

Our sincerest congratulations to all performers, music teachers, conductors and staff involved in this festival. These past couple of years have been extremely challenging for the arts, and even more so for music in a school environment. You all know what challenges you've come through, so we needn't spell them out. Thank you for keeping ensemble music alive in your schools in the face of hardship.

Some general comments:

1. It seemed to us that repertoire selection is one of the most important parts of the job as a director/conductor of a youth ensemble. There were some instances where the repertoire was far too difficult for the level of the ensemble. It was very rare to see an ensemble where the repertoire was too easy. There is of course a balance to be had, but some ensembles can more carefully consider the intersection between difficulty and length of the repertoire, and how that fits into the year's programme as a whole.

2. Don't underestimate your ability to play without a strict beat. Everyone benefits from more autonomy from the musicians. Further to the above point there are certain types of repertoire to cultivate this, at whatever level you are at. E.g. beginners: any arrangement that includes a drum kit, more advanced: most classical repertoire era repertoire. The benefits of focussing on this skill include:

- conductor's beat is given more meaning when it is there
- conductor can focus more on listening and problem solving
- ensemble's focus moves to listening to one another (and later musical response)

3. We know this acoustic is a challenge. This means we have to be creative.

- Percussion is often over dominating, and there are a lot of things we can play with. Cloth on timpani for example can keep the articulation while reducing resonance and overall volume. Stick choice can also make a big difference.
- If possible, start practicing early to change working priorities. The acoustic is damp so the focus needs to be on crisp articulation, cutting off notes at the exact right time, and sometimes even shortening notes in order to reduce muddiness and allow the space to articulate the next note clearly.
- It is a loud acoustic, which gives us the opportunity to focus on the beauty of sound and not volume. Despite this, there were many ensembles who simply gave too much in a *mf* or *f* dynamic, and then couldn't grow to a *ff* where needed. These dynamic contrasts are extremely important; in some works the difference between *f* and *ff* is all we have to display the structure of the work, whether it's an Avengers Medley or Beethoven Egmont Overture.

Thank you all again so much for your wonderful music making, and giving us the opportunity to hear everything that you have to offer. There were some moments of extreme beauty and we look forward to hearing the progress you've made next time!

*Vincent Hardaker and Michael Joel*

