Rehearsal Planning

I am a bit wary of writing this article because I have observed many music educators in their first year of teaching who are really good at rehearsal planning. I, however had to learn the importance of rehearsal planning at “Hard Knocks University” whose graduates didn’t pay enough attention in their music education classes.

Like all of you, I had to prepare lesson plans when in college and while student teaching. I hated them! My arrogant self resented being forced to put things into a specific format. I was obviously confusing form and function. I resisted the form and therefore didn’t understand the importance of the function; having a well-planned and prepared rehearsal.

So, when I took command of my first Army band, I apparently felt that my towering intellect and amazing musicianship negated the need for good rehearsal planning. Minutes before each rehearsal, I would thumb through the scores and pick what we would rehearse that day. However, the afternoon before a major concert, as I was assembling my scores for the performance, I discovered that one of the pieces on the program had never been rehearsed; it had been buried at the back of my folder. And so, we performed it with no preparation – longest six minutes of my life! And so, I received my degree with honors from Hard Knocks University and vowed to not only have a lesson plan for every rehearsal, but to invest time in long range planning to guide those lesson plans.

As I was promoted and took command of larger music organizations, detailed planning became vital because I was presenting concerts with vocal groups and soloists, fanfare trumpets, bagpipes, video, and other interdependent elements and each one of them had their own demanding rehearsal and performance schedule. So how does this apply to you? Many of you have multiple ensembles, often in different schools and in different rehearsal and performance spaces. Your fantastic students are pulled in many directions by testing, sports, and other activities (not to mention snow days and worldwide pandemics). So, you are left to solve a Rubik’s cube and devise a plan to have all of your ensembles arrive at their performance date with multiple pieces of music in peak form.

INSERT DIAGRAM 1

For each season, I develop a master spreadsheet that will show every single rehearsal block and other relevant dates across the top. I want to foresee every possible conflict and have a realistic look at how much rehearsal is available for every performance. On the left side I list every piece of music to be performed by each of my groups and for each event. After that’s done, you just start putting an X wherever you intend to rehearse that piece. Doing so will help you to avoid having the same rehearsal order every day (a great way to make the students hate it!), and to visualize where sectionals or other types of work might be beneficial. It can even keep you from scheduling your middle school dress rehearsal while you are at contest with your high school group! Having a total of “X’s” for each rehearsal at the bottom can keep you from planning to rehearse ten pieces on one day and one on another (unless that’s what you want). As snow days and other changes arise, this long-range planning calendar can make it easy for you to make adjustments. I share this long-range plan with all of the “stakeholders.” Your department teammates, your supervisor, and especially your musicians should get a copy. They are the ones who can help you spot conflicts. For instance, if a featured soloist whose family is going to take an extended ski vacation, knowing that in advance can help you adjust the long-range calendar. If I have weeks or months to make adjustments, I’m happy. If I find out walking into rehearsal that over half of the ensemble or that day’s soloist is missing, that’s a bad day! The diagram is obviously, a mock-up. If you would like to have a copy of the actual planning document that I used at “Pershing’s Own,” contact me through www.ThomasPalmatier.com.

Once the season-long planning is done, daily lesson planning becomes so much easier because you have already done the big picture visualization of how the preparation will go. I prefer to do a week at a time if I can and then make minor adjustments throughout the week as necessary. Your school probably has some type of required format where you show your learning objectives, etc. But for rehearsal planning, I prefer to have a detailed timeline with brief notes of what I want to accomplish. As you gain experience, your time estimates will get better and better. Whenever possible, stick to your schedule. If you didn’t accomplish as much as you’d hoped you can adjust time distribution in later rehearsals. Following is an actual rehearsal plan I used with The United States Army Band “Pershing’s Own.” The timeline allowed vocalists, audio/lighting technicians, and others participating in the rehearsal to only be there when needed.

INSERT DIAGRAM 2

Every minute spent planning is worth an hour of rehearsal! Having a detailed timeline will help keep you on track. Your notes telling you what to concentrate on and what to rehearse (don’t always start from the top!) will ensure that every minute of rehearsal time is purposeful. Sharing the plan with your musicians tells them that you are prepared, you have a plan, and you are acknowledging their important role in making every rehearsal a success.

Next month’s edition of “Colonel’s Book Club” will feature “Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us,” by Daniel H. Pink. It’s a fascinating study about what really causes you and your students to be engaged and how many of our traditional ways of motivating students can be counterproductive. As always, I love to hear from SBO readers at www.ThomasPalmatier.com.