Who Are Honor Ensembles Really For?

I have been blessed with the privilege of working with many honor ensembles over the last few years. While everyone likes to focus on the All-State groups, there are many, many other honor ensembles for all ages and ability levels. Some are sponsored by colleges and universities, often as part of their recruiting strategy, while others are district/regional ensembles sponsored by the state associations. There are a smaller number that are sponsored by secondary schools, community bands, and other arts organizations.

The All-State ensembles obviously get the headlines. For conductors, the All-States present the opportunity to perform music of a greater difficulty, more professional acclaim, and they generally pay well. For the hundreds of other honor ensembles, the landscape can be quite different. It’s these types of ensembles that I believe offer the greatest service to music education and specially to underserved communities and students.

Several recent honor ensemble experiences have really enlightened me about the impact of these events on students, parents, and teachers. These included a district honor band in southern Virginia, a non-competitive band festival in Colorado with an emphasis on clinics, an honor band in northeastern Missouri and another in west Texas. All of these ensembles included a very small number of students who had qualified for an All-State ensemble, but the vast majority were students who form the backbone of our school bands and orchestras. They work hard, come to all the rehearsals, and usually serve in leadership positions. They may not be the greatest performers and will probably not major in music, but they work hard and are always the first ones to volunteer. So, what do these honor ensembles offer to them? In many cases, these students come from very small or remote schools with tiny bands and orchestras. They are among the best players in their school but rarely get to play anything at Grade 3 or 4 level and never experience a fully instrumented band. Now, imagine that they arrive for the first honor ensemble rehearsal having worked on new literature at the Grade 3-4 or even 5 level. They take their seat in an ensemble of 50-75 other musicians and all the parts are covered! They are on an actual stage instead of a gymnatorium. The entire festival is expertly run, and they are treated as responsible adults. Their sectionals are conducted by college professors or high school directors who are real experts on their instrument. Their conductor (in this case) formerly directed The U.S. Army Band “Pershing’s Own” and The United States Army Field Band. Rehearsals are fast-paced and demanding but also fun and rewarding. Their concert is for a packed house of appreciative parents, teachers, and many others.

These students get to experience the thrill of being in an honor ensemble that is too often limited to the All-Staters. They learn new concepts to take back to their bands but more importantly, they feel that special tingle that each of us gets when experiencing a great musical moment. Will they be future professional musicians or educators? Probably not, but their recollections of school band and orchestra will for the rest of their lives contain a special memory of when they were part of something special where they contributed to perhaps the best musical performance of their lives. In the future, they are the audience members, the band and orchestra parents, the school administrators, and the community leaders and elected officials. While they didn’t make All-State, don’t we owe it to them to also give them a great musical experience? Directors should seek out these honor ensemble experiences for their students or even consider hosting one. Frequently, local music dealers or corporations that devote resources to music education, such as Conn-Selmer and Yamaha, will help financially. Please feel free to contract me if you need help.