



## Maintaining Student Interest

One of the most challenging aspects of elementary band directing is maintaining a high level of student interest throughout the entire year. Any experienced director knows the cycle of student interest only too well: there is unbelievable excitement among the students at the beginning of the year, lasting for about two months, during which there is tremendous individual practice with nearly everyone remembering to come to band prepared with equipment. Many students move ahead in their band books on their own and will ask for extra lessons to get ahead. Students are happy to miss recess or other favorite activities to come to band.

This excitement is followed by a gradual waning of interest once the novelty has worn off—students may begin forgetting their instruments, stop handing in practice cards, need to be reminded to come to band, and ask to be excused from band so as not to miss something of interest in their classrooms. During this period students begin to drop out of the program. The dropping out accelerates. Unwary directors may find their bands crumbling before their eyes.

I make maintaining student interest and enthusiasm a top priority—it is rare that any students drop out during the year or fail to continue for both their fifth and sixth grade years once they begin in band. It requires a

conscious effort on the director's part to achieve program stability. The following suggestions may aid beginning band directors in avoiding the unfortunate scenario of band atrophy described above.

### **PERFORM OFTEN**

Frequent performance is the single most important means of maintaining student interest. Students love to perform for anyone who will listen—classmates, teachers, parents, community members. The excitement that is generated by a performance is often enough to reinvigorate those students whose interest is lessening and to maintain the high interest of the other students. In addition to the standard spring concert, you might give a winter concert, have the band perform for a special schoolwide celebration such as arbor day, field day (schoolwide Olympics) or spirit day, or take the band to perform at a nursing home or other community center. Perhaps you can start a tradition at your school—a band ice-cream social or a band performance at the school fair. Have the band perform the national anthem at the awards assembly or at an S.C.A. assembly.

Impromptu performances are equally exciting to students. Take a class to perform for the kindergarten—kindergartners make a wonderful audience—or take a group into the lunchroom to serenade students. Invite the principal or secretaries in to hear a brief performance in class. Accept invitations and look for opportunities to have your students perform—the rewards in terms of maintaining student interest will be well worth the effort.

### **ESTABLISH A REGULAR ROUTINE**

Create a regular routine for your students and stick with it—coming to band class prepared to play on the appropriate day must become part of your students' weekly routines. Consistency is fundamental in establishing any routine. Without regular attendance students cannot progress, and once progress halts, interest is lost. No matter how inconvenient or difficult to schedule it might be, I recommend seeing each student each week. If a holiday falls on your day at one school, try to adjust your schedule at another school to accommodate both groups of students so that no one misses band class. It may mean taking all students together at one school for a full rehearsal, and you may not be able to cover new material in the method book, but, at the least, you will have held your students' ground and conveyed your expectation of regular attendance in the band program.

Band directors lament the fact that their Monday schools are always behind and that it is nearly impossible to maintain interest when weeks at

a time pass without seeing the Monday students. There might be a Monday holiday, then a Monday snow day, then the teacher is sick on a Monday, and then the students are away on a field trip—a month passes and the students are out of the habit of coming to band. They have forgotten everything they had learned. Once the novelty of playing the instrument has waned and the initial exuberance is gone, it is a struggle to try to start over if the student falls behind. Most would rather give up than backtrack. For this reason it is crucial that you do not allow the downward spiral to ever begin. Maintaining a regular schedule where students are seen each week is the key. I consider it my chance to give them their weekly dose of invigoration which will carry them through the week of practice until I see them again.

It is important to keep the band in the forefront of students' thoughts; not just the band students' thoughts, but those of all students in the school. Visit the classrooms often, as long as the classroom teachers do not object. When I need to make an announcement or remind students of something, I try to go in person rather than leaving a note for the classroom teacher to relay. Students will often ask me questions which I can answer then, and even the nonband students see me so often that they feel as if they know me and I them.

## **BE VISIBLE**

Make schoolwide announcements frequently to congratulate students on accomplishments or to let them know of schedule changes and the like. The announcements familiarize all the students in the school with the activities of the band and can generate interest. Put up posters in the halls or a photo display showing the band's activities. The more the band becomes a focus of positive attention in the school, the more the students want to remain associated with it.

Participate in all aspects of the school program—be involved in your students' overall education. Help out at the book fair, volunteer for bus duty, attend class plays and special events, sponsor a club. There are a million ways in which you can become involved. Not only will your students benefit from your generosity, but you will also benefit: the good will that you foster with the classroom teachers, the P.T.A. and the administration can make your job so much easier in the long run, and the connection that you have with your students will be stronger, increasing your effectiveness as a teacher. Remember that you represent the band, and anything positive that you do for the school reflects well on the band program.

**PROVIDE  
SPECIAL  
ACTIVITIES**

Another excellent means of maintaining student interest is to provide opportunities for students to participate in special activities in addition to the weekly band class. The more involved students become in band activities, the stronger your band program will be.

The solo and ensemble festival is one recommended special activity. It is an extracurricular event in which students can participate if the director is a member of MENC (Music Educators' National Conference). Each state is divided into various districts which set their own dates, but the event usually takes place in April. Many students are eager to prepare music and to attend the festival in the hopes of earning a medal which will later be publicly presented to them at a concert.

About half of my band attends the solo and ensemble festival each year, and some students participate in three or four ensembles. For the few months preceding the festival, the band room is a buzz of excitement with students staying after school or coming in during my breaks for extra help. The level of enthusiasm and of performance rises greatly during what could be a slow couple of months. I often combine an entire class into a large group ensemble such as a beginning clarinet choir; this way many students are involved at once without the stress of performing individually, as in a solo. All of the students in the group can win medals, and this is a strong motivator. Working toward a common goal further unites and strengthens the band, making students feel that they are part of a team.

An optional solo and ensemble recital can be a further motivator. I have so many students asking to perform that I often have to hold it on two separate nights to avoid a marathon-length recital. Students love to perform for their parents and friends, and though they'll deny it, they enjoy dressing up for a special occasion. A small reception after the recital is a nice reward for the students. While helping them over their "butterflies" before the festival, the recital also teaches students proper concert manners (applauding for others, bowing, acknowledging the accompanist), exposes them to a great deal of music literature, and allows them to learn from each other.

Area band is another excellent activity for strong second-year players. It provides an extra challenge for advanced students because they are combined with the top players from other elementary schools. With several concerts presented during the year, the extra performance opportunities make this a strong motivator for students, because almost all children love to perform. I know of one director who created a special area band for first-year players. This is a wonderful opportunity for the students; unfortu-

nately, the director must donate his free time for such an activity and there is a limit to how much even the most dedicated teachers can give.

Other ideas for special band activities might be a band fund-raiser (bake sale, ice-cream social/concert), a field trip to hear a professional performing group, or a concert at the local retirement home. When my band visited the nearby retirement home, the students were excited for weeks ahead of time; that was all that they talked about. “Will we be going to the retirement home again?” was one of the first questions that the students asked the following year. What a great motivator! Other directors take their bands to perform at the local shopping malls for the holidays. This would not be my first choice because of the potential for problems, but the directors and their students who have done this thought it was terrific. One director formed a jazz band with several of her top players and had the group perform on a school band concert. A band party mid-way through the year might be another fun special activity for your students.

Providing special activities for students to take part in outside of the regular band class helps to maintain student interest. Spacing the activities over the course of the year can keep your band in a state of constant anticipation and enthusiasm, thus avoiding the common problem of band attrition.

Music is perhaps the strongest tool a director can use for motivating students. A student once told me that he had signed up for band solely because he wanted to learn to play the song *Let's Go Band* (see Chapter Nine—Annotated Guide to Elementary Sheet Music). Some students have made their choice of instrument based entirely on the song that was used to demonstrate that instrument at the recruitment program. When selecting music, keep your students in mind. While I believe that a diet of only rock or pop music is unbalanced and inadequate, I do suggest selecting some tunes that appeal specifically to students. Try to stay current with students' tastes—they enjoy playing theme music from hit movies or popular television shows, or from a special event such as the Olympics. Most pieces with the word “rock” in the title also appeal to children. There are many excellent pop tunes available, and they can be as effective for teaching musical concepts as the classical pieces.

It may surprise some directors to find that elementary children really do enjoy playing classical pieces—especially those that they recognize. There are some excellent elementary band arrangements of well-known classical works. The John Kinyon Mini-Score Series (Alfred Publishing

## **SELECT MUSIC WITH STUDENTS IN MIND**

Company) contains many. My students love playing the *Theme from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony* (arranged by John Kinyon and better known as *Ode to Joy*) and *Evening at the Symphony* (arranged by Feldstein and O'Reilly—a medley of famous works by Beethoven, Haydn and Mozart). While children *love* to play familiar pieces, they *hate* playing simplified pieces that have been arranged in such a way that the basic rhythm or tune that they expect to hear is altered. Your students will either drive you crazy by playing it the way they have heard it, or you will drive them crazy by making them play what is written.

When selecting music, try to choose a variety of styles—some marches, some classical, some popular, some folk songs, and some novelty pieces. You might even try your hand at composing: children are enthusiastic about playing music that you have written just for them. I wrote a simple piece titled *The Cherry Run March*, and it quickly became a favorite of the students. They seemed flattered that I would write a piece for them.

Novelty pieces can often provide students an opportunity to express their creativity with props or costumes or with a choreographed activity. For example, when my band played the *Theme from Jeopardy* on a concert one year, a brief skit accompanied the performance: students had constructed and decorated podiums behind which the contestants stood, and one student was dressed as a game show host and read the clue (i.e., “This Fairfax County elementary school has the best students, teachers, administrators, and parents in the world”). The two contestants scratched their heads while the band played, then held up their cards which read “Cherry Run” when the song finished. It was a big hit, and the ideas came from the students. When my band performed Ralph Gingery’s *Rap it Up*, students auditioned to be rappers, choreographed moves and coordinated their clothing for an exciting performance. They knew better than I what would be appropriate for that type of music, and the result was fantastic. If you give your students the opportunity, they may give you some excellent ideas for performances; at the same time, the students are being highly motivated by the music.

In addition to motivating students through band music, I try to keep on hand materials for those students who need additional resources—i.e., books with music from popular children’s movies such as *Beauty and the Beast* or *The Little Mermaid*, as well as books with television show themes, pop songs, folk songs, and patriotic songs. I sign the books out for a week at a time and am always adding to my collection. My students can’t wait to take the books home so that they can play these favorite songs for

their parents. They are strongly motivated by the music. Music, when selected with your students in mind, can be a director's best motivational tool; it should be chosen with care and consideration.

Someone once said that "timing is everything," and this is never more true than in the field of elementary band directing. Knowing in advance when you can expect the peaks and valleys of student interest allows the astute director to head off any loss of momentum. A well-timed activity can almost always counteract a waning of student interest. Most elementary directors would agree with the following assessment of the year's high and low points.

The first month is a director's dream. Enthusiasm is so high that the students practice without being reminded. They all remember to bring their instruments and books to class and they arrive on time. Everyone turns in a practice card and the recorded practice times are fantastic. Progress occurs by leaps and bounds, and both students and their parents can easily see the achievement. This is the time to carefully establish routines, to maintain consistency and to work primarily in the method book, setting a solid foundation for learning during the remainder of the year.

After the initial month or two, the novelty wears off and students tend to slack off in their practice; the second month or so would be a good time to introduce a new activity. Issuing a challenge to the students is one possibility—i.e., "Whoever can play this song perfectly next week will win a prize." Then be sure to have plenty of prizes on hand the following week. I stock up on prize items whenever I find a bargain. Pencils or erasers with a music theme make good prizes. The thought of winning something can be a great motivator.

Planning a small-scale performance can also motivate students. Once beginners have learned a few familiar tunes, they want to perform them for anyone who will listen. *Hot Crossed Buns*, *Mary Had a Little Lamb*, and *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star* are favorites. You might say, "Next week we'll go to the kindergarten rooms to play for the students. Everyone remember your instrument and practice hard this week." You can build the performance into as big an event as you wish, choosing students to tell a little about their instruments or about the band. Students may want to dress a certain way (i.e., uniform colors or clothes with a theme), or they may have ideas about the presentation. Listen to their suggestions and learn—they know what appeals to children. Although you may tire of doing this with every class, all of your students will want their classes to per-

## PREPARE FOR THE PREDICTABLE SLUMP IN INTEREST

form. Try to make arrangements with the lower-grade teachers, the cafeteria hostess, and the office staff so that your groups can play for different audiences. Remember that those kindergartners and first and second graders will soon be fifth graders who are eligible for the band. The seeds you plant today you will reap in a few years. These performances not only benefit your current band in fostering pride and motivation, but will also benefit your future band program, serving as a pre-recruitment. Make the most of the opportunity.

Introducing sheet music to beginners for the first time can be another fantastic motivator. Once the basics of sound production, hand position, and note reading are mastered and the students have learned about six notes, they are ready to try sheet music. I generally save this activity for the first week back after Thanksgiving. Returning from a break can be a low point for students, and introducing sheet music is a perfect morale booster. I begin with a simple band arrangement of *Jingle Bells*. Even though this tune is in most method books, the fact that it is printed on a separate sheet seems to be significant to children. The arrangement that I use has the melody with either a duet or a trio part on each sheet, so everyone can play the melody at home, and the teacher can have students try various parts in school. The director can easily arrange familiar tunes in three- or four-part harmony, and the parts can be tailored to your students. Any beginning band piece will do, however, as long as it is geared to the level of your students. Watch particularly for oboe parts and French horn parts which are often in a poor range for beginners—you may need to revise the parts.

The three to four weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas provide a great opportunity to reinvigorate students, and the timing is crucial. Many music stores offer an initial three-month instrument rental contract at a low price as a trial period for the student. Thereafter, the instrument is rented by the month at a slightly higher rate. Because beginners usually start band around the beginning of October or late September (after all the recruitment programs, parent meetings, and time to obtain instruments), their trial period expires around Christmas. Likewise, school-owned instruments are rented by the semester, and most directors hand out new contracts in January. Rather than having the child make a year long commitment to play in the band, many parents view it as a three-month commitment, at which point they will assess the situation and decide on their child's future participation. That makes the Christmas/winter vacation a crucial time. If parents see students losing interest, they will be likely to



discontinue. Unless student interest is maintained, the band director could return in January from the winter break to find that many students' instruments have been returned to the music stores. For this reason it is paramount that the students leave for their break motivated to continue.

The ideal solution to the problem of motivation is to schedule a winter concert for one of the last days before the break. A school assembly program is the perfect forum. All band students perform together on several pieces, and the advanced students then play a few tunes on their own. Children love to play for their peers and teachers; my students get so excited about performing that the gym seems to be charged with energy. I know of no better student motivator than such a performance. Scheduling an evening concert for parents is an additional idea. It is important for the parents to see the result of their child's efforts. The holidays are such a busy time that some directors wait and schedule a parent concert in January or February. On the positive side, this can raise morale during what is probably the biggest lull in the school year; on the negative side, holiday tunes which may have been included on the school concert are no longer appropriate, so students must prepare new pieces.

Preparing for concerts does slow progress in the method book, so I try to move along as far as possible in the book before the first concert. Once your students move away from the book, it is difficult to make them go back—once they have sampled band music, they will want to continue with that.

The waning of interest in January and February can be frustrating. Preparing for a special concert, perhaps for Valentine's Day, is one way to overcome the doldrums. I begin talking about the solo and ensemble festival and distributing music as soon as we return from the winter break. Students are excited by the possibility of winning medals and are anxious to practice a solo or ensemble. January may seem early to begin preparations when the festival is in April, but you will need the time to help students prepare and to avoid a rush at the last minute. I also begin passing out sheet music that I might want to have the students perform in the spring concert. This keeps everyone looking ahead. Continue games, playing for prizes, and impromptu performances in class.

If the area band will attend the district band festival in March, this becomes an intense time of preparation. I find this to be very motivating for my advanced students. Most have never attended a band festival before and are looking forward to the event.

March is officially MENC's "Music in the Schools Month" and is a good time to promote music in your school; while you are at it, you can also moti-

vate students. Have a poster contest for band students, give a lunch-time recital, decorate a display case, or perform at a retirement home. The possibilities are endless. Continue to pass out new music in preparation for the spring concert.

The end-of-the-year stretch usually begins in April. The solo and ensemble festival is the high point of this month. The more students you involve, the more your band is motivated. I often take entire classes to the festival as large ensembles. Class time is used to prepare for the event, and the students feel that they are working toward a common goal. Preparing for the festival fosters a sense of camaraderie among the band students. All are anxious to win medals and are strongly motivated. Even those who do not participate can be caught up in the excitement of preparing for the event. A recital prior to the festival adds to the excitement and provides a test run for the students attending the festival. With spring break usually occurring sometime in April, these two events seem to fill up the month and keep everyone busy.

Momentum climbs higher still in May as the spring concert nears. Students look forward to full rehearsals, and I try to schedule about five of them prior to the concert. I often invite people in to hear the rehearsal, and this can add to the excitement of a rehearsal. I like to schedule the big concert for the end of May. That leaves June to devote to special events such as field day and the school picnic. Often the intermediate director wishes to hear sixth graders audition for placement in next year's band during the month of June. Each school has its own special activities in June, and the resourceful band director can keep student interest at its peak right up to the end of the year by involving the band in the activities. I pass out summer band letters just before the spring concert when enthusiasm is high. Shortly after the concert, I can usually count on receiving many summer band registration forms. The students are so excited from the concert that they are eager to continue playing in a band over the summer. The spring concert is such a strong motivator that the students' enthusiasm carries over through the summer.

With foresight and planning, the wise director can ensure that student interest is maintained at a high level throughout the year. Knowing the predictable pattern of waxing and waning student interest, and counteracting the waning periods with special activities and music are important tasks of the elementary director.

Finally, it is important to respond promptly at the first sign of a student's falling behind. Whether it is due to illness, a broken instrument, lack of practice, or lack of talent, once students fall behind, they are heading toward dropping out. Nothing is more frustrating and embarrassing to a child than to be the only one in a group who can't do something correctly. The easy solution is to give up. As soon as I think that there may be a problem, I try to give that student extra help, either during or after school. Contact with the parents is important to ensure that the student practices and has support at home. Sometimes it may take weeks of extra help, and sometimes I may need to move the student to a more individualized setting with fewer students. I hate to lose any players regardless of talent, and I do whatever I can to ensure success for all who join the band.

Some students learn more slowly than others and can greatly benefit from private lessons. Most band teachers do not have enough time during the day to devote to teaching individual students. Recommending a private teacher is a wise move. The high school band director can also recommend any high school students who are interested in teaching. The use of a student tutor often appeals to parents for several reasons: the high school students are less expensive, are closer to the child's age and therefore may be better able to communicate, may even come to the house, and can provide an enlightening and motivating glimpse into the world of high school band. Even advanced elementary students can help a slower beginner. Whatever the approach, prompt remedial action is necessary if the student's interest is to be maintained.

In conclusion, maintaining a high level of student interest throughout the year is a challenge and one of the most important tasks of an elementary band director. It is normal for student interest to decline after the novelty of learning an instrument wears off; however, the enterprising band director will be able to regenerate interest during the course of the year. Having students perform often, maintaining a regular schedule, keeping the band and oneself in the public eye, providing special activities, selecting appropriate music, preparing for the inevitable lulls, and reacting promptly when students fall behind are some ideas for maintaining interest. ■

**RESPOND  
PROMPTLY  
WHEN  
STUDENTS  
FALL BEHIND**

**CONCLUSION**