

How to Run a School Concert



Notes for Teachers

by Dr Susan West

to accompany the DVD

“HOW TO RUN A SCHOOL CONCERT”

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How to run a school concert:

10 'dos' and 'don'ts'

In this little summary, I have listed 10 'things to do' and 10 'things to avoid' for school concerts. I am focussing particularly on schools and particularly on music, although many of the ideas apply equally well to any sort of concert in any sort of environment. There is an accepted wisdom that says when giving others 'tips', to concentrate on the positive, not the negative. However, my experience with teachers suggests it can actually help to reduce stress if one is clear about some of the things one doesn't have to do. We are all so imbued with a picture of what performances are supposed to look like that it can be quite liberating to think that it doesn't have to be that way, and that, in fact, being different can yield a better result.

The ideas given here derive from many years of experience in developing a different model for music engagement, based on what we in the Music Engagement Program (MEP) call the 'Music Outreach Principle.' You can find more details about the Music Outreach Principle at www.music.anu.edu.au/open-school-music/mep



10 THINGS TO DO

1. Consult the students

The concept of student choice does not always exercise great influence in education, perhaps never less so than in music education. When it is exercised, it can often swing between offering Claytons' choices that are not really choices at all (i.e., 'Which of your three exam pieces would you like to play today?') to a free-for-all where the assumptions about student likes and dislikes actually contribute to a lack of choice for students (i.e., 'Students will only like their own contemporary music and the rest they have to be taught to appreciate.') My experience is that students in primary and secondary school are much more catholic in their tastes than most adults: given the chance to broaden their musical horizons, they will grab it with both hands.

There are many simple ways to involve students. In the MEP, we do regular surveys of students' likes and dislikes; in fact, the whole repertoire for the 'How to run a school concert' DVD was devised in consultation with groups of students from several schools. The MEP also has a set of songs (the 'Seventy Over Seven' series) for the seven years of primary school that were chosen through repeated surveying of students over a period of ten years. Students who make music in 'a climate of choice' are always happy to have, and will often invite, adult ideas as well, so no-one needs to feel that his/her opinion is not valued, whether adult or child.

2. Short, simple, singable

This suggestion is really 3-in-one but relates to the same basic point: you don't need to make things difficult in order to have both a successful and enjoyable time. First, most school concerts run too long for the energy and patience of all concerned: nowhere does the maxim 'leave them wanting more' apply more aptly. Secondly, it's always best to start with very simple ideas that can be worked out literally in moments,

rather than commit to endless rehearsals that tire everyone's patience and often lead to chaotic results. Thirdly, if one adopts the principle of 'singability' everything else becomes simpler anyway. 'Singability' refers to the degree to which any song you are using can be sung by a group. Much contemporary repertoire is not designed with that aim in mind: it is designed for individual soloists, possibly with vocal backing. Such songs often don't work very well for groups.

At the same time, you don't need to limit yourself to 'choral' type music or old folk songs in school choir booklets (although they can be nice too!). The MEP has done much research with its many users on the concept of singability and has many examples of songs that work with groups and are loved by children. One way of finding out what is singable en masse is to do lots of singing en masse!

3. Maximal participation

This idea is perhaps one that indicates the biggest difference in the MEP approach. So many concerts seem to involve the unspoken idea that the children exhibit what they have learned and the parents watch and admire. What we might not often consider is that this type of concert leads to more of the same: children take on board the idea that making music is something that's done at school, as a child, and not as an adult. Concerts can be much more fun if they don't just revolve around the idea of 'some do, and others watch the doing', as in performance-based concerts. There is an added benefit in encouraging audience engagement too – it can actually lower the stress. If you are designing at least some of your items for everyone to participate in you will be inclined to think more simply about the items. You also don't need to feel that the children must be able to perform their items without adult help, since the whole point is to involve adults. When it comes to enthusiastic, vibrant singing, it's usually the adults who need help from the children.

4. Fun for everyone

Everyone – children, teachers, families - needs to enjoy community concerts, including the preparation for them, rather than feel that they are a trial to be endured. Both teachers and students can end up feeling that way about concerts if the preparation is reduced to correcting mistakes and drilling repetitively. Asking yourself 'Am I having fun yet?' is one way to help keep things simple. If it isn't fun, it's often because something is being done that feels too difficult. Simplify and try again. It's always easier to add sophistication (see next point) than to remove it.

5. Adjustable sophistication

In the MEP we specialise in items that have adjustable building blocks that allow us to increase the number of parts, the instrumentation, choreography etc, as suits each group. Whether you are working with voices, instruments or both, always start with some basic songs that everyone likes and that are easy to learn (even if it's just the chorus) and easy for others to join in; a simple song sung together without any accompaniment can be much more uplifting and fun than a more complicated piece that the participants struggle through. Canons are a good example of pieces that can become more complicated. For example, a four part canon can first be learned as a one part song; it can then be sung in two parts; and then, if the group is able, in four. The bigger the group, the easier canons become: you might find, for example, that you can sing the canon in more parts on the day of the concert when the participating audience is there, and you don't even need to rehearse it fully beforehand. Some schools we work with have favourite songs that are repeated at every concert they do. They may even put the words in the program. The audience, consisting largely of parents who have been to more than one concert, of course, gradually learn those repeated songs and the whole group is able to add more sophistication to the songs over several concerts. The sophistication may involve more canonic parts or more harmonic parts of various sorts. Sometimes parts can be very easy and designed for the audience, thus giving the parent/adult audience a real impetus to engage to help their children.

6. Keep it live

It often feels easier to rely on some sort of professional backing for singing and dancing and there are, of course, times when that is appropriate. However, particularly with singing, the use of professional backing tracks, or even amateur ones, can be unhelpful for the end result. There are a range of potential problems: for example, the track cannot adjust to move with the students who are singing, thus making it necessary for the students to sing with the track, regardless of whether that really works for that particular group; the pitch of the track may not suit the students and cannot always be easily adjusted; the volume may need to be loud enough for students to hear, often making it hard to hear the students; and we have found that somehow the backing track often automatically reduces the volume of the students even when attempting to keep the track relatively soft. Remember that unaccompanied singing is perfectly fine, and often more musical than soft or even inaudible singing with a backing track. Remember too that, while it is possible to create a backing track especially for your concert that works more effectively, it can take a bit of skill to do so. Whatever sort of backing track you try, if it isn't working, don't be afraid to rethink and drop it.

7. Play to the venue

I can count many concerts I have been to where it is clear that teachers and students have spent a great deal of time perfecting complicated items with several parts that are wasted because the concert is performed outdoors, possibly in windy conditions, with bad miking so the parts cannot be heard at all. Schools can rarely afford the sort of miking that professional venues have and even then the results can be mixed. If you can get away with not miking items (other than perhaps individuals who are speaking in the open air or in a large auditorium) that it is always better to do so. Outdoor venues always work better with simpler items that can be clearly heard. So: when preparing your items think about the venue before you start planning and you may save yourself work and stress.





8. Embed in your regular program

The MEP has a curriculum document that works on the idea of developing music-making in just five minutes a day. This idea can be useful when thinking about a concert. Rather than plan for a concert in the short-term and stress teachers and children through lack of time and extended drill sessions, embed music in your curriculum in simple ways and then simply make music together with your school community using the repertoire you have been singing all year. It can become part of the personal learning journey of each child and each class, not to mention each teacher. The songs sung throughout the year at one school where I worked intensively for a decade, have become standard repertoire for the MEP program. The songs were chosen by the children who sang them from amongst many choices I gave them, or ones that various children and/or teachers suggested. Songs can become part of the fabric of the school and of the school day, and provide a way for children to take ownership of part of the school life. If you build music-making around a group of easy songs, it is also easy to embellish them in various ways as the songs are learned. In many schools which adopt the MEP, we often suggest ways that a school can turn its standard repertoire into a participatory concert with the minimum of fuss and with fun for everyone. A little bit of music-making every day makes such an approach possible.

9. Quantity over quality

I know this point sounds the opposite of what most people suggest and it is. We worry too much about quality, which doesn't always help the quality. When I suggest 'quantity', what I mean, for example, is that a bigger group of singers will often sound much more impressive, not to mention more lively, than a smaller group, even if something much simpler is sung. Ten simple songs that everyone learns and are easy for the audience to sing too, may work much more successfully than five more complicated songs that have to be practised until everyone is sick of them, and which the audience can't learn quickly. In other words, quantity may help the quality as well. Quantity can also apply to enjoyment, which eventually will affect quality. For example, one favourite song at many of our schools is called 'Green Grow the Rushes', which has twelve verses that are cumulative (like 'One Man Went to Mow'). Children are always requesting this simple song: it gets sung many many times before a concert. By the time the concert comes, the children know the many verses extremely well and still seem to love singing it; the end result is that it is sung with great gusto and enthusiasm and usually with full audience involvement by the end, because the repetitions ensure that parents pick up at least some of the verses. If the 'quantity' element in the singing comes from the children wanting to sing a song over and over again, the quality quite naturally improves.

10. Transitions are part of the show

Large schools or groups of any sort can often have a problem with getting people on and off the performance space. Here is another reason why audience participation is a useful inclusion in your concert, as well as being great fun. Use the transitions from group to group as a way of including more music-making for both those out in front and those sitting in the audience. You may simply repeat a song as a group goes off and the new one comes on, you may have 'a walking song' that happens for every transition that everyone can sing, you may have 'a front act' involving a smaller group doing an item as others move quietly in the background, you may put your instrumental items in between, or a group may come on already singing their song. You can, of course, include a bit of talking, but don't rely just on talking to fill the spaces when you could be having everyone singing!





10 THINGS TO AVOID

1. Don't perform

The idea of 'performance' often causes the most stress. It is an idea that gives rise to Performance Anxiety, which is a recognised problem for anyone who performs. Being a professional performer does not protect one from Performance Anxiety – in fact, some of the best and most famous performers in history, from all artistic disciplines, have been crippled by it. Adults who believe they are less skilled in music will often bring in someone more skilled to help but there are times when the more skilled can cause more anxiety, particularly because the focus can become very much about performance, with its notions of practice and correctness. One of the 'cures' for Performance Anxiety is to be well prepared. In itself, this idea is not a bad one, but if the nature of the preparation is driven by anxiety it can mar a concert that might be in other ways wonderful. By removing the idea of performance, we can move away from the criteria that are used to build and judge performance, which includes being technically as accurate as possible and, often, exhibiting the most advanced skills we can. Both of these criteria can heighten Performance Anxiety. If we think in terms of providing a musical and artistic situation that everyone can engage with, we are not thinking of just exhibiting the skills of the young for the adults. We are asking the young to help lead us all in participatory artistic activity that will help everyone relax and have a good time. So don't perform, just make music together.

2. Don't drill

This suggestion follows on from no. 1 above. If you are not performing, the correctness imperative is reduced. It may sound from this sort of suggestion as if I have no interest in 'quality' at all. That is not the case. I am suggesting that quality that is built on anxiety and drilling is not quality at all. On the other hand, repeating songs that everyone enjoys singing will lead to quality outcomes in a much more natural way. The best

result is when the students really want to keep singing the songs, even more than the adults do. It is a simple matter to increase sophistication and accuracy gradually as part of the enjoyment of simply singing, rather than as an exercise or practice session. In the MEP we avoid the word 'practice' altogether. We sing and we sometimes rehearse, although the rehearsing has less to do with the music and more to do with just ensuring everyone is clear about logistics for the event. If you are thinking in terms of participation, rather than performance, even the logistics can be a simple matter.

3. Don't do more than the community will support

Part of the participatory focus I am suggesting involves involvement! While there may be one or two artistic types who have enthusiastic ideas for a concert, stress is often created or magnified if those one or two individuals run the entire show. If you don't have much community support, a simple event that requires little excess work for volunteers is the best way to have a relaxed event. There is rarely a school the MEP has worked with where the community as a whole – including parents and other relatives and friends, does not become more engaged and more helpful as event succeeds event. Many schools that adopt the non-performance model, find they may have musical events of various degrees of sophistication on a much more regular basis than once or twice a year.

4. Don't let theme overshadow content

Having a theme running through your concert can be a lovely idea. Just be careful that your linking theme doesn't become the most important element. Parents usually are not concerned about such artistic niceties – they are just looking forward to seeing their children and, hopefully over time, they will also look forward to joining in to increase their own enjoyment. Pick items that groups want to do and then work out what sort of links you will need, if any.

5. Don't audition

The concept of auditioning goes along with the concept of performance. If we are to have an excellent performance, we need our solo spots to be performed by those who seem to be the best at the activity, whether it be singing or playing. If we let go of the idea of performance, we no longer need to audition. There are many other ways of helping participants into roles that suit their skills, their confidence, and their own ideas of what they may want to do. Here are just two radical things to think about: first, those who often audition and decide on participants for solos or important roles are not always as qualified in making these decisions as one could wish; secondly, the rules that govern how we make choices are simply tradition. The idea of a 'good' voice from one era is not the same as the idea of a 'good' voice from another. One person's idea of a 'good' voice will also differ from another's. Even the notion that the solo singer needs to be able to hold a tune is a discardable notion. The tune is only one element of a song – perhaps the person who delivers the song most musically will not be the one who is the most accurate.

6. Don't leave out anyone who wants to be in

There is always a way to give an important role to someone who wants it. There is always a way to include anyone who wants to be included in a way that makes him/her feel valued and involved. The only time the MEP limits involvement is if there is a financial problem, such as lack of funds for an extra bus for a concert excursion. Even in this case, a selection is not made of the 'best' singers or 'best' behaved students to go; generally some sort of ballot is held so that students are clear that adults are not favouring any person over any other. Likewise, it is extremely important not to withhold engagement from important artistic events as a form of punishment for difficult students. If consequences are necessary, find another way to invoke them. Do not punish the students through their potential artistry which can be their salvation.

7. Don't obsess about getting it right

Correctness comes through enjoyment, repetition, lack of anxiety and some support. Repetition is important but drilling is unimportant. Pick songs that you might get sick of singing but the children continue to repeat with gusto and enthusiasm. In this way, the accuracy comes spontaneously and with far less tension or anxiety than might otherwise be the case.

8. Don't pass on fear

It is important for adults to realise that fear in artistic terms (and perhaps in other ways) is contagious. Letting go of the idea of performance, with its attendant criteria, is one way of helping this problem. However it is almost invariable that the most anxious people on the night of any concert I go to will be the adults. The children are usually just excited. However, over time, children pick up on the anxiety of the adults, as they also notice that the adults are often the ones looking at them and not actually doing anything. The twin ideas – that artistic activity is part of school for children and that it is anxiety-producing – lead to a society in which few of us actively behave

artistically at all, especially musically. Be aware of, and honest about, your own anxiety not just to yourself but also to the children; you will then help them avoid becoming anxious and open yourself to their help.

9. Don't let 'experts' control it

As suggested above, sometimes those with more skill can provide certain help but also cause certain problems. For example, you may use a piano player who plays songs in certain keys or at certain tempos that really don't suit your students. The piano player may insist that this or that tempo is the 'right' tempo and one student needs to adopt, even if it really doesn't work for that group. A piano player may only be able to play a piece in one key, a key that doesn't help the students because it is too high or too low. I have seen an 'expert' conduct a group of children singing to a taped backing, where the children valiantly tried to stay with the backing while the conductor was trying to insist they perform differently. At the same time, doing things that we think experts do can complicate simple situations. For example, teachers often feel they need to 'conduct' a student group even when they have no experience at conducting and often have little impact on the playing and singing when they DO conduct. In many cases a conductor is unnecessary – it is more fun and relaxing, not to mention helpful in a range of ways, for the teacher to sit down and play with the band or sing with the choir. By all means stand out the front and sing if that helps everyone remember the words, just don't feel you have to look like a conductor. And take care that you are not swayed by someone who offers expertise that might end up being unhelpful and add to everyone's stress, rather than increasing the fun.

10. Don't make anyone do anything they don't want to do (adults and children)

This suggestion may seem to be a repeat of no. 6 but in reverse. It's important to make a particular point of it, however, because it is not only extremely important but often overlooked. Adults can regularly insist, in the most polite way, that a student be involved on the assumption that the student will eventually be grateful or just because it's good for him or her. In the long term, force never works with music, whether we are talking about children or adults. It is also unnecessary. I have lost count of the number of times I have happily helped a student not participate, against the wishes of others school adults, only to have the child suddenly ask (if not demand) to be included some time before the event. Late inclusions can be problematic of course and often there may be some suggestion that leaving the student out 'will teach him/her a lesson.' Yes, it probably will do, but not necessarily the lesson we think it will teach. In the MEP we suggest that 'The Singing Bug' is very infectious but very delicate and easy to kill. We don't want to kill it. If the environment is relaxed and fun, those who initially might resist involvement will not be able to help themselves and what a quiet triumph for everyone, including the disengaged, if he/she suddenly feels it is important to be involved.

On that note, let me conclude with a little story from my own experience. We once had a young Torres Strait Island boy, James*, join our school in Year 5. Boys coming late to this school often found it hard to comprehend and adjust to the boisterous and unaffected singing of the other boys. After initially finding it intimidating James tried, as boys before him had tried, to disrupt the other boys' singing, but without success. There was no need to try and engage him or stop him attempting to disengage others because neither was necessary. Boys who sing in a happy environment from the beginning of school do not usually understand non-singing until later in secondary school. Soon after James' arrival, his class was to go on a regular outreach excursion to a local nursing home. James was adamant he did not want to go and sing with 'a bunch of old wrinklies.' He was told that there was no need for him to go, although we generally suggested to students new to the school that they attend an outreach just to see what it is rather than dismiss the idea without experiencing it. The final decision, however, was in James' hands. His mother was keen for him to go but I discussed our policy with her and asked her to avoid pressuring him.

Come the day of the outreach, James appeared with his permission note and insisted that he had decided for himself that he would come to 'watch'**. Within a short time after arriving at the venue, James was actively and enthusiastically participating. On the way home in the car he commented on how friendly the nursing home residents were and, furthermore, that he wanted to be an opera singer when he grew up. I don't know if he became an opera singer but he continued to participate in music sessions at school and in the community while he remained at the school.

In conclusion

Whatever the nature of your concert, many of the suggestions I have made will apply. I can only add the suggestion that, whatever the nature of your concert, include some singing for everyone. You will be glad you did!

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**not his real name*

***While James was not autistic, we often find children on the autism spectrum like to come to observe from some distance, at least on the first visit. Observation by students in this way is perfectly acceptable since there is no obligation for anyone to attend or engage in any particular way. The only rule is that individuals should not encourage others to disengage.*

Dr Susan West

Dr West performed extensively as a flautist and piccolo player with the WA Symphony Orchestra and with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, as well as a number of woodwind and chamber music ensembles that toured nationally and internationally. She also studied for a year in Hungary in the Kodaly method before developing her own practice and philosophy in music education at the Australian National University. She is currently an Associate Professor at the ANU's School of Music. She lectures extensively around Australia and overseas, and is the author of many articles about her approach to music education, and her work has been the subject of four PhD theses.

Other DVDs available from Ronin Films about the work of Dr Susan West and the Music Engagement Program:



COMMON ARTISTRY

(44 mins)

A lecture by Dr West that offers an insight into her radical new approach to music education, developed over many years of practice-led research in Canberra's school system.



OH, BEETHOVEN!

(25 mins)

A children's guide to Beethoven's life and music, devised by Dr West, followed by discussion about Dr West's approach. Accompanied by lyrics and 'dots' and a rehearsal CD.

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