 - rehearsal format
 - equipment needs
 - personal needs

Most conductors prefer . . .

- to make their own travel arrangements. However, if the coordinator is responsible for these arrangements, ensure that the car, flight, hotel, and so forth, are in the accurate name of the conductor, and if possible, prepaid so not to put the conductor in an awkward payment situation.
- to know who will greet them at the airport, train station, hotel, or such, when they will be transported to/from one location to another, and to have that person's contact information in advance.

Anecdote from Brian Balmages:

“When booking a hotel room for the clinician, several organizers I have worked with booked the room in their own name thinking that would simplify things or that it must be under their name to use their own credit card. If the host is not able to be with me at check-in, it is important that they fill out a form at the hotel indicating that the charges can stay on the credit card on file. Otherwise, we (the conductors) wind up having to put it on our own card and then the host has to come switch it out. And as to the story of putting the room in the organizer's name... I have had instances when someone at the front desk couldn't find a room under my name and they were ready to turn me away until we were able to go

through a list of possible names or group names and find the right one. I have also had instances when I mentioned the organizer's name, but they would not give me the hotel room because my ID was not the organizer's name! And finally, I had one glorious instance when my key card deactivated during my stay for whatever reason. When I went to the front desk to get a new one, they would not do it because my name was not on the room. So, I had to wait an hour or so for the organizer to show up and clear everything up. So, it is in everyone's best interest to make sure the room is always in the conductor's name!"

Invitation and Scheduling

Be kind, courteous, and precise with the invitation to the conductor and information regarding the schedule and responsibilities.

Most conductors prefer . . .

- to initially be contacted via email with a phone call later in the planning process to review more specifications and repertoire considerations.
- to be informed of the exact hours of rehearsals, appropriate repertoire selection, rehearsal planning, and pacing. (Example: a 3-day event with rehearsals only from 4pm-8pm for 2 days is not the same as a 3-day event with rehearsals from 9am-4pm for 2 days)
- to avoid having the concert start time scheduled after a full day of rehearsal. (Example: rehearsal occurs from 9am-5pm with a concert at 7pm on the same day. This length is grueling for musicians and conductors!)
- to avoid rehearsals after dinner, which can be problematic for the students' mental focus and physical endurance.
- to be knowledgeable of what interruptions will occur during rehearsals. (Examples: bells ringing, announcements made via an intercom, meals, breaks, etc.)
- to be informed about the rehearsal and/or performance space regarding layout, size, etc. (Example: the rehearsal space has risers, a tiered floor, an acoustical shell, etc.)
- to know if other tasks will be required, such as signing student certificates, presenting to educators, and if so, an agreed upon time should be determined.
- to be provided the final schedule with changes announced as soon as possible.

Anecdote from Michael Sweeney:

"Probably the single most critical element for a successful honor band event is selecting the right music to fit the event and level of the students. It's usually best if the guest conductor selects the music he or she will be expected to conduct, but this should be done in close collaboration with the festival coordinator. Looking at programs from previous years can be very helpful, however, be aware that not everything listed on a program was necessarily performed. Select a range of levels – one or two to provide a challenge, and others on the easy side to ensure you can

prepare at least one or two selections to a level that will allow musicianship and polish beyond just starting and stopping at roughly the same time. The level of the music often needs to be one notch below what the students normally can handle, since in most cases the rehearsal time for the festival will be very limited.”

Programming

Be knowledgeable regarding festival experiences from previous years and prepared with programs, recordings, and answers to frequently asked questions.

Most conductors prefer . . .

- to have coordinators be realistic in the expected instrumentation or voice parts and musical ability levels of students.
- to receive a list of previous conductors and performed music, along with any audio/video recordings, if available.
- to have an honest dialogue with the coordinator before music selection occurs about the appropriate level of music to consider. (Example: often coordinators believe students can master more challenging music than they truly can in the time allotted. A frequent guest conductor usually has good judgement regarding level.)
- to select repertoire themselves, with approval or suggestions provided by the coordinator.
- to create their own seating chart to be used for both the rehearsals and performance.
- to have scores provided and mailed to them well in advance in which they are permitted to make markings.
- to have preparatory rehearsals/sectionals scheduled and completed prior to their arrival.
- to bring along an extra full selection or two, in case the music prepared is too difficult or is not challenging enough.

Anecdote from Chris Bernotas:

*“The most positive experiences have been the ones where the goals of the festival have been communicated, the performance level and approximate student ability have been communicated, and the rehearsal schedule has been communicated. The key word in all of this is **communication**. The best experiences have been the ones in which the manager/contact person of the group has provided all of this info BEFORE the event.*

Reflecting on the most positive experience, for both myself and the students, would be a one-day event that recently took place. My manager sent me all of the logistical information I needed well in advance. I knew when my flight was, where I was staying and most importantly, the rehearsal schedule. Knowing how much contact time I was going to have with students was key in selecting an appropriate

program for the students. Even with that rehearsal schedule, I was able to communicate with the manager, who had years of experience with the festival and knew the school districts involved very well, to ask questions about past programs and the general/historical level of ability of the students. She provided me a wealth of information, including past programs and some of her personal anecdotes about their most successful years and those years where they struggled. Having some insight and background of the group, the schedule, and the communities involved, helped me as I chose selections for the event as well as help me mentally prepare. Once I made my preliminary repertoire choices, since I had confidence in the manager, I had her review and advise me as to whether they seemed appropriate for the group. I guess that is the key for a successful experience – having confidence in the manager so you can lean on them to help guide you to provide students the opportunity for an educational, memorable and FUN experience. That event was fantastic for all involved – the rehearsals ran very smoothly, the students made amazing improvements and the concert went off without a hitch. This happened mainly because of all of the prep work BEFORE the actual event day. Yes, I had to think about the pacing of the rehearsal blocks, the order that I rehearsed the music, etc., however, I felt like it was all a great fit, because I knew what to expect.”

Materials & Equipment

Think through every scenario regarding the necessary equipment, materials, and music required for the festival.

Most conductors prefer . . .

- for folders to be distributed to musicians with ample time before the first rehearsal for independent learning to occur, provided with music of the students’ appropriate part, and a welcome/expectations letter from the coordinator and conductor (if preferred).
- for audio links of each selection to be provided to students for their listening and preparational needs.
- for percussion parts to be preassigned to students (at the same time as winds/brass) with parts rotating according to the students’ strengths and a percussion assignment chart provided.
- that if legal photo copies of music are created/permitted, pages are taped together so not to be placed out of order or lost.
- for all measures in the students’ music and conductor’s scores (if provided) to be numbered.
- that students are prepared with a pencil or one is placed on their music stand.
- that chairs are provided for the percussionists, too, for moments of rest.
- that the coordinator cross references the number of students in the ensemble with the amount of posture chairs and music stands at the host school/facility. If not enough are available, plans should be made to ship more equipment to those locations, if necessary.

- that the coordinator checks the scores of all selections to ensure that the host location has access to all needed percussion equipment.
 - Will that equipment have to be shared with another ensemble during rehearsals? Can this be avoided?
 - Substitute instruments should *not* be utilized: with proper planning, all required equipment should be on-hand for rehearsals and the performance.
 - Ship missing equipment, if necessary.
- to have the availability of a chalk or whiteboard or a projector/smart board for rehearsal reminders, schedules, and illustrations.

Anecdote from Dr. Paula A. Crider:

“I should have known that the clinic would be, well, less than organized when my host failed to request a suggested seating chart, or to ask for desired part distribution. However, this was early in my career, and I assumed that all details would be well in hand. My first clue that all was not well in River City was when no one met my flight. This was long before cell phones, but after repeatedly paging my host, a local music dealer who happened to be flying home heard the announcement, and volunteered to drive me to the honor band site. Upon arrival, my clueless host greeted me with: “You can set up the rehearsal space however you want.” The fact that this young man is still alive today is a testament to superhuman restraint on my part! Following this disaster, I constructed a detailed “Suggestions for the organizer” sheet, complete with a generic seating chart, and always followed up with a call to ensure that all details were covered well in advance of the honor band event.

I selected literature based on a program from the previous year, but as we attempted to read the first piece, it became painfully clear that this group of eager young musicians was incapable of playing anything I had in the folder...not even the march! When we took a break, so I might find something in the library that might fit the group, I asked my host (we’ll call him Mr. Clueless) how the band performed the pieces listed on the past year’s program. His response: “Oh, they couldn’t play anything the last honor band director chose either.” We did manage to find pieces the band could play, and Mr. Clueless undoubtedly continued to follow his well-worn path to mediocrity. From that day forward, I never failed to contact the previous conductor of an honor band before selecting literature. Lesson learned!”

Stipend

The discussion between the coordinator and conductor regarding money and personal needs can be uncomfortable if not handled professionally. Amounts of stipends vary for several different reasons and so do the needs of conductors and their families. When reviewing a budget, carefully consider the time and planning on the part of the conductor.

Most conductors prefer . . .

- to have all meals provided or reimbursed throughout the entire trip.
- to be asked about dietary restrictions and food/beverage preferences.
- to have water provided for rehearsals.
- to be asked about personal and conducting needs.
- to choose their meal selections from a menu prior to the event occurring, so not to be disturbed while on the podium.
- that the amount of the stipend includes all travel, rehearsal, and performance commitments.
 - Add all hours that the conductor will be away from their home, consider a realistic hourly rate, and compare this per-hour-rate to the amount you had planned to offer.
 - Keep in mind that the conductor has forfeited time with family, other professional obligations, and possibly other paid engagements to fulfill the commitments of the honor ensemble festival.
- to be paid on the final day of the event or by a prearranged date, should the stipend not be provided immediately following the event.

Anecdote from Dr. Kenneth Kohlenberg:

*"I was told that there were 3 bassoons in a high school honor band and I chose Daugherty's **Alligator Alley** as one of the pieces. A week before rehearsals, one of the directors happened to notice that piece on the program and sent me an email, "All 3 bassoonists are very weak. You might want to choose another piece." Fortunately, I was at a conference at which Michael Daugherty was a guest and I was able to explain to him my predicament and he said that it would be no problem to add a good baritone saxophone or euphonium player to the bassoon part. I later thanked that alert band director who gave me the "head's up" and was glad to tell the band that I talked to the composer, himself, about this.*

*It's important that not only the percussionists have parts assigned to them and all parts are covered, but the equipment has to be there. I was asked to work with a junior high band on **Triumphs!** by Joshua Hinkel. Halfway through the piece is a triangle part and I saw the triangle on a stand with a student standing behind it, nodding his head to the beat and looking at me but not playing. What was wrong? "We lost all of our triangle beaters."*

I was at an all-county band several years ago with a reading session at 7:00 in the evening. I was talking with a few of the band directors before the reading rehearsal started but one by one they left the room to round up a student or to check on someone or something. Before I knew it, it was 7:00, time to start, and not a single teacher stayed in the room. I stepped up on the podium, introduced myself, welcomed the students and off we went. I would suggest to hosts to make sure

there is assigned a familiar face in the room to introduce the guest and to welcome the students and wish them well in their upcoming experience together.”

Rehearsals

- Supplemental Resources:
 - ["Preparation for Adjudication: A Checklist for Success"](#)
 - ["Do You Hear What I Hear? Isolating and Attacking Musical Phrases for Accuracy"](#)

One can easily identify a rehearsal that has been haphazardly thrown together in comparison to one that has undergone meticulous organization.

Most conductors prefer . . .

- for the rehearsal space to function in good condition and be conducive for a large ensemble. Avoid the following:
 - low ceilings
 - pillars that block views
 - loud exhaust fans
 - rehearsing when a loud sporting event is occurring in the neighboring gymnasium or athletic field
 - planned evacuation and emergency drills
- for high-quality equipment (such as piano, percussion, etc.) to be present at the rehearsal site and for the same equipment to be used for the performance.
- for the rehearsal space to be set-up according to the specifications on the seating chart, as provided by the conductor, and prior to the arrival of the students and conductor.
- for a staff member to greet students as they arrive to each rehearsal, especially the first one, to provide consistent and specific behavioral and musical instructions.
- for the student name tags to be placed on chairs or music stands to direct students where to sit or stand.
- that an instrument repair technician/staff member is on hand during rehearsals.
- to be introduced to the students as the ensemble conductor with a brief biography announced about them, so that students know they are working with a competent clinician.
- for directors of the participating students to observe the rehearsals without conversing, scrolling their devices, or freely walking around the ensemble to assist – unless invited to do so.
- for the rehearsal to start (and end) on time.
- that if they are being transported to the rehearsal by a staff member, to arrive shortly before the rehearsal begins rather than arriving with staff and waiting endlessly.

Anecdote from Dr. Deb Confredo:

"In doing a high school honor band some years ago, I arrived to find out that this was not an honor band at all but a "y'all" come group of students from 4 area high schools. Picture about 250 students in a gym for a 1-day festival. There were no contingencies; this was truly a massed band event for which there were no auditions with no semblance of discipline or organization. Many of these types of festivals are great but this one had no sense of organization and very little communication up front from the host and participating directors. I wasn't told ahead of time regarding the type of ensemble I would be working with. Several other important pieces of information were also omitted. There were clearly students who so wanted to have this experience and several who clearly did not. So, I set out to do what I could given the set of circumstances. There was no assistance from the band directors; they were nowhere to be found throughout the entire day. Suffice to say that it was a struggle to get much music-making done. While I have done several "y'all come" groups (heck, my campus-community band is one of those and we have a great time together!), it would have made life a lot easier to have been provided this information in advance. The experience of those who really do want to work, participate, and have fun can be compromised with others for whom the goal of the day was disruption. This, for most of us, is the exception and not the rule, of course. Ensemble kids are some of the best students and they make these events worthwhile for those of us who get to conduct them. Bottom line: good communication from all involved is essential!"

Staff Responsibilities

Whenever possible, select staff members who are positive, productive, and passionate about the festival and their responsibilities.

Most conductors prefer . . .

- that coordinators are prepared for any such emergency.
- that a nurse or medical staff are available at all rehearsals.
- that at least one staff member is assigned to remain with the conductor at all rehearsals to address student expectations, balance concerns, percussion needs, instrument repairs, behavioral management, etc.
- that a staff member is on hand to give verbal instructions at the start of each rehearsal and prior to break, meal, and dismissal times.
- that a staff member is on hand at breaks and meals to direct the conductor to the break room, or local restaurants for meals if they are expected to go off campus and get food, shown where to change clothes, if expected, and the like.
- that student discipline concerns are handled by the coordinator or staff.

Anecdote from Dr. David Gregory:

“Once, and thankfully it was only once, I reported for my conducting duties at an honor band event and was prepared to move quickly through the usual and expected beginning rehearsal procedures. Instead, the site host escorted me to my rehearsal room, introduced me to the students, and left. I had no student aide(s), no directors to help serve as section coaches, no one to help oversee the percussion section, no arrangements made for students who did not have all their music (and there were several), no instructions given (verbally or in writing) as to expectations for behavior/rehearsal schedule/etc., nor was there sufficient or complete equipment provided for the percussion section. I spent an inordinate amount of rehearsal time (most of that initial session) with non-rehearsal items. It was an enormous struggle on many levels...probably the most significant was that there were few expectations of excellence from the students. These low expectations were clearly demonstrated through lack of preparation by respective directors and host staff. In fact, the director who was conducting the second band grew so frustrated with the lack of organization and apathy demonstrated by the local directors, as well as the confusion and lack of discipline and respect shown by the students, midway through the rehearsal the following morning he simply packed up his music and went home. All in all, a pretty disastrous clinic weekend. And most of the problems could have been avoided or solved had the director(s) in charge of organizing the event been assisted by someone who knew what was needed.

One of the most pleasant and musically rewarding clinic situations for me (and I have had so very many over the years...many more than I deserved) was an all-state band a number of years ago. I was picked up at the airport by one of the local directors, taken to my hotel where all details of my stay had been addressed, and escorted to the first rehearsal where the students were already seated with music, ready to rehearse. The organizer explained to the students the expectations of conduct, musical outcomes, rehearsal times, and made certain all the equipment and musical needs had been met. He then introduced the directors who would be present at all rehearsals to help with any logistical or musical issues, including those of the percussion section, and then he introduced me as the guest conductor. We immediately went to work and accomplished remarkable things during each rehearsal the entire weekend. I believe the students, without exception, had fantastic musical and educational and artistic experiences during the event, and I have no doubt the directors and parents were overwhelmingly pleased with the results. This clinic was one of those extremely rare occasions where each rehearsal began where the previous one left off. There was little or no need to go back and “re-learn” the concepts we had addressed earlier. In many cases the progress from rehearsal to rehearsal was exponential rather than sequential. All in all, it was one of the most rewarding honor band clinics I have experienced as a conductor, and I think it was an equally life-changing musical time for the students.”

Concert Programs

- Supplemental Resource:
 - ["Get with the Program: It Can Be the Icing on a Concert's Cake"](#)

One can easily recognize a program that has been haphazardly thrown together in comparison to one that has undergone meticulous formatting and careful editing.

Most conductors prefer . . .

- to review the program before distribution to ensure accurate information is included.
Example:
 - conductor's preferred name, with accurate spelling and title
 - conductor's updated biography
 - conductor's most recent photograph/head shot
 - correct selections, composers, arrangers, etc.
 - program notes
 - accurate instrumentation listed
 - names of performers
 - names of volunteers/patrons
- that if programs must be printed before a selection order is chosen, to list selections as "to be chosen from" and done so in alphabetical order.
- to have a draft of the program prepared for the first rehearsal for students to review. Ask students to confirm that their names are listed under the correct instrument section or voice part and spelled correctly.
- to accurately list the names/positions of all performing musicians, staff, and volunteers who assisted with the festival.

Anecdote from Dr. Mike Fansler:

"My most unique experience occurred during a one-day clinic at a desolate Midwestern high school on a cold and blustery winter day. The directors were not present for any of the rehearsals; rather, they were all gathered at a "meeting" the entire day. At 3:00 p.m., there was a long break for dinner. After waiting 15 minutes for any of the directors to come find me, I walked the halls and found one on his way out. I said, "Hi, there! What's the plan from now until the concert?" He said, "Uh...just run up to the cafeteria and grab some dinner. There should be a few ladies up there. See you later!" After roaming the school in search of the cafeteria I finally found a group of students eating and saw a few staff gathered behind a serving window. As I approached, one of the staff members opened a snack-sized bag of corn chips, pulled a ladle of runny slop from a steaming vat and poured a heap of "mystery meat" into the bag. She handed me the bag, a plastic spork and turned her attention to the next serving. I looked around thinking it was a practical joke; alas, it was real. I tossed the "meal" into a garbage can and, with no restaurants for 45 miles in any direction, resigned to an empty stomach. I went outside and sat in my car... for 3 hours. When I walked back into the school for the

performance I asked the directors if I had missed anything important. They said, "No. We all went home to be with our families."

There are at least two ways those directors could have made for a better experience. First, they could have been present. Attend at least a portion of rehearsals when a guest is working. I have learned most of what I know from observing others. Second, extend hospitality and appreciation. Guest conductors must leave their families to go out and help young musicians improve. Please take a moment to make sure their time away from home is enjoyable, and show personal gratitude for their sacrifice to be there."

Performance & Acknowledgements

Often, honor ensemble festivals consist of more than one performing ensemble. This could be a combination of band, choir, and orchestra or it could be multiple ability-level ensembles. Coordinators should value the time, energy, and commitment of all students, staff members, and conductors. Equal attention, acknowledgement, praise, and gratitude should be given to all stakeholders regardless of ability level, age, experience, repertoire, etc.

At the beginning of the performance, most conductors prefer . . .

- to have the coordinator or a staff member assemble and lead the students in processional order onto the stage.
- to have all students be seen entering the stage in a planned, organized, and rehearsed fashion.
- to ensure parents/audience members can view all performers when they enter the stage in processional order:
 - The back row of students should enter the stage first. If this is an ensemble that contains percussionists positioned at the back of the stage, then percussionists should enter first, followed by the next farthest row from the audience and so forth.
- to have an opportunity to warm-up/tune the ensemble on stage (if only for a few moments) immediately before the performance begins.
- to have local dignitaries and/or hosts recognized and introduced to the audience.
- to be briefly introduced to the audience prior to their appearance on stage.

At the conclusion of the performance, most conductors prefer . . .

- to ensure parents/audience members can view all performers when they are acknowledged.
 - The back row of students should be asked to stand first. If this is an ensemble that contains percussionists positioned at the back of the stage, then percussionists should be acknowledged first, followed by the second farthest row from the audience and so forth.

- The recognition for the percussion section should be rehearsed to ensure that offstage percussionists can quickly take to the stage to be celebrated, and that performing students can step around larger equipment to be visible to the audience.
- to have all conductors return to the stage for a final bow, if there is more than one ensemble performing.
- to have the coordinator acknowledge the commitment of all students, staff members, and educators.

ACTION ITEMS

Timeline

Consider the following suggested timeline for a successful honor ensemble festival:

1 to 2-Years Prior to the Event:

- Determine dates/times.
- Secure facility.
- Select & invite conductor. Provide this person with as much information as you can at the time of invitation. Example:
 - dates (including travel time and housing, not only rehearsal/performance)
 - times
 - location(s)
 - transportation
 - lodging
 - meals
 - stipend amount
 - typical size and musical level of ensemble
 - rehearsal/performance format
 - repertoire selection
 - available equipment
 - condition of facility
 - additional responsibilities

1-Year Prior to the Event:

- Confirm conductor and obtain signed contract and tax paperwork.
- Secure staff. Include:
 - ensemble coordinators/assistants
 - sectional coaches
 - onsite instrument repair technician
 - percussion coordinator
 - nurse/medical staff
 - lighting/sound technician

- Review student selection process.
- Invite suggestions from participating schools' directors to enhance experience from previous years.
- Draft rehearsal/performance schedule with input from others.
- Ask conductor if they would like a preparatory rehearsal or sectional to occur prior to their arrival. One or both of these options can ensure the following:
 - Students will be present.
 - Students will understand behavioral and musical expectations.
 - Students will be prepared with all necessary materials.
 - All parts will be covered, including the percussion section.
 - All equipment will be available, especially percussion and conductor podium/stand, and the requested amount of posture chairs and music stands will be present.

9-Months Prior to the Event:

- Confirm student selection process or audition procedures.
- Update rehearsal/performance schedule, as needed.

6-Months Prior to the Event:

- Send repertoire list from the prior 3 years to conductor with remarks about if certain selections were too easy or difficult. If a past program is sent, be sure to acknowledge which selections may not have been performed.
- Request selections from conductor with time to approve/disapprove and make suggestions for further selection, if needed.
- If agreed upon, ask conductor how many students they would like per section and per part.
- If agreed upon, ask conductor if they are willing to provide a clinic or presentation for music directors and what the needs will be (projector, screen, sound system, and so forth).
- Plan lodging and flight/transportation for participants/conductor. If the conductor purchases their own airfare/transportation, confirm when reimbursement will be provided.
- Confirm rehearsal/performance sites and equipment. Ensure that there is an instrument storage location, warm-up location, and performance area.
- Confirm rehearsal/performance schedule and performer/conductor concert attire.

3-Months Prior to the Event:

- Send instrumentation to conductor (once known) and request balance of sections (number of musicians on each part).
- Provide information to conductor that may affect balance or rehearsal limitations, such as layout of room, size of stage, especially strong or weak sections, etc.
- Ask the conductor if they would like to write a welcome letter to the musicians to be included in their music folders.

1-Month Prior to the Event:

- Stuff folders with original copies of music.
 - Place typed labels on each folder including the name of the ensemble, students' full names, and instrument/voice part/chair.
 - Include in the folder an information sheet including attendance policy, time commitments, behavior, musical preparation, study recordings, materials, expected musical accessories such as brass mutes, woodwind reeds, cork grease, valve oil, concert attire, etc.
- Distribute music and expectations to students.
- Send reminder to conductor with all specific information:
 - finalized rehearsal schedule
 - emergency contact info
 - who will pick them up at airport/hotel and that person's contact info
 - addresses of all locations
 - directions
 - where to park
 - which doors to enter
 - which meals will be provided
 - suggested concert attire
 - if there will be an ensemble photo with conductor
 - additional responsibilities
 - other pertinent information
- Organize use of percussion equipment and ensure all equipment is in good playing condition, and that instrument and part assignments have been made.
- Organize use of posture performance chairs, music stands, and conductor podium/stand and ensure all equipment is in good performance condition.
- Organize meals for participants, staff, and conductor.
- Organize final staff responsibilities (set-up, percussion instructor, attendance, instrument repair, medical, break down, etc.).
- Advertise. Ensure that there is a sizable audience.
- Obtain preferred seating chart from conductor.
- Obtain biographical information/photo from conductor (for the program/introduction).
- Obtain program notes from conductor.
- Draft program and proofread. Allow the conductor to proofread it. Employ a new set of eyes to review the content, grammar, formatting, etc.

1 to 2-Weeks Prior to Event:

- Print/create programs and decide how they will be distributed.
- Obtain hosting gifts/food.
- Print name tags for students to hang on their music stands. Only the first name of students is necessary and printed as large as possible in dark ink.
- Check-in with conductor, preferably by phone, to answer any final questions.

Day Before Event (or morning of):

- Set-up registration table.
- Set-up chairs, music stands, percussion equipment, and conductor podium/stand according to the seating chart provided by conductor. Be certain all required equipment is available and functioning properly.
- Print/Hang directional signs for registration, rehearsal space, restrooms, meal room, etc.
- Place student name tags on their chairs or music stands.
- Check bathroom facilities and secure extra paper goods.
- Check auditorium lights/sound.
- Pick-up conductor at airport/train station and transport to the hotel or rehearsal site.
- Provide a gift basket at the conductor's hotel filled with water and snacks.

Day of Event:

- Provide a designated parking area for conductor, closest to the entrance to the rehearsal/performance space (if they are driving) or transport the conductor to the rehearsal/performance site shortly before the rehearsal begins.
- Be sure to have a lighting/sound technician or knowledgeable host director on hand to work the sound and lighting boards to provide appropriate light and/or amplification for rehearsals and performances.
- Ensure that all students are seated in their chairs (on time and with all materials and accessories) prior to conductor taking the podium.
- Review rehearsal expectations with the musicians before the conductor begins rehearsal.
- Provide a knowledgeable introduction of the conductor to the musicians. (Most students may not know who the conductor is and will require a short biography.)
- Provide all meals for participants and conductor. For meal breaks during the rehearsal day, provide a quiet place for the conductor to eat with some of the directors. If the event is held over a few days, ask the conductor if they would like to dine out with the music directors for a social meal. Some conductors will enjoy this, others will prefer private time.
- Pay conductor and provide reimbursements prior to performance (but not as they are walking on stage).

Performance:

- Provide a private changing area for conductor to dress, freshen-up, or shower.
- Distribute programs to audience.
- Introduce the conductor at the start of the performance, having practiced what to say as an introduction and brief biography.
- Recognize all who have assisted with the success of the event.
- Acknowledge local/school dignitaries.
- Acknowledge the daily teaching of the music directors and private instructors.
- Acknowledge the parental support.
- Celebrate the students.

Immediately After the Event:

- Transport the conductor back to the hotel, airport, train station, or next destination.
- Clean-up.
- Collect all music and equipment.
- Stack chairs and music stands properly on racks.
- Cover and return all equipment to the appropriate storage locations.
- Organize all used rooms/spaces. Consider taking a photograph before use to ensure that each used room/space is returned to its original condition.
- Turn-off all technology.
- Pick-up trash.
- Search for any personal belongings left behind.
- Ensure that every student has safely departed the facility.

1 Week After the Event:

- Reflect on the event.
- Send thank-you cards to the conductor and staff members.
- Inquire about suggestions for improvement.
- Ask conductor for a recommendation for a future clinician.
- Rest!
- Restart the planning process!

CONCLUSION

For various reasons, there will be ideas and suggestions included in this resource that do not apply to you, your festival, the students, staff members, or conductor. And, on the flip side, there will be items that were not mentioned in this resource that apply to your situation. Regardless, consider your strengths and limitations when hosting an honor ensemble festival. Reflect on what you already do well, what you hope to improve upon moving forward, and what ideas you may have to add to this resource. Will **you** be successful in hitting the highest notes when coordinating your next honor ensemble festival?

Contact the authors, Lori Schwartz Reichl and Robert Sheldon, for additional guidance, to inquire about a collaborative professional development session/presentation on this topic, or to invite Reichl and Sheldon to serve as conductors for an upcoming honor ensemble festival.

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Lori Schwartz Reichl *is an author, educator, clinician, and consultant.*
She can be contacted at [Making Key Changes](#).



Robert Sheldon *is an internationally renowned composer.*
He can be contacted at [Robert Sheldon Music](#).



CONTRIBUTORS

Brian Balmages
Chris Bernotas
Dr. Deb Confredo
Dr. Paula A. Crider
Dr. Rodney Dorsey
Dr. Mike Fansler
Dr. Vince Gassi
Dr. David Gregory
Dr. Kenneth Kohlenberg
Dr. Charles T. Menghini
Pam Phillips
Trey Reely
Dr. Thomas P. Rohrer
Donna Palmerio Schwartz
Lee Sellers
Andrew B. Spang
Michael Sweeney
Dr. Emily Threinen
Marguerite Wilder

