

# Solo and Ensemble Festival: A Guide for Teachers

By Elizabeth C. Bley

Solo and Ensemble Festivals are opportunities for band and orchestra students to perform solos and ensembles for adjudicators and receive written critiques. Teachers play an important role in guiding students through successful preparation for these events.



Advice for Teachers:

- 1) **Encourage participation:** Encourage all of your eligible students to participate in Solo Festivals because they provide a valuable opportunity for students to 1) perform with a piano accompanist and 2) receive written feedback from another teacher (judge). To be successful, students must take a challenging piece and make it performance-ready. This process can enhance time management skills and develop a self-confidence that will stay with them throughout life.
- 2) **Select the right piece:** It is important for teachers to help students select a piece of appropriate grade level and difficulty. Choose a selection that sparks enthusiasm, which in turn provides motivation to practice!

I involve students in the decision process by doing the following: During the lessons prior to (at least four months before) solo festival we evaluate pre-selected solos that I have chosen based upon the student's skill and interest level. First, I play sections from each of the solos for the student, and then ask them to rank the selections in preferential order. Next, the student previews (plays sections) each of the choices, and we discuss the pros and cons of each one. Important considerations include tempo, range, articulation, and the amount of time needed for preparation. The best choice is one that challenges and motivates the student within these parameters.

Some teachers prefer to "play it safe" and select solos that fit easily within the existing skill levels of the student. While it is nice to be able to say that "all of my students received the highest possible rating" for their performance, where is the challenge for the student? As teachers, our charge should be to inspire students to set goals that produce growth, and we should give them the tools to meet those goals.

Don't allow a student to play under tempo or fail to articulate as written. The judges will notice! At a recent festival I asked a student who performed for me why all of the articulations were changed from tonguing to slurring. The response was "my teacher wrote in the slurs because my tonguing sounded bad." This does not help the student correct a major fundamental issue, and it may place the judge in the position of being unable to give the student a high rating.

- 3) **Book the accompanist early:** Make sure you know the best piano accompanists in your area, and assist your students in securing their services. Advise parents in advance about

the accompanists' fees and require them to schedule at least two rehearsals prior to the event. **Be sure the accompanists you recommend can handle the repertoire.** The wrong accompanist can detract from or even derail a student's performance. Whenever possible, discourage parents from accompanying their children - particularly with more advanced repertoire - unless the parent is a professional accompanist. If a parent insists on accompanying, listen to a rehearsal so that you can decide if this arrangement will work.

- 4) **Order sheet music: Each student needs original sheet music (not a photocopy) with numbered measures for the judge at solo festival.** Order sheet music early to make sure it arrives in time. You can always loan students your original sheet music, but you run the risk that it will be damaged or lost. A week before solo festival, double check that your students have numbered each measure on the original copy that will be provided to the judge. Numbering helps the judge refer to specific measures in the critique.
- 5) **Efficient and effective practice:** Make sure your students understand what will be involved in learning the piece. Give them clear and concise instructions on how they should practice. Help them access a recording of the piece, and suggest that they listen to it frequently. [SmartMusic](http://www.smartmusic.com) software is a practice tool that works well for many solos. It allows students to play along with a synthesized piano accompaniment, at the tempo of their choosing, with or without a metronome beat. The program allows students to start or stop at specific measures, listen to a synthesized solo part, and create practice loops and recordings. For more information, visit [www.smartmusic.com](http://www.smartmusic.com).
- 6) **Reed selection:** Make sure your students have an adequate supply of working reeds. Just before solo festival, ask them to show you the reeds they have prepared and have them play on their best two or three. The best and most consistent results come from Vandoren Reeds. I prefer the V12 and 56 Rue Lepic cuts. **Since so much of the student's rating at solo festival depends on tone, technique and phrasing, it is imperative that they play on a good reed.** To protect reeds and assist students in organizing and quickly identifying the best reeds, I recommend Vandoren's VRC810 reed case. It holds eight reeds in numbered spaces, and has a nice compact design with ventilation slots to prevent mildew and warping.
- 7) **Intonation:** Students should be coached on how to tune with the piano before they begin. Unfortunately, not all pianos are tuned to A=440. Many students mistakenly believe that tuning in the warm up room is sufficient, but this does not take into account the pitch of the piano or the temperature in the performance area.
- 8) **Breathing:** Good breath support is critical for good tone and a successful performance. **Many times when students get nervous, they forget to breathe correctly.** Make sure your students have ample breaths marked in appropriate places throughout the piece. Also, advise students to take some deep cleansing breaths before beginning a performance. Keeping brains oxygenated will help students perform better under stress!
- 9) **Coach for Performance Success:** Make sure your students know the difference between practice sessions, rehearsals, and a performance. Teach them to 1) never stop during the

performance and go back to correct errors; 2) project confidence and competence and 3) cue the accompanist for entrances, tempo changes and cutoffs. Students don't always feel comfortable being the soloist or leader, as their natural tendency is to follow the accompanist.

- 10) **Dress for Success:** Give your students very specific instructions on what is considered appropriate dress for solo festival. Absolutely no jeans, shorts, mini skirts, T-shirts, tank tops, tennis shoes or flip flops should be worn. Boys should wear dress shirts, dress pants, dress shoes and ties. Girls should wear dresses, a nice blouse with a skirt, or nice pants with reasonably low-heeled dress shoes. If students do not have access to appropriate attire, have them consider wearing a school band concert uniform. Some band directors keep closets equipped with "clothing to loan" for those who cannot afford appropriate attire.
- 11) **Introducing yourself to the judge:** Teach your students how to greet the judge when entering the performance room. For example, have them say, "Hello. I am Lisa Smith, I am in sixth grade, and I have been playing clarinet for two years. Today, I am performing "Siciliano" by Johann Sebastian Bach." This teaches the students good etiquette and lets the judge know the age and experience level of the student.
- 12) **Review judge's comments:** After solo festival, take time to review the judges' comments with each student and incorporate the suggested improvements into your lesson plan. Let students know that it is OK if they got nervous and made some mistakes, and reassure them that this is a normal part of learning to perform.
- 13) **Host a recital:** Consider holding a recital just after solo festival. Have all of your students perform their solos with accompanists. This is a great way for students to implement the judges' suggestions and demonstrate what they have learned from the experience.



**Betty Bley** is currently a clarinetist with the Loudoun Symphony, the Virginia Grand Military Band, the Turnbridge Trio, and the Quintessence Woodwind Quintet. She is also a free-lance recording artist, adjudicator, private teacher, and master class instructor. Betty received her B.A. in Music with High Honors from the College of William and Mary, where she was Principal Clarinetist in both the Concert Band and Orchestra. While there she won several concerto competitions and music scholarships. She also attended the University of Michigan School of Music at Interlochen, where she was a featured soloist and chamber music performer. In 2004, Betty attended the Indiana University School of Music clarinet teaching workshop. A native of Northern Virginia, Betty attended South Lakes High School in Reston, where she received many awards including the Semper Fidelis award for musical excellence from the United States Marine Corps.