

KBB Music Festival 2019
Concert Band Adjudicators' Report
Beth Cohen and Alison Housley

Thank you for the invitation to be your adjudicators for the 2019 KBB Auckland Band and Orchestra Festival. We were delighted to be a part of this wonderful event and were thoroughly impressed by the high standard of playing and enthusiasm of participants and staff during the festival.

To all conductors, teachers and tutors, congratulations! To all behind the scenes supporters including parents and administration, thank you! In this day and age there is every excuse in the world not to have a band program in our schools and the fact that you, in spite of academic, scheduling, financial and logistical obstacles, have persevered to uphold well playing bands is a testament to your deep seeded belief in the value of concert band music. The courage, patience and hard work you have in upholding that belief directly translates to your students' fine performances.

To all conductors, be aware that we too live and breathe our days as teachers. You are all experts and accomplished musicians, and our comments are observations of what we heard across just one of your many performances.

It was obvious that some band directors would benefit from further professional development to improve their conducting skills. All conductors can learn more, but, for those that have received only basic or minimal training, we highly recommend further study. So, explore the art of conducting and discover how this will help your band's performance. Generally musical issues could have been corrected through a more nuanced, detailed or technically strengthened baton technique. You will learn that it is not necessary to conduct every beat. It is also possible to allow your bands to breathe into entrances and additionally demand more from them in terms of dynamics and phrasing and articulation. This can all come from your baton.

We were impressed with the presentation of your bands. Your students knew how to enter the stage, seat themselves and wait for their conductor to begin. We witnessed some issues with stage set up, stands or chairs needing re-placement but your students handled the interruptions efficiently. Importantly, you are teaching your students important life skills that go beyond musical performance. Bravo!

For many bands we understand that getting to the festival was an accomplishment in itself, performing an added benefit, and, a high score, icing on the cake. Both adjudicators have experienced these things. Whether you are a band that has reached an extremely high level, or a band that is just starting out, please be encouraged by and reflect on what you have achieved and learned in your festival preparation. Our comments are meant to inspire you to achieve more next year. We hope you will continue to participate in festivals such as the KBB. It allows your players to shine and reach for higher levels of musicianship. We encourage all bands of greater or lesser abilities to play more for the community and especially communities who so badly need the sustenance of concert band music: the elderly, underprivileged, immigrants etc. We hope you can make a statement with your fine music making by in playing in such a well executed and energetic way that you will give recognition and appreciation to many in New Zealand who feel isolated and

overlooked. You are even more powerful ambassadors of music than professional orchestras such as NZSO or Auckland Philharmonia!

The hall that you played in was gorgeous and yet also problematic. We applaud all of you for trying so hard to utilize and handle the issues of resonance and balance.

We were also quite impressed generally with repertoire choices. There were some truly fantastic pieces that played to your ensemble's strengths, highlighted your better players and more importantly, presented deep interpretation and programmatic messages.

In general, we have the following musical recommendations:

Articulation

There is no such thing as too much attention to articulation. All other elements fall into place if you pay attention first and foremost to articulation. Many band conductors focus on dynamics first but if articulation is considered first, dynamics will come more naturally. Unified articulation is very important. For example, are the flutes playing staccatos with exactly the right tonguing? Is the legato of the winds the same as the legato of the brass? Talk about differentiating the types of legato. With her band members, Beth enjoys using singing and amusing terms, physical gestures and visualizations. An example might to play as if "shmearing some cream cheese on a bagel", "playing for a Hollywood movie", or with a deep attack like a Russian Cossack (drunk on vodka even)!"

Tempo and unity

Simply put, the bands that truly excelled in this festival were those who played together. That's it. Very simple, but so hard to do. In some cases, this might be corrected with a more technically refined baton technique. Another approach that is effective is for the conductor to stand aside and have the section leader lead a passage. This wonderful exercise for creating musical unity and building team spirit.

Phrasing and Expression

Phrasing and expression also delineate good bands from superior bands. "Wow" moments are experienced when listening to the Berlin Philharmonic or Chicago Symphony in Carnegie Hall but these can also be experienced when listening to a student ensemble due to the attention given to phrasing and expression.

Phrasing can be brought out with articulation but it also requires other subtle approaches such as a push or relaxation of tone. This would have enhanced moments in both expert and beginning bands.

Expression is the ingredient that we all know is the key to ultimate musical success. Some of the bands played with flawless technique but with a somewhat mechanical interpretation. Others had issues with technique but played with such energy and enthusiasm which made a tremendous difference. A few ensembles played with both superb technique, musicality and enthusiasm. For the most part, we were impressed that the students seem to feel the essence of the music's message incorporating bluesy, atmospheric, somber or spirited elements.

Beth comments: It is a basic fact that American concert band repertoire predominates. It is such a wonderful challenge to capture the positive American

style and spirit in our playing and truly capture the essence of the music's message. American music can be played with the sound of the "big prairie", "Texas independence" or "New York intensity", Native American spirit etc. For pieces based on themes, movies, musicals etc. try to go that extra mile and show your students at least excerpts from those TV shows or movies or better yet, read from the books or the articles that will give them an idea of where the music is coming from and how it can really feel. You can discuss and play around with the "attitude" of the piece as much as the music. That's where the real fun can kick in.

Some other points:

- Avoid mechanical interpretation. Push into melodies, and relax them and speak through your instruments. Repetitive notes should be played with phrasing. Long held notes should be played through to the end. Percussion can show phrasing even with and within repetitive patterns.
- Conductors should consider their repertoire carefully. To quote Stravinsky: "less is more". Three pieces that show contrasting styles of playing will do. Two pieces could even suffice if one of the pieces has multiple sections.
- Avoid pop pieces and medleys unless wonderfully arranged. Most usually do not show technicality and musical range. We understand that these works are important for your programmes, but they are not of such value in a festival program.
- We applaud the stage manner and presentation of all bands who were generally very poised and professional. Try to go that "extra mile". Play with a bright countenance (you can't smile through your instruments but you can play with a joyful spirit), show your enjoyment of the playing, dive into the music and it will respond with a splash!
- We applaud the smaller ensembles who played with courage, with a fullness of tone and confidence in attack. Bravo!
- We applaud the beginning ensembles who took on more challenging music (please stay away from pop and movies!) and in spite of their limitations played with expression feeling and conviction. Bravo!
- The essential thing we were listening for, whether from beginning level bands or advanced, small ensembles or large, was the music. Why are we all working so hard on our instruments and in our bands? To express ourselves through music! If we heard expression and musicality, even amidst other difficulties, we took note. You achieved that musicality through all the attention to detail: articulation, dynamics, balance, tonal quality, breath, phrasing, unity of ensemble plus one more magic factor, your spirit and the joy you brought to your playing.

Congratulations to all and thank you for an enjoyable three days!

Beth Cohen and Alison Housley

