

Musical Excellence: The Hallmark of Texas Bands

Bradley N. Kent, D.M.A., UIL State Director of Music

Most Texas band directors and directors from around the country have traditionally felt the hallmark of Texas marching bands is their musical excellence. Specifically, the exceptional tone quality, technical facility, ensemble skills, and artistry are some of the most notable characteristics. Every year this excellence is on display at the state marching band championships and during the countless other performances given by our bands throughout the fall. How have we established these high standards, expectations, and performance levels? And, how do we not only maintain these high standards, but also continue to grow?

Historically, the implementation of a well-balanced curriculum, combined with exemplary teaching and strong stakeholder support, has probably contributed most significantly to the success of Texas bands. When asked what constitutes a well-balanced curriculum, most responses would likely relate to the development of the individual musician, which, in turn should facilitate the enjoyment of high-quality music making. Remember the adage, "If you want a better band, develop better players." Let's take a moment to reflect on the concept of development of the individual musician.

Wind players are taught how to play their instruments while seated in a chair. Proper posture, hand position, embouchure, and breathe control are among the basic tenets of learning how to play a wind instrument. The development of these concepts is a lifelong pursuit, requiring patience, diligence, and meticulous attention to detail.

Most band students begin receiving instruction in sixth grade, spend a few years developing their craft at the middle school or junior high level, then continue on to high school in ninth grade. Most high schools introduce marching band into the curriculum during the fall semester, coinciding with football season. Instruction begins at some point in the summer and students are taught how to play their instruments and move their feet at the same time. We put a uniform on them, have them memorize their music, teach them marching and other choreography that goes with the music and then ask them to do all this while simultaneously

playing their instruments. Coupled with the extreme Texas heat, this process can be overwhelming to the young musician. However, when taught correctly, marching band is a skill most can achieve. With the exception of an occasional parade or football playoff game, marching band season usually concludes sometime in November after the band's final contest or football game. At this point in the year, bands typically transition into concert season.

How does concert band contribute to the development of the individual musician? Concert band allows students to play their instruments in a temperature-controlled environment without the task of simultaneous physical choreography. Additionally, we have the opportunity to explore an immense body of literature and focus our efforts exclusively on making music. The transition to concert band sometime in November also affords band programs the opportunity to spend the majority of the school year on concert ensemble skills, solos, and small ensembles, which all allow for the maximum development of the individual musician. It is this "season" of our curriculum that, when done correctly, should define the high level of achievement in our programs. In other words, most believe that "concert season" is our foundation for musical excellence.

I recognize there is a very delicate balance between marching band and concert band. My fear is that if we ever do anything to damage this delicate balance the intended and unintended consequences could be detrimental and irreversible to the excellence we have spent over a century cultivating. There have - and always will be - temptations to have our wind players spend more of the school year and curriculum on marching band than concert band. Please understand I believe wholeheartedly that marching band holds an important place in a well-balanced high school band curriculum. However, I also strongly believe that we should never lose sight of what got us to where we are today, lest we run the risk of losing the hallmark of our Texas bands. In conclusion, during this time of "concert season" I encourage my colleagues throughout the state to keep your efforts focused solely on the development of the young musicians in your program through the vast body of concert literature available for large ensembles, small ensembles, and soloists.