

## FOR DIRECTORS: GETTING THE MOST FROM A GUEST ARTIST

Ron Kearns, Vandoren performing artist

Over the years when I was teaching, I had the opportunity to host guest artists visiting my schools. I've also been a guest artist for schools all over the United States and Canada. From these experiences, I've learned that guest artists when used properly can be an important asset for a successful program or one that is in its building stages. In order to get the most out of a guest artist, there are a few things you need to consider.



Ron Kearns

First, plan how to best use the expertise of the guest artist. To do this, you must be familiar with the guest artist's area of expertise. You wouldn't want to have a classical artist teach jazz technique unless they are also a jazz performer. True, there are techniques that apply to both areas but when bringing in an expert you want to utilize their best field of knowledge. Secondly, be sure to tell the guest artist exactly what you want him/her to focus on. This does not mean that you should tell him/her what to do, as an expert, you want them to work from their strengths, not try to use your techniques. Once you start trying to dictate to them how to do their job, you're no longer using their experiences, you simply have them repeating your instructions.

Be as specific as possible when describing what your needs are. If intonation is a problem, describe where in a particular piece intonation concerns are greatest. It may be due to several problems from embouchure, range or breath support (depending on the instruments encountering the problem). Once the "specialist" knows what kinds of stress players are going through to control intonation, he/she can key in on the specific problem. Since brass players and woodwind players face different challenges, use artists who have experience on those instruments to work with those sections only. Very few artists play both brass and woodwind instruments professionally. Since you want more than general observations from a guest artist, use their main area for your group. When you want the clinician to rehearse a large group, minimize the number of pieces or sections of a piece you want to concentrate on. If your group is having difficulty with rhythmic precision, choose a section of the piece that has the most rhythmic challenges. Ask the clinician to use some exercises that he/she uses to count tricky rhythms. Untie the clinician's hands to present the material with a fresh perspective.

One of the most difficult experiences you'll face when working with a guest artist is when he/she says something you've been saying and your students act as if it's the first time they've heard it. Remember, the reason you brought in a specialist was to get your students to listen to these things-no matter who says them. The biggest challenge you'll face is letting your ego take a back seat and resist the urge to step in and say something. If you listen carefully, you may hear another way of saying the same thing you've been saying. The object is to get your students to learn how to solve the problems you brought the guest artist in to help you with.

Guest artists can be a valuable asset to you and your program but preparation is the key. Once you've prepared your students for the guest artist and the guest artist for your students, you can sit back during the clinic or master class and observe (unless you're running a rehearsal or teaching during the same time). Take notes and do active listening or ask the guest artist to describe what went on in your absence if you could not be in the room. The guest artist is not a substitute teacher. Stay in the room as an observer and for the next few weeks reference things that the guest artist said. Now you can say, "as the guest artist and I told you before..." That way you're building on a positive experience not getting into a "shooting match" with your guest. Everybody wins in the end. When a guest artist has a positive experience with you and your group, he/she will share that experience with others. Unfortunately, the same holds true of negative experiences. It's your choice how it turns out.