Preparing For Brass Band Competitions

by
Russell Gray

Russell Gray's career as a conductor began in 1998 when he was appointed as the resident musical director of the Stavanger Brass Band (Norway). Since then his reputation as an authoritative interpreter of brass band music has been acknowledged at home and aboard. Since 2008, he has been principal conductor of Molde Brass Band (Norway) and is Adjunct Professor of brass at Queensland University (Australia). Russell has enjoyed considerable success within the world of brass band competitions with leading ensembles in Norway, Denmark, Finland, France, Switzerland, Japan, New Zealand, Australia and Switzerland. Russell enjoyed periods as the principal conductor of Foden's, Fairey and Leyland brass bands and since 2012 has been principal conductor of Reg Vardy Brass Band, the leading band in the North of England.

The views and opinions expressed in this text are those of the author.

Preparing For Brass Band Competitions

Brass bands have been in existence for over 150 years. They serve community needs on civic occasions from parades to remembrance services, weddings, funerals, opening ceremonies and important sports fixtures. Away from civic duties, they spend a lot of time in rehearsal preparing for concerts, recordings, tours and competitions. Some of the busiest bands perform 40 to 50 concerts every year.

There is a very strong desire in many brass bands to compete against each other so they can declare they are the best band in the area. In fact, there has been a world ranking system in place for many years. Currently (at the time of writing), the officially ranked number one band in the world is the Cory band from South Wales. I recommend you visit their web pages to hear just how a brass band should sound. Competition really is very important to brass bands as they use their contest successes to help find sponsorships and be more attractive to concert promoters.

To understand the dynamics behind competitive music and how to prepare a band for competition, it is necessary to have an appreciation for the rich history of the genre.

The roots of brass bands can be traced back to the earliest years of the 19th Century. Some bands have even recently celebrated their 200th anniversary. There have always been amateur bands connected to villages and towns around the world, but until the 1850*s they were largely unorganised outfits consisting of whatever instrumentation was available. As the industrial revolution spread throughout the UK, causing the urbanisation of the population, business entrepreneurs, Colliery owners, Wool and Cotton Mill owners not only embraced the responsibility of providing wages for their workforce but also built houses, churches, shops, pubs and recreational parks around their factories. Some of the more civic-minded of them would also play important pastoral roles in their employee's everyday wellbeing.

In what was a very male-dominated society with long working hours, crowded living conditions and not much to do during leisure time, alcohol became an increasing problem and political unrest was never far from the surface. This combination of talk and drink often descended into crime and violence. Bringing music into a town was one way to counter this, so many factory owners encouraged the development of town and work bands. Culture normally reserved for the upper classes was brought to the masses. Classical music was arranged for those ensembles and the working classes had access to this through their church services and Sunday concerts in the parks and town halls. Inevitably these same entrepreneurs and business owners liked to boast that they had the best band so competition was born.

In 1851 the great exhibition was at the Crystal Palace in London where the Belgian instrument inventor Adolf Sax was one of the exhibitors. Among his inventions was a complete set of Saxophones and also a range of instruments called Saxhorns. Besses O'th Barn band, who were established at least as far back as 1818 were a public subscription band, meaning that they relied heavily on public donations through concerts. They also made a large part of their income from competition prize money. Having heard and tested these Saxhorns, they bought a full set and over the course of a couple of years converted the whole band to brass instrumentation. What followed was a highly impressive list of competition victories. Other bands just couldn't compete, so decided they needed to convert to an all brass format. In the day Besses O'th Barn band were regarded as one of the most progressive and forward-thinking of amateur musical organisations. As mentioned, competition was key to their survival. They relied heavily on prize money to cover the large expense of paying for their rehearsal room, buying instruments, maintaining uniforms, buying music and most importantly paying for a conductor.

Brass band competitions were very popular in the mid 19th Century largely due to the vision of one man named Enderby Jackson (regarded as the founder of the British brass band). By liaising with railway companies, he helped develop the idea of a cheap day railway excursion. This helped bands and audiences move around the country at a price they could afford for the first time in history. There were an estimated 40,000 brass bands registered in the UK by the 1870*s so this was big business. The instrumentation and the number of members allowed in a competitive band was regulated to 25 plus percussion by the mid-1870's and this hasn't really changed much over the years. The homogeneous tone of the 'all brass' band tended to set them apart from the mixed blend of disparate instruments of others. The end was in sight for the mixed wind bands in the UK as contest success slipped further from their grasp.

The brass band as we know it today was born.

Some of the more successful conductors of the 19th century were also highly accomplished composers and arrangers in their own right. Alexander Owen was one such conductor. He arranged works by Rossini and Beethoven for his bands and to this day remains the most successful competition conductor there has ever been with 424 wins and 827 top 6 finishes. To discover more about Brass band competition statistics it's worth visiting http://brassbandresults.co.uk.

In modern times, conductors with more than 50 wins to their credit are considered exceptional. One wonders how it was possible to attain such a number of victories in one lifetime. Bands that were sponsored by a factory or a coal mining colliery would allow their workers to rehearse during the day in a working week, so it was possible with the newly expanded railway network to rehearse two perhaps 3 bands in a single day. Owen would take up to 7 bands in a single competition often taking the top 5 or 6 placings with his performances all playing his arrangements.

Factory and colliery bands of the late 19th Century through to the 1980's and 90's maintained their thirst for competition and were always looking for their next win. Many of those sponsored British brass bands could well have been classified as professional considering the playing members would mostly have paid employment with the sponsoring company. By the 1990's the colliery industry had collapsed and mills began to close. Company sponsorships dried up and many of these sponsored bands had to, sadly, shut down. Those that were able to continue had to find other ways to generate funds. Competition success helped to raise the profile of bands so they could self promote concerts, set up commercial recordings, gain patronage and set up youth bands. Forming a youth band opened up new funding streams from government bodies and arts councils.

Brass bands did exist around the world throughout this same period of time, but were largely community-based and were considered truly amateur. From the 1970's onwards a closer connection between nations was established as international travel became more affordable to everyone. In 1978 the first European Championships were held in London and has continued every year until 2020 when Covid-19 put a temporary hold on it.

The first non-British band to win the European championships was in 1988 when the title went to the Eikanger Bjorsvik band from Norway. Since then, European bands have held the title on many occasions. The British style Brass Band has become a global phenomenon and continues to develop around the world.

Music as a Sport

For many people, music is regarded as one of the highest forms of artistic expression. It is a thing of beauty, an inspiration, it touches our innermost feelings. Music has a transformative power and can move us on a deeply emotional level.

When you think of sport, your mind may jump to images of an individual or a team competing against others with some physical exertion and skill to win some sort of trophy or title. If the two disciplines are combined then it's not hard to imagine the idea of musical competition. To judge such an event, it is important to keep in mind that you can't judge the piece of music being performed. You must base your judgment on how the piece is being performed. This can be hard to separate when the bands are free to choose any piece of music. You might hear a piece that's familiar or is an old favourite of yours and you must compare that to a performance of something less known but no less challenging to the musicians. It's easy to judge the piece and not the playing.

Usually, in elite competitions, the organisers will choose one piece that all competing bands will perform. Sometimes the music selected will be taken from established repertoire, or it can be composed especially for the event. From a judging viewpoint, it is easier if every band has to perform the same work because a comparison between performances can be more readily drawn.

Imagine if you were a conductor engaged to rehearse and conduct a performance in a competition. You must study the music very carefully before you venture into your first rehearsal. You must be able to conduct the piece and have a clear vision of what the music means and how it is going to sound. Then you must be able to hear any technical issues that your band may not be able to fix. It will be the conductor's job to find solutions to those problems and be able to inspire the musicians to perform at their peak when they are onstage.

In some cases, there can be in excess of twenty bands at a competition playing the same piece. How can you maximise your chances of a successful result? Your task is to be remembered, to stand out from the crowd, be different from everyone else. There will be many decisions that you have to make. Most of them are musical, but perhaps some will be tactical. In this section of my article, I will take you through some of the tactical choices that conductors consider in their preparation for competitive music-making.

The (fp) Effect

The fp in music usually means that a note will be struck at a loud dynamic then immediately be followed by the continuation of that note at a quiet dynamic. This marking in music can be sensationalised for competition purposes.

When approaching a normal (fp), it is human to observe the (p), part of the effect before you arrive at it. When reading music we tend to look ahead of the notes we are playing in the moment. The result of this is a rather weaker (f), dynamic as we prepare for the (p), and/or a louder (p) than desired as we over hit the (f). The pitch can also be affected if the musicians are less experienced. In concert, this may not be so critical but in competition, you want to show that your band is better than the rest so to sharpen the effect, the long note (fp) can be rewritten as a short quaver (f) followed by a quaver rest then a subito (pp) entry. Usually, the acoustic in a concert hall will cover any break in the note and that allows the players to fully commit to the (f) dynamic and then adjust to the (pp) entry on the second beat.

If the acoustic is dry like an opera house, depending on the scoring, the band can be divided so that some players fully commit to a short quaver at (f), while the others forget about the (f) and start that note at (pp) this translates to the listener as a true (fp) without a break in the sound.

Crescendo / Diminuendo

Let's look at the crescendo in the context of a competition. In some cases, to make the effect of a crescendo more sensational it is often better to ignore where it starts on the score and leave it as late as possible. This puts more focus and energy on the destination of the crescendo rather than a more subtle, gradual warming of the sound or intensity of the music.

In a brass band setting a crescendo always sounds better when it is led by the bass note in the chord for example from the bass section. Diminuendos can be dealt with the same way but in reverse. In other words, fast diminution of the sound, flattening out towards the end. Diminuendos are often more effective led by the highest voices in the chord.

Tempo

When preparing a performance for competition sometimes conductors take liberties with tempo markings. While a knowledge of the composer's intentions is always important, there is a case for seeing the intentions of a composer and then pushing those intentions to a more extreme setting.

Unlike classical music, brass band competition conductors are usually working on a piece written by a living composer, so it is easier for them to make direct contact to ask questions about the music. Some composers have very clearly structured approaches to their music and tempos must be observed meticulously while others always write circa next to a metronome marking giving much more license for experimentation.

Elite bands often have musicians with quite remarkable techniques so if there is a very fast tempo then it's ok to show off by taking the tempo beyond that of any other band as long as it's kept under control.

Fast tempo example: https://youtu.be/wEMbmvsAg8U

Also if the tempo is slow, more experienced musicians have the ability to show great breath control by holding phrases for longer, so stretching a slow tempo can have a big impact on the performance.

Slow tempo example: https://youtu.be/pG2iKezexzg

Dynamic Extremes

In classical music it is rare to see extreme dynamics by which I mean multiple (p) or multiple (f), eg (ppppp) or (fffff), also it is unusual to see that in a brass band score. But when preparing a performance for competition, part of the game is to show that your band has the widest range of dynamics imaginable, so some conductors look for opportunities to show that in the score. At the louder end of the dynamic spectrum, it's not unusual to see an entire cornet and trombone section positioning themselves so that they are facing out into the auditorium directly at the judges lifting the decibel level by a significant measure.

If this is not controlled then the effect can be quite ugly. I have even seen basses leaning forward in their seats to add to the dynamic of directional sound. The desire to be able to play louder has prompted instrument manufacturers over the years to develop instruments that can deal with that volume of air. If you listen to brass band music from the 1920's through the 30's the style is much closer to what you would expect in chamber music suitable for smaller venues.

Example: https://youtu.be/mxnAumwvXks

Modern brass music is much more robust and suitable for the biggest venues.

Example: https://youtu.be/qtqFyuShpKQ

At the other end of the dynamic scale, the challenge is to play as quietly as possible while still maintaining a full band tonality. Inventors from all over the world have been trying to produce a mute that will fit into the bells of brass instruments that allow the player to play a normal (pp), but the tone will still appear to be an open tone and the dynamic will sound much quieter. There have been some varying degrees of success with this but judges are aware of those and listen out for the hint of muted instruments where they should be open. Another solution to the 'quiet' problem is to cut down the number of musicians playing, thus thinning out the tone colour or even reducing it to solo lines. This is also dangerous in terms of competition as it is easy to distinguish one voice when there should be a tutti sound.

Re-Scoring / Changing the Score

Most brass bands consist of musicians of varying ability. Often in competition the choice of music to be performed is selected by the competition organiser so conductor and band have no choice in the matter. It is the job of the conductor to help the band perform the work as close to the intentions of the composer as possible. However, there may be problems with the ability level of some of the musicians. A degree of re-scoring might be required to make the music fit the band rather than making the band fit the music. This is useful if more than one person is sharing a single line of music. Moving parts around from one player to another might be a good solution to an exposed line or a technical passage.

Sometimes a cornet line may be on the lowest register and intonation will often be in issue there as well as tone colour. Moving that line to an Eb horn might help. This can also work if the problem of register is in a horn line that can be moved to a baritone or trombone etc.
If a passage is too technically demanding for certain players, it can be a good idea to simplify their parts. The goal would be that the music sounds under control rather than scrappy and fractious. It is for instance possible simply to leave the odd semiquavers out entirely so the whole passage sounds cleaner.

Pedal Notes

This is largely concerning the tuba section. It's a technique that requires a BBb or EEb player to play a note one octave lower than printed on the score. The effect of this technique can enrich and thicken the tone colour of a chord. If balanced correctly, the listener should feel the sound rather than hear it directly. Some composers write those notes into the score where desired while others leave it to the discretion of the player and conductor. If pedal notes are added in the music it must be done tastefully as it can cause great offence to composers who might not appreciate the changes to the music. Judges are aware of this practice and are unforgiving if the effect is overused.

If the BBbs and the EEbs tubas are an octave apart in a chord sometimes adding the second EEb a 5th above the bass note will also enrich and thicken the texture. The 5th of the chord will often be played in another section of the band, but reinforcing that the most dominant overtone helps the overall tone colour.

Audience Training

Every Brass Band has its loyal supporters. They attend concerts, come to open rehearsals, even get involved with fundraising or become patrons of the band. Over time they get to know the members of the band and the band gets to know them. Especially when there is a new piece to be performed at a competition, the ending can sometimes come as a surprise to an audience that hasn't heard it before, or if the work finishes on a quiet sustained chord that fades away into the distance, the applause can be quite muted. This would be appropriate and expected in a concert setting. There is nothing quite like holding that special moment of silence after the sound of the last chord disappears into the hall. In a competition, it's something different. Yes, you want the held silence, but then you need rapturous applause and cheering to make a lasting impression on the judges who cannot see who is performing.

In the week of rehearsals leading up to the competition performance, there will likely be an open rehearsal where the supporters of the band will be invited to attend. It is customary to perform the piece at least once during that rehearsal. Often a number of the supporters attending the rehearsal will also be attending the competition. If the music doesn't immediately induce rapturous applause from the audience then a certain amount of audience training is required. They can be educated as to how the piece is going to end and then be encouraged, even rehearsed to respond a certain way at a certain time. During the

competition, they will burst into loud cheering and enthusiastic applause leading the rest of the audience to join in.

Your faithful supporters will feel they are part of the process and become hard-wired as fans much like football supporters have their chosen team. Of course, some of the finest brass bands in the world have a universal appeal to those attending the competition and they will perform to a full hall. Expectation runs high and when the band delivers a thrilling performance any audience will respond with wild cheers, whistles and applause. The conductor will then start to play the audience. They might walk directly off the stage and wait till there is a small dip in the energy of the applause then reappear encouraging the audience. There will follow an invitation to the solo players in the band to stand and receive their adulation, usually leaving the lead soloists until last. They will receive more cheers and whistles. After this is done the whole band will stand to receive more applause. Depending on the level of enthusiasm from the audience the timing of the individual solo stand up's varies from quick to very slow.

Music Written as a Display Piece

There are competitions in the elite division and many competitions in the lower sections that invite a band to perform an own-choice work. This allows both the conductor and the band to choose something that will show a bands strengths and help to hide any weaknesses.

As in the days of Alexander Owen, it is an advantage for a band to have a conductor that is also a great arranger of music and a composer. A conductor with an intimate long-lasting relationship with a band will know exactly which players to write solos for and who to avoid. They will know all of the tricks that a judge will be looking for and what an audience will want to hear. This combination can be very intoxicating in an 'own choice' section of a contest.

Here is one such piece composed by the conductor Philip Harper under the pseudonym Paul Raphael, 'Explorers on the Moon':

https://youtu.be/Hsgs5J5uanc

When Tricks Become Cheating

There are some elements of competitive stagecraft that sit uncomfortably with me and the vast majority of my colleagues. They are considered in conflict with what would be considered fair gamesmanship. However, such tactics do exist and do appear to have been part of some performances. Therefore it's worth writing about some of them. We do not endorse these tactics. On the contrary; fair play should be observed, and is really the only path to satisfying victory in competitions.

We did discuss simplifying and altering parts earlier, and as long as the composer's intentions are maintained, I feel that must be fine. But, changing the actual pitches, is that ok? If there is a technical passage of quickly moving semiquavers involving nasty finger patterns then some contestants have been known to simplify by adding or taking away some

accidentals in order to make it slightly easier to play. If the music is fast enough the change of notation will pass very quickly and hopefully escape being noticed by a judge. If they do notice, the reaction could be severe.

Causing a distraction at a critical time has been used by some as a last resort tactic. If during rehearsals a soloist is not covering their solo particularly well and all other options have been ruled out, then it might be a good idea to ask a percussionist to ‘accidentally’ drop something like a cymbal on the stage at the appropriate time, thus covering up the weaker soloist.

As with forms of all cheating, this is risky, as the distraction can backfire on the band as they would not necessarily have been given any pre-knowledge of this happening. You may consider this tactic as underhanded, but for a judge shielded from visually seeing the band, they could be more inclined to forgive the unfortunate mistake rather than the soloist not quite making the grade.

Leadership roles of a conductor

I get asked many times about what I do for a living. This is a question that normally has a straight- forward answer. "I'm a musician." The next question is "Oh! What do you play?" My answer: "I'm a conductor." Simple so far, it's the next question that I struggle with. "So, what does a conductor do?" I have tried for many years to come up with a clever, concise way of answering this particular question, and I can tell you I am still working on it. Here I will try to list some of the roles I think a conductor has to play.

Here are just some of the important attributes you need before you pick up your baton and step onto the podium: Fine instrumentalist, project manager, counsellor, psychologist, quality control officer, motivator, historian, linguist and traveller.

Let’s take them one at a time.

Fine Instrumentalist

Being a master of at least one instrument is very important. The musicians that you are leading feel much happier if they know you can play as well as they can and it helps if you empathise with them because you know how it feels to be on their side of the podium. Having knowledge about the capabilities of all of the instruments in the band will help you to avoid asking for impossible things and having some ability on piano will always help you internalise a score before you start rehearsing it. If your piano playing skills are like mine, it helps if you can play each line in the score on your main instrument.

Teacher

Teaching is a large part of conducting, especially with amateur ensembles. When working with professionals you can expect a certain level of expertise and knowledge about what is being performed. That cannot be assumed in the amateur world. Almost all of the musicians in those amateur bands will maintain a day job that will be far removed from music-making. Your task is to educate them on the music and be able to offer solutions to technical and musical challenges set by the music.

Project Manager

When I am asked to guest conduct, I have to have a clear plan. As project manager, I know there is a deadline (usually a contest or a concert) and I construct a timeline to the performance, working backwards from when I walk on stage to the first rehearsal. There will be musical decisions to make and to adjust, according to the experience of the players in the band; perhaps absences from rehearsals will slow the preparation down, but these are situations that you have to deal with as they happen.

Counsellor

Quite often musicians take a conductor into their confidence about matters not connected with the music. I welcome this as part of the job and I am happy that my musicians can feel comfortable enough to trust me in this way. It is very important to be a good listener and to offer honest help or advice, if you can.

Psychologist

For you to achieve the full potential of the group, you must figure out what each individual needs to be able to perform at their very best, if not a little better than they thought they could. Some need to be put under pressure to play well (a strong look from you will usually suffice), but the vast majority need to be supported and given space to express themselves (sometimes you may even need to turn away from them as they negotiate a tricky solo passage). As you get to know your band, this will become easier to achieve. As an important performance comes closer, I can sense when my band tenses up and I have to counter that by making sure that I appear to be the most relaxed person in the auditorium. I might be feeling knotted-up inside, but nobody needs to know that, especially the band.

Quality Controller and Motivator

It's important to realise that, when you are conducting, you are in control of the temperature of the band. You need to create the right working environment so that the musicians can perform at their highest level. If the band is in a flat mood and you reflect that mood back, your rehearsal will go nowhere. You need to lift the band and try to reflect the mood of the music you are rehearsing. Being too energised can lead to a loss of focus, so be careful. I always treat my rehearsal as a performance. That helps me hold everyone's attention for the duration.

Historian and Researcher

Conductors bear the responsibility to composers of conveying their music as they wanted it to sound. When developing an interpretation it’s about trying to be as authentic as possible to the composers’ wishes at all times. In the genre of brass bands, it is somewhat easier to do this because many of the composers are still alive and we all have phones in our pockets. However, if we are interpreting a transcription of an earlier orchestral work, then it’s not so easy to have direct access to the original intentions of the composer.

In order to achieve this, we must be prepared to do some research into the background of the piece. Look for clues left by the composer and also any other relevant background information that might be there. Recordings are helpful (if there are any). The biographical material of the composer can be useful. Political and historical events surrounding the time

of composition can also be used as information to help you arrive at your final take on the music.

Finding the correct tempo is vital of course. Every piece of music has one. Even if it is ‘A Piacere’ (At Pleasure or Ad Lib), it will convey a sense of tempo or rhythmic pulse as the performer changes note. The music will still move the listener at an emotional level. As the conductor you must be able to find the right tempo not only in your study room and at rehearsals, but crucially when you are on the podium at a concert or competition when the pressure is high. If the tempo chosen deviates significantly from the composer's choice, the music will take on another character and you could be accused of not being true to the composer's wishes.

Metronome markings on a score didn’t appear before 1817 when Beethoven first used beats per minute (bmp) for his symphonies. Anything before that was indicated in words, usually German or Italian. Before Beethoven, tempo is rather left up to how you interpret it. Mozart had many ways of describing his tempo requirements that often didn’t only relate to the speed but also the character of the music. There are many ways of interpreting Allegro for example. Mozart had more than 12. Also one could consider how fast is fast to an 18th Century gentleman? Perhaps a charging horse, a cannon ball, or a bullet. Our 21st Century perception of speed is dramatically different. The international space station travels at over 27,500 kilometres an hour. Mahler really was very specific about his intentions by writing full sentences of instruction to the conductor. A good example from his first symphony is:

“Von hier an in sehr allmaehlicher aber stetiger Tempo Steigerung bis zum Zeichen”
(“From here on in a very gradual but steady pace increase to the sign”)

Contemporary composers use a mix of both and we can be more confident in their intentions through their very clear, precise markings. However, if you have a premier performance before you, it is worth remembering that the composer will probably not have heard the final version of the piece, so some guesswork on your part and close collaboration with the composer (if permitted), is necessary for realising the most authentic performance.

Seasoned Traveller

The nature of conducting also involves many days travelling in a year. Most years I spend more than 200 days away from home, so it's important that you travel well. It sounds tremendously glamorous, and it is up to a point, but you can only really pack for up to ten days in a suitcase - it gets complicated when a trip can be over three weeks. Then you can have the problem of what to pack. I remember travelling from a youth band course in summer in Brisbane, Australia, where it was 42 degrees in January, to Bergen in Norway where it was -2.

Suggested Timeline to Performance

One of the many facets of being a conductor is to inspire musicians to reach their potential during a performance. This is especially true when your performance is in the context of a

competition. I always find my best performances are the ones I didn't have to get involved in. As soon as I have to get involved with keeping the ensemble together or dealing with a nervous player, then something isn't working and we aren't going to be close to winning. In this article, I will focus on the conductor's role of Project Manager.

There are always deadlines with projects. In this context, it is the performance. When preparing an ensemble, I like to plan a clear rehearsal timeline that contains targets the group has to hit along the way. When the time comes for the live performance the ensemble should feel totally comfortable in the knowledge they have prepared themselves fully and there won't be too many surprises during the performance that can't be managed.

I am in a very privileged position. I don't generally get involved in the early stage of rehearsals. My role as professional conductor doesn't really start until very near to the actual performance. However it is important for both myself and the ensemble that I keep close contact with the conductor appointed to prepare the group ahead of my arrival.

I will discuss tempo, style, beating patterns, dynamic landscapes and any personal thoughts and impressions I have taken from reading the score. The final interpretation of the piece will be left to the last few days when I can have direct contact with the players and together we can see a clear picture of the piece crystallise In our minds.

My first rehearsal is usually 8 or 9 days before the performance. If the contest is on a Saturday then I would meet the band on the Friday of the week before.

Friday, 8 days to go

This rehearsal is my opportunity to assess where the group is in terms of technical proficiency and also to allow the band to become familiar with my beating and tempos.
My aim during this first session is to get an overall feeling of the ensemble and to find out which players respond to pressure and also which players need to be nurtured or encouraged. I take notes during the rehearsal to be used in sectional work.

Saturday, 7 days to go

A day of sectional rehearsals. Very useful for delving deep into forensic details on note lengths, articulation, balance, and thinking about technical fixes if there are insurmountable problems with individual parts. This is a very long day for a conductor, but a great deal of work can be achieved. The scoring of the work being studied will determine the breakdown of the band into sections. It may be useful to keep two or more sections together or perhaps you will need to see all the section leaders together.

Sunday, 6 days to go

I like to begin this day with a percussion sectional. Many bands struggle to pull together a full section as each competition piece has different requirements therefore often one or two new players are drafted in. This may be one of the first rehearsals they are able to attend. I use this time to give the section an opportunity to place every instrument exactly into position and to discuss who will cover what part. Often players will opt to play a section of one part then move to another part that best suits their individual strengths. I then discuss the issue of balance and timbre so the pallet of tone colour is just right.

After a break the whole band will join for a full session, extended if needed. Usually, there is a noticeable change in the standard of performance from the Friday evening rehearsal. This has the effect of giving the band an immediate confidence boost. There will be a sense that the music is pulling together and I will take a couple of recordings of entire run-throughs. I use the recordings to help me prepare the next rehearsal.

Percussionists love run throughs without stops as they can really get on top of the logistical issues of instrument placement. I also strongly believe in performing a piece as many times as possible before the competition. This builds stamina and also helps everyone know what physical condition they need to be in to achieve the perfect performance when it matters.

Monday, 5 days to go

I will find a comfortable chair and listen to my performances from the night before. I have my score in front of me, a pen in one hand and a packet of post-it notes in the other. If I stick a post-it note directly onto my score I will not forget to read it during my rehearsal as it covers the part of the score I want to see. The other benefit is that I don't waste time trying to find specific notes from a list on a separate sheet of paper. If any re-scoring needs to be done due to technical limitations from some players, I will do this before the next rehearsal.

At the rehearsal: after a warm-up of hymn tunes, I will read through my notes from the previous rehearsal. Most notes will not need to be rehearsed, but a few will require some time to implement. I then perform the piece twice, recording both.

Tuesday, 4 days to go

The pattern for this day follows closely that of the day before. I may call a sectional rehearsal before the main one just to straighten out any wrinkles if there are any. Again the rehearsal will follow closely the pattern of the previous night. I will record a further 2 performances.

Wednesday, 3 days to go

If possible, I like to allow for a rest day. Playing brass every night in a week is mentally and physically tiring. Especially in an amateur setting. Most likely everyone will have a daytime job and arrive at the band tired from their day. Having a break in the middle of the week allows everyone to refresh for the drive to the performance. It also creates a space for the musicians to make any last minor adjustments to their own part in the performance.

Thursday, 2 days to go

Open rehearsal. I find when I'm conducting less experienced ensembles, they Benefit greatly by being given the opportunity to perform the selected piece in front of supporters and perhaps other bands involved at the same event. Not only does this help settle 'first performance nerves', but it also encourages social interaction between local organisations which is so important for future development.

Another, perhaps more hidden, bonus is that it allows me to talk openly to the audience about the piece in a way that I can't while in normal rehearsal mode. I can be more expressive and colourful in my language, setting the scene in an emotional context the audience can relate to. I take them on a journey through the music while the band is listening and absorbing the same information the audience is. This has the effect of giving

the musicians something else to focus on other than the notes in front of them. I always record two performances on this open rehearsal night.

Friday, 1 day to go

After a day of analysing the performances from the previous evening, I will go to the last rehearsal with my score packed with post-it notes and go through each one trying to avoid playing to rehearse them. The band should be capable of marking their own music and executing the last-minute instructions without physically playing them.

I will record one performance and let the band go home early if possible. I want them to be well-rested and fresh for the following day.

Day of the Competition

Morning rehearsal

This is not a rehearsal. It is a gentle warm-up for everyone to find themselves and each other. I will allow them extra time to play themselves before we take the first hymn tune together. I usually play three or four hymns so everyone has a chance to check tone, balance, intonation, ensemble togetherness etc.

I will fine-tune each instrument if the band is less experienced and play through some of the linking, bridging passages in the piece to make sure they are secure. We finish the rehearsal with a few positive words and a final run at the opening few bars of the piece. This rehearsal usually lasts around 20 minutes. I think if it takes longer than this then we really aren't ready and I haven't done my job.

Short warm-up rehearsal

Depending on the facilities and the professionalism of the band there are useful things you can do as conductor. The musicians in a top-class band will have their own individual rituals they like to go through to prepare themselves for their performance, so interference from a conductor is not welcome. I will however ask them to play a couple of hymn tunes gently together before we take to the stage.

If I am working with a band that might be less used to the bright lights of a stage, I will give everyone space to go through their rituals, then play through a couple of hymn tunes. At this point, I will ask them to join me with a breathing exercise.

Everyone in the room is anxious about performing and the first physical sign of this is faster, shallower breathing. Playing a wind instrument requires a strong, free-flowing breathing technique so a breathing exercise minutes before a performance will benefit most players regardless of their experience. When I do these exercises I stress to everyone that they don't have to join in as it can have an adverse effect on some.

The other effect this exercise will have is to create a space of peace and quiet for everyone before they take the stage. It calms everyone down and brings everyone closer together.

Performance

When we are on the stage, I really want everyone to enjoy the experience. I am conscious that the conductor has to appear like the most relaxed person in the concert hall. This confident appearance will transfer over to the musicians and consequently through their playing. As I said at the beginning of the article, the best performances are the ones I don't have to be involved in. What I mean by this is that everything unfolds as it always has in the rehearsal room. My conducting gestures don't change and everyone executes their part in the overall performance. If, for some reason, there are changes due to performance nerves then I have to be ready to direct the band back onto the rehearsed path. This results in an unsettled performance and detracts from our chances for a podium finish.

At the end of the performance after the applause has subsided I take great pleasure in meeting every musician as they leave the stage. I get a thrill out of seeing them beaming at me if things have gone well and I can pick them up if it didn't.

Conclusion

Performing live music is not an exact science, that's what makes it exciting to be part of. There are many parallels between conductors from all genres. We all need to be clear about what we want, economical with our beats, in command of the time available to rehearse, and inspirational. We are all aiming to inspire the best performances out of the resources we are standing in front of.

I hope that by sharing some of my thoughts on strategies and roles used by conductors when preparing for competitive music-making, that you will consider some of them when the time comes for you to take the steps to a career in conducting.

Good luck with your music-making!