



Planning For Music Program Success

Ideas with impact

*Planning for success first requires you to define what success sounds like in your school. From this base you can make planning decisions that will move your community towards this success. **James Le Fevre** shares some ideas that proved successful during a seven year stint as Director of Bands at a medium fee, Catholic Girls high school. Please adapt these ideas to suit your context.*

1. Plan high impact performances

Having defined what "success" is for your program, consider the timing and type of performances that will have maximum impact for your players.

Joint performance: Partner with a community ensemble that is stronger than your group. It will open their ears to new possibilities by broadening their listening (let's face it, not everyone in your group has Holst on high rotation on their Spotify playlist). This is good for your parents too. If possible, include a combined "share the chair" item. Not only will your players learn from playing alongside more experienced musicians, they will feel more connected to the broader music community and experience first-hand that there are many avenues for music making beyond Year 12.

Play a concert at your local primary school:

Our students loved going back to their primary school and showing off their musical prowess and it is great marketing for your school. Primary school gigs including fairs & fetes are generally relaxed in nature and provide a fabulous informal performance opportunity. Even if having an entire orchestra perform is not possible — having a string quartet, guitar trio or flute ensemble perform can have positive outcomes and playing chamber music is highly enriching for your musicians.

Cross ensemble collaborations: Combine your choir and string orchestra for a feature piece, or your strings and concert band to form an orchestra. This is a fabulous avenue for developing a sense of camaraderie beyond one ensemble. Try performing a “reflections” piece where the choir sing a work and then the band play an arrangement of the same work. (*Seal Lullaby* by Eric Whitacre is a good one for this). Any opportunity for your ensembles to play for each other is worthwhile, even if it is just in a rehearsal.

Stage a musical: Warning, this is not for the faint hearted!

Host a visiting group: This is particularly excellent around festival time when travelling groups are looking for an opportunity to rehearse or perform. Be sure to allow time for the groups to provide feedback for each other, possibly using the festival adjudication criteria. Allow time for socialising – the players will get a real thrill out of meeting other musicians and will walk away with a deeper sense of belonging to our music community (your lonely bassoon player will delight in meeting another of their kind too!)

Go to a festival: Setting aside the debate of music as a competition, hearing other ensembles, receiving feedback, performing in a different environment, and working towards performance goals are all positives.

The 5-note concert: Having a concert in the first six weeks of learning an instrument can have powerful effects on practice habits, confidence in performance, and ultimately retention.

Serving others through music: Participating in an ANZAC march, performing carols for nursing home residents, and playing at a new Citizenship Ceremony have all taught students about using their music to give back to the community.

2. Be audible and visible

Invest two minutes to send a short email to students and parents after rehearsal. Include reminders about what you focussed on, what you will cover next week, logistics for upcoming concerts and a YouTube clip to listen to. Not only is this a great reminder for your students, it helps parents feel involved in their child’s learning. Inviting parents to an open rehearsal can be powerful, particularly for beginner band.

Record concerts, take photos and share them with families. Proud parents love to share their child’s success and in doing so are transformed into advocates for your program.

Film a teaser from your rehearsal and use your school’s social media and website to post it. Not only does this help your visibility within your school, it also helps attract prospective families who value music education.

It’s also good to have music at every school event you can. A brass quartet or acoustic pop duo playing welcome music at an information night can be a low maintenance way of highlighting your program. Other effective ideas are to record a Christmas Album, or record your school’s telephone ‘hold’ music.

Ask your principal to stop in on a rehearsal to personally thank and congratulate the students for representing the school to such a high standard.

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3. Engagement = Enjoyment

Talk less. Play more. This speaks for itself!

Change the physical set up: Simply facing the other way in the rehearsal room can create a sense of novelty in a rehearsal. Setting up in a circle, flower petal, or scrambled seating (students choose where they sit), will allow them to hear different things and force them to be less reliant on their desk partner.

Listen to recordings during rehearsal time: For some students rehearsals are the only time they participate in focussed listening, especially music of the western art music tradition.

Record your rehearsals and reflect as an ensemble: Students never get to hear themselves from the audience perspective and are often so caught up in the act of making sound they are not listening enough to be making music.

Use exit polls: Do a quick "3, 2, 1" at the end of each rehearsal: three things I improved today, two things I need to improve for next week, and one thing the band needs to improve. They are practically writing your next rehearsal plan for you.

Choose a variety of excellent repertoire: Your group may enjoy playing the Disney medley, but are they musically engaged? Be aware of the message your programming sends to your players and the community.

Ask a composer to work with your group: There are many fabulous Australian composers who love you playing their music and are happy to come and work with your ensemble. This will change the way your students connect with the music forever.

Skype another school: It is super easy, and your students will feel a part of the global music community.

4. Develop your own practice

Clearly, the better we are at our job, the more we can offer our students. There are numerous organisations offering professional development for music teachers which are great for exchanging ideas, resources and networking. Beyond this, continue striving to develop your own music skills in your own practice.

5. Schedule social time

Feeling socially connected imbues a sense of belonging and responsibility. Something as simple as having an afternoon snack roster or a once a month band breakfast can create an enriching social outlet for your students. Expanding this to an end of year music department lunch for all students in an ensemble to attend creates cross ensemble interactions.

6. Student mentoring

We invited students to become mentors in our beginner bands, orchestras and choirs. To ensure sustainability, the project participants (Year 8s and 9s dubbed *The Big Sound Sisters*) were expected to attend at least every second rehearsal (although most attended every week) and assist at all concerts. Not only did these students act as musical lighthouses for our beginners, their assistance in set-up/pack-down was invaluable. They were given space to be tutors and would raise their hand and request a moment with their section to correct fingerings, rhythms, clarify repeats etc.

Our Big Sound Sisters also wrote hand written invitations asking our brightest juniors to move up to an intermediate ensemble. Staff provided the list of players to be invited, but receiving a hand written, personalised letter created a beautiful sense of welcoming.

If you are interested in exploring student leadership in your music program I highly recommend *Classic Leadership* by Dr Tim Lautzenheiser.

7. Plan the department calendar from Term 4

Auditioning/inviting new students into senior ensembles in Term 4 had a prolific effect on our program. The strongest junior students became the weakest players in the intermediate ensemble and were enthused to continue lessons the following year in order to "keep up". This also avoids re-enrolments in December, when everyone is worried about affording Christmas. The only downside to having the new recruits join in Term 4 is navigating the end of year performances.



8. Start a feeder school band, orchestra or choir

This is not a small undertaking but can have a huge impact on your program. We recently invited all of the Year 6 students who accepted offers for Year 7 2020 to come to the school on Wednesday afternoons for rehearsals and lessons.

9. Model professionalism

Dress professionally, be early and have a detailed rehearsal plan that focuses on teaching ensemble concepts and skills through the repertoire. I limit myself to between two and four key concepts or skills per rehearsal, and avoid getting caught up in note bashing that should have been taken care of at home.

10. Check in, and follow up on absences

Send the student an email, go and find them in the yard, or pick up the phone and call home. When they know their absence will be noticed and followed up on, their attendance will improve.

11. Never cancel a rehearsal unless you absolutely must

I am yet to meet a director who complained of too much rehearsal time, and cancelling a rehearsal sends a message that something else is more important. There are three certainties in life: death, taxes and band!

12. Learn to mail merge

A personalised letter from the Music Director will elicit better results than a generic "Dear Parent/Guardian".

13. Choose your words wisely

Make a concerted effort to use communal language ("we/ our/ us" instead of "I/ my/ me") and always say "when" as opposed to "if". For example: "Next year we will..." rather than "if you continue next year..." It has a subtle but beneficial impact.

14. Have music playing as students are coming into the rehearsal

It is another opportunity for the students to hear the style of music they are rehearsing to replicate and helps create energy and focus before the rehearsal begins.

15. Submit a long-term purchase plan to your administration

Be sure to include itemised costing, rationale and a proposed timeline. Presenting a documented plan seems to make business managers more supportive.

16. Schedule time for planning

I prescribe to the Eisenhower Matrix of time management – it changed my life! I highly recommend setting up repeating events in your calendar for weekly tasks such as rehearsal planning, following up absences, marketing etc.

But remember – always be guided by your definition of success.



WORDS BY James Le Fevre

James holds a Bachelor of Music with Honours from the Australian National University majoring in Jazz Saxophone, and education qualifications from Monash University. In 2016 James completed studies in Education Leadership on scholarship to the Expert and Leading Teachers Colloquium through the National Excellence in School Leadership Initiative. James is currently Head of Music at The Victorian College of The Arts Secondary School in Melbourne.