

A close-up photograph of a person's hands playing a keyboard instrument, likely a piano or electronic keyboard. The hands are positioned on the keys, with fingers pressing them. In the background, there are colorful streamers or decorations in shades of red, green, and white, suggesting a festive or holiday setting.

# tips for a successful holiday concert

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*At many schools, the winter or holiday concert is your first performance of the year. You want the experience to be rewarding for your students and inspiring for your audience. But there's so little time to prepare!*

*While planning may be the secret to success, it needs to be the right planning at the right time. There's a lot to keep track of, even if you've done this dozens of times before.*

*To help, we reached out to music educators. We asked for their insight on everything from programming the music to sweeping the hall afterwards. Check out their tips, and approach your winter concert with confidence, knowing you've got everything covered.*



# creating a concert preparation checklist

For more than forty years, Hopkins, Minnesota has showcased its 5-12 band program with annual All-District Band Festivals. These multi-evening events bring more than 1500 students into the high school auditorium. An undertaking of this magnitude requires significant teamwork, coordination, and preparation.

Whether you are planning an All-District Festival, an end of the year celebration concert, or a more modest winter concert, your preparations will be very similar. The secret to a successful concert is to plan, plan, plan! I recommend creating a detailed concert checklist so no task is overlooked. Such a list should also indicate when each task should be completed.

The thoughts I've shared below come from my participation in the All-District Band Festivals as well as many other concerts. I hope you can use some of the information in creating your own personal concert preparation checklist.

## Music Selection

For me, the **music selection** comes first. Music is a vital part of your curriculum. Choosing great music is key, and variety in the music makes the concert interesting. Factors for your consideration include different:

- Time signatures, for example 2/4, 3/4, 4/4, 6/8...
- Tempos, dynamics, etc. Go for contrast; some fast, some slow, some loud, some soft...
- Styles – consider opening fanfares, overtures, marches, programmatic music...
- Themes – "Music from Around the World," "Music of John Williams," "American Composers," etc.
- Difficulty levels – you might include some easy, some medium, and only one or two difficult pieces.

Would you welcome some additional ideas? Check out the next article in this ebook in which Ted Scalzo focuses on repertoire selection.

If you will be **ordering new music** for the concert, order it early. This will ensure that even if there are minor delays, your students will receive plenty of rehearsal time with the new music.

## Long-Term Planning (Several Months Out)

While it sounds obvious, start with those tasks that have to be completed first. The window of opportunity for some of these items may have already passed for this year, but that's no reason to omit them. The list you're creating now can serve as the foundation for future lists. Plus, it's never too early to start planning for next year.

Select your **concert dates**. Make sure they are on the district and building calendars, shared with parents at your open house (or in your newsletter), and written on the board for students to put in their planners. Will you rehearse in the performance space before the concert? Will you need the space for a reception afterwards? Be sure to include these details in your scheduling.

Set up planning meetings for everyone involved in the concert. Attendees might include administrators, teachers, AV and tech staff, custodians, etc.

You will want to complete all required **documentation**. If you will be performing at a location different than your school you may need a **building use form**. You may also need to order buses. If you do order buses, determine if you will need a trailer for the big instruments.

## Medium-Term Planning (A Month or Two Out)

Plan ahead to **promote** your concert. Reach out to local newspapers and radio stations and anyone else who might include your event in their calendars. Think about creating and hanging posters, both at school and in local businesses. Make sure parents are sufficiently notified and reminded in newsletters and/or emails.

We required a “**Student Permission Slip**” to be signed and returned. If you do too, this can be a great opportunity to share additional important information with parents. You could indicate **concert attire**. If students need black or white clothes, for example, this gives parents a chance to find some options or shop for bargains.

You might also use this opportunity to ask for student and parent volunteers. This might include serving refreshments, handing out programs, helping clean up, or acting as **chaperones**, providing student supervision for wherever you will not be at concert. I've provided a [sample permission slip](#) to help you get started.

Double-check to confirm the concert is listed on **district and building calendars**; if not, follow up. Look for other opportunities to promote the concert including **school or department websites**.

Start working on your **printed program** early, making lists of student names, acknowledgments, concert order, etc. You can refine later, but capture the information as it becomes available. Look for additional program tips later in this ebook.

Prepare a concert preparation **rehearsal time-line**. This would essentially be your lesson planning; what pieces you'll work on when, some benchmarks, and perhaps a list of SmartMusic assignments.

It's not too early to finalize your **hardware needs**. How many chairs and stands will you need? How will they get where they need to be? What about a podium or a microphone? Will you have a monitor behind the band for rehearsal and announcements? Don't leave these items to the last minute. You may want to

get started on ordering the printing of your programs.

If you'll be using **technology**, like PowerPoint slides or video, identify a tech helper and discuss the details. You'll also want to identify who will help with stage set-up and tear-down. If you're going to shoot video of the performance or take group photos while you're there, line that up, too. Photos can be very helpful to promoting your group (as well as a treasure for parents), so don't overlook this opportunity.

In addition, you may also want to start thinking about the **announcements** you will make at the program (especially if you will invite a guest speaker). Here are some ideas to consider:

- Welcome parents
- Tell them how terrific their kids are
- Invite the principal to speak
- Share some thoughts on the importance of the arts in education
- Thank everyone who has helped with the concert
- Invite parents for refreshments after the concert
- Remind everyone of upcoming events

## Short-Term Planning (The Week of the Concert)

Make an emergency kit. This could include instrument repair items (zip ties, duct tape, reeds, valve oil, mutes etc). Because of the likelihood that someone will “forget” about the dress code, you might even consider packing some emergency wardrobe pieces (like extra black pants). You can often find affordable options at second hand or thrift stores.

If you'll be using a wireless microphone, or anything else that uses **batteries**, bring some extra. If you'll serve refreshments, or will have a reception after the show, now's the time to finalize those arrangements.

**Check in** with everyone identified above, from facilities people to parent volunteers, just to make sure the event is on their calendars as well as in their minds (as this can be a hectic and chaotic time of year).



And remember to pick up the programs.

#### At the Concert

Be sure to bring your emergency kit, and your checklist, which should include cell numbers for partners you're counting on. If you have an announcer, guest speakers, or guest performers, identify where they'll stand, and if they'll need a spotlight. Bring some signs for reserved seats, especially if you have multiple bands performing. And slot some time for those group photos.

#### Afterwards

Especially if you'll have a reception afterwards, make sure you're clear who staffs that AND who will perform cleanup duties (and when). Cleanup might include backstage areas, the auditorium, and any dressing or reception areas. If you don't do it yourself, you'll want someone to do a thorough "idiot check,"

walking through the building and making sure nothing has been left behind.

#### Perspective

It seems like a lot, doesn't it? Don't let the details overwhelm you. Winston Churchill said: "Let our advance worrying become advance thinking and planning." Anytime you're feeling a little anxious, use that energy to check off a few more tasks from your list.

In addition to being a great way to manage all your tasks, a thorough concert preparation checklist can also be a great comfort, by helping you reassure yourself that everything has been prepared for a great performance.



Kay Hawley is a retired music educator with more than 40 years' experience.

Read her articles and bio on the [SmartMusic blog](#). Ted Scalzo offers tips on creating video of your concert in [this post](#).

# programming your winter or holiday concert

This time of year many of us are faced with the challenge of programming a winter or holiday concert with music that is appropriate for both our students and our community standards. At the same time we look for new and interesting works that present traditional materials at a skill level that fit our students. We all know that not every group will be able to perform Handel's full "Hallelujah Chorus".

## Some Things to Consider

- First and foremost; what is your school or district policy regarding holiday programming? If you are not sure, check before you consider music for your concert.
- What is the ability level of your group today and what level can you reasonably get them to by concert time?
- What educational goals do you wish to achieve by programming such music?
- Will the piece or pieces you are considering meet pedagogical goals and criteria?
- Does your choice of music meet state and national standards?

Besides these top-level considerations, you might have more practical ones as well. Is one section particularly strong this year? Perhaps you could select a piece that allows them to really shine. Ryan Thomas shared some great thoughts on this topic in a previous [SmartMusic blog post](#). Ryan also talks about leveraging the winter concert as a means to get your students where they need to be in the spring...

## Looking Ahead

Think about what you want students to play at contest. Programming that music in your holiday concert would certainly give them a head start. Alternately, you

may wish to program material that will help them get to these contest goals. Again, check out [Ryan's post](#) for additional details.

## Student Interest

Another consideration is whether or not each piece will be engaging enough to sustain your students' interest through both your rehearsal and your performance. Mike Gibson is the director of bands at Ridgeview Charter Middle School in Sandy Springs Georgia. He adds,

*"We've all seen the kids that kill themselves to learn that one cool song in their folders. The crafty director is able to take that energy and transfer the learning into other pieces. This in turn can expand the student's interests – stretching and challenging their minds to expand into other genre of music."*

One way to increase student investment is to let them pick the music.

Did your blood pressure just rise a little at the thought of that? You can avoid that by letting them choose from your pre-selected list of titles that meet your other criteria. I shared some details of how I've done this in the past in this [SmartMusic blog post](#).

## Audience Interest

Anything we can do to make sure the experience feels inclusive can only help build stronger community. Mike Gibson suggests:

*"You have to opportunity to go Multi-Cultural. Music related to Hanukkah and Kwanzaa should be explored. Thinking internationally, what about music from Asia or South America or Africa or the Middle*

*East? Those countries have major celebrations as well, even if you may have to be a little creative with the calendar dates. Ask yourself, ‘Is it wrong to celebrate human celebrations?’”*

### Balancing Sacred and Secular

Often we feel anxious about making sure we are balancing sacred music from one tradition with music from other traditions – and for good reason. Parents and administrators are always on alert for this type of imbalance. Educational goals can offer an additional justification for programming both secular and sacred repertoire on your holiday concert. You can explain that pieces were chosen based on student development (“this Hanukkah piece emphasizes the harmonic minor scale,”) or to feature a particular section (“Little Drummer Boy features the percussion section”).

Schools where a high degree of collaboration occurs between directors and educators have additional options. For one example, the balance between sacred and secular can be spread across the choir, band, and orchestra, giving each individual group additional flexibility if one concert program leans more this way or that. For another, the opportunity exists to collaborate with history or social studies teachers for cross-cultural tie-ins. (Incidentally, this is a great way to foster relationships with fellow faculty members.) You might work with other teachers to expose kids to music from the time period or culture they are studying. This also helps students internalize the connections between classes and boosts their learning.

As always, cover your bases. Being able to fall back on written district policies – as well as state and national standards – means that your choices of sacred and secular repertoire are “safe.” You may wish to familiarize yourself with NAFME’s [position statement on sacred music](#).

Many districts have a posted policy, like this one from [Plano, TX](#).

Also, don’t hesitate to check with your administration. Confirming beforehand is better than having to put out a firestorm of public opinion afterward. As much as we wish the answer could be “just teach good music,” spending some time balancing sacred and secular repertoire with an eye for pedagogical goals and district policies is a worthwhile investment.

### Telling a Tale

One time-tested way to increase audience and student interest is to add the element of a story. Can you find something that tells a story or helps solidify a holiday message? I once had great success programming Stephen Melillo’s [“Festival of Lights.”](#) The publisher’s website describes it as “a musical retelling of Chanukah, complete with Syrian invasion, Maccabean defense, the shofar’s call to battle, and the final victory of the eternal light that burned for eight days.”

The music was very dramatic and included shofars (an ancient bugle-like instrument, historically made from a ram’s horn). We had students play the shofars from the back of the auditorium, which added to the drama of the music. The students learned more about the meaning of the holiday from that piece than just being told the story. Best of all, the audience reaction was impressive.

### Resources

All of this can be a bit challenging if you do not have access to scores, parts, and audio files. Technology has greatly aided this process. Many online retailers like [JWPepper](#) provide perusal scores and audio files. In some cases YouTube can provide opportunities to see and hear performances (and share them with students). SmartMusic also offers easy access to an impressive collection of band, jazz band, orchestra, string orchestra titles, and choral titles.

### The Season

To close, I’d like to quote Mike Gibson one last time:

*“I think Andy Williams had it right; it is ‘the most wonderful time of the year.’ (Please accept my apologies to songwriters Edward Pola and George Wyle, and for showing my age.) Every year, my mom and dad turned on classic holiday music by Andy, Bing, and the rest to create an environment promoting cheer and goodwill. I remember visiting my grandparents and standing around the piano as my aunts, uncles, grandparents sang the familiars in four-part harmony. They laughed, hugged, and we ate!*

*If you were as lucky as me to have powerful family traditions, how could you not think fondly of this time of year? So, I look forward to*



*programming our ‘Winter Holidays Concert’ every year. I really do.*

*But it’s not these memories that make this time important. What’s important is to help your students to grow, to provide an inclusive atmosphere in your community, and to create similarly powerful memories in the hearts of your students and their families.”*

Ted Scalzo is a veteran teacher of 36 years. Read his articles and bio on the [SmartMusic blog](#).

Would you welcome some choral-specific programming tips? Check out this related article by [Laura Vaughan](#).



# building community with your holiday concert

We wanted to do something special for last year's December concert. Among our goals was to increase attendance by attracting some new audience members. Things began to come together when we found an arrangement of Leroy Anderson's "A Christmas Festival" that included choral parts. Instead of asking our exceptional vocal department to join us for this big closer, we decided to invite members of several area church choirs.

## Recruitment

To get the ball rolling, we emailed area church choir leaders and explained our plans for the holiday concert. We shared our ideas for community building and indicated that we would name each participating church in the concert program, offering some exposure. We also emphasized the fun we'd share in performing together in our brand new auditorium.

The positive response we received from church leaders exceeded all expectations. Comments included:

- "We are a small church and to be able to sing in a large chorus is exciting."
- "I am looking forward to meeting members of other area churches."
- "It's a rare opportunity to be accompanied by an entire band in a large auditorium. Sign us up."

## Preparation

About a month before the concert, we sent the choral music to each choir director. We asked them to prepare their groups during their regular rehearsals. On the day of the concert, we had our bands and the choir performers come in an hour early to rehearse the piece all together.

The rehearsal went really well.

After the rehearsal we provided refreshments for choir members in the cafeteria so they could mingle and get to know each other. It was a chance for them to chat with people of like interests and "talk shop" while we reset the stage. We received a number of compliments on that opportunity alone. Folks kept saying they don't often get occasions like this and that they really enjoyed it.

## The Audience

The members of the choirs came to the auditorium for the performances of the two bands. Seats that usually remained empty were full. Augmenting our regular audience with the additional choir members (and their families) really made a difference. It was especially nice to have new people in our audience.

As an added bonus, these were music-loving listeners who could really appreciate the work the students had invested. While they might not have attended one of our concerts in the past, we opened that door for them.

## The Performance

After the two groups finished their portion of the concert, we combined our two bands for the grand finale. The members of the choirs surrounded the front of the stage. We projected a gentle snow on a screen behind the bands to set the mood. The excitement in the faces of the choir members was contagious. I sensed that many of them were brought back to their own public school years and the thrill of performing with friends in a large auditorium.

The resulting performance brought tears to our eyes. Not simply because of the sheer size of the group, or even the beauty of the sound. We were moved by the incredible number of connections that were made that day. Connections were made between members of different churches, and between community



members and school. We saw different religious denominations singing as one. We heard developing instrumentalists performing next to advanced players.

Seeing everyone together, from our youngest band student to a 92 year-old lifetime choir member, was overwhelming. The performance concluded with a standing ovation that lasted longer than any we have ever experienced.

We continued to receive accolades for the event for many weeks afterwards. Hopefully, many of our new friends will come back to enjoy our holiday concert this year. Part of the trick is to invite them!



Kevin Mead and Terrence Bacon are instrumental music teachers in New York's Churchville-Chili School District.

Read their article and bios on the [SmartMusic blog](#).

Additional community-building tips can also be found in this related post by [Glen Pohland](#).

# preparing students for the first concert of the year

Student preparation for the first concert of the year can be stressful. Every director, new or seasoned, feels the pressure to fully prepare the music and make it concert-ready. As the day of the concert approaches we'll occasionally find ourselves wide awake in the middle of the night, haunted that we've forgotten some crucial detail. Today I'd like to share a few tips, which I found successful in my concert preparation, to ease the stress and help you best prepare your students.

## Dress Code

While being sensitive to how quickly children grow, I asked parents to dress students appropriately. This meant, more or less, that they were to wear their Sunday best. Of course things have changed drastically over the years, so you may have to be more to the point. For example I might recommend that girls wear a dress or slacks and a blouse or sweater. Boys might wear slacks, such as khakis, a polo or dress shirt, and an optional tie. For both, hard-soled (or dress) shoes are preferred.

Even if you specify black pants and black shoes, do not assume that students will also arrive in black socks. Be very specific on what you expect to see, including sock color, if applicable. While limiting clothing colors to black and white can produce a pleasing, uniform appearance, for a holiday/winter concert, I might give the students a chance to dress more colorfully.

In a recent [post on preparing for contest](#), Laura Vaughan offers some tips that are also applicable for concert attire. Following her advice you might carry a supply of black socks, shoes, pants and dresses, as well as a sewing kit, to be prepared for any mishap. Many appropriate clothing items can be acquired inexpensively at second-hand stores.

In today's society, and in the interest of being politically correct, it may be

difficult to enforce a dress code. In some areas, jeans are considered acceptable "dress" clothes and I appreciated that parents may not be able to afford more. While I would typically be more lenient with younger grades, my older students were not allowed to perform if they arrived without appropriate attire. Use your best judgment, tread lightly when necessary, and make sure to cover all such policies in a written form of communication.

## Concert Behavior

I expected nothing but the best concert behavior from my students. This was made clear from day one. I asked my students to act professionally from the time they entered the stage to the end of the performance. This meant no waving or responding to people calling their names, no talking during any performance (whispering was allowed between pieces), and ensuring that all restroom needs were addressed before being seated.

I was also clear in my expectations of conduct by family members and friends. I would ask students to remind their guests that sporting events and concerts are very different activities, requiring different audience behavior! It irks me to attend a concert and see parents be disrespectful by yelling, using their phones, etc. When directors and students work hard to prepare the program it's vital that the entire audience listens to their accomplishments.

## Behavior Consequences

I controlled talking and inappropriate behavior by documenting any occurrence. Either I or another faculty member would write down student names. The next day I'd address conduct issues with a consequence, often a deduction of concert points. All performances were worth 100 points. I would make deductions for failure to attend, poor conduct, inappropriate attire, tardiness, as well as for arriving without your instrument, sheet music, or other required supplies.



### Adult Supervision

In situations where more than one group was performing, I made it a point to sit with my students. If this wasn't possible I would have an assistant or parent volunteer sit with them. In these situations, it's important to choose adults that know your expectations and will not hesitate to address any negative behaviors.

In a performance hall with limited space, I would have non-performing students wait in a nearby rehearsal room or classroom. Again, anytime you are unable to remain with the group, make certain they remain supervised.

### Other Preparation

The key to a successful performance is to preparing for every aspect. Start early and repeat often. Rehearsals are a great place to practice concert etiquette. This can include, but is not limited to:

- Posture
- Standing and sitting
- Taking a bow together
- Entering and leaving the performance site
- Remaining quiet between numbers

Of course, last but not least, rehearsals are also the place to prepare the music. I often found that Fridays were a great day to run through concert program material.

With planning and practice, your students can be very professional in their presentation, and your performance will be enjoyed by all.



Joseph Pappas is a veteran educator, composer, and publisher. Read his article and bio on the [SmartMusic blog](#).

You can find additional student preparation tips in a related post by [Asa Burk](#).

# creating a quick, inexpensive concert program

Putting on a successful concert means taking care of a lot of details. Obviously, preparing the music is most important (and comes with its own processes and challenges). Nevertheless, sometimes the logistics feel like the hard part. You have to enforce a dress code, make sure that students arrive on time, set-up and manage the facility, and more. What you don't have time to do is print a paper program.

## Why Bother?

Programs are worth the time and effort. A concert program demonstrates to students that a performance is an important formal event to be respected. They're part of the culture and ritual of concerts and parents will expect them. They also offer families a tangible keepsake to include in a scrapbook or memory box.

Programs have benefits for you as well. Looking for a short holiday piece for beginners to round out a concert? Look at what you programmed in years past. Obviously, repertoire selection requires more than just recycling old pieces, but with the passage of enough time including a classic title can be useful. Being able to reference old programs tells you exactly what was played.

## What Goes in a Program?

The vital elements of a program include:

- A title page with information about the concert setting
- A list of the pieces being played, along with their composers and arrangers
- A list of the members of the ensemble(s)
- Acknowledgments

Including a title page identifies the concert and improves the program design. Including a simple graphic can help identify the theme of the event (for a

holiday concert, for example). Be sure to include a time, date, and location. Finally, give your concert a title. "Metroville High School Winter Concert" is fine — this doesn't have to be rocket science.

The bulk of the program should tell the audience what they're about to hear. That means including the titles of each selection, the composers (and arrangers if applicable) and which ensemble is performing. In my experience, there are almost always multiple ensembles performing at a school concert, and the audience wants to know who is playing what. If there will be an intermission or changes to the staging, include those in the program as well.

Some style guidelines that have worked for me include:

- Italicize the song title, but not the composer
- Including the year a piece was composed is optional
- Including composer birth and death year is optional
- Include movement titles, even if you're only playing one movement
- Indent movement titles

Listing the performers offers a personal touch — Grandma loves seeing little Johnny's name in the program. Some programs leave this out, but I think it's important and always included it. In the interest of time and effort, I don't recommend sorting the students by instrument. An alphabetical list of the ensemble members is enough. I recommend copying and pasting from your official class roster to be sure that you don't misspell anyone's name.

Somewhere in the program, be sure to acknowledge and thank the school administration, staff, parents, any booster groups that support your band, and the entire music faculty. Of course, you (or your MC) will do this out loud at the concert as well, but thanking people twice never hurts.

## Making a Program Quickly

The biggest time-saving technique when creating a concert program is using a template. We've built one you can use in Word. [Download it here](#). This template incorporates other time-saving ideas as well. It prints on a single 8.5"x11" sheet of paper (though you'll need to be sure to set it up to print double-sided). By printing on one page, you don't need to staple anything. Because it's a standard size, you won't have to scrounge around for a particular type of paper in the copy room.

All that's required after printing is to fold the page in half. You can do this yourself (perhaps with a glass of wine) the night before or have every student fold two programs in class the day of the concert. It's a piece of bell work (or an exit slip) that takes less than a minute. If a student creates origami or airplanes instead of a properly folded program, explain that you'll be sure to make sure to save the airplane program for that student's parents so they can appreciate their student's work.

## Going the Extra Mile

The programs I've described so far are very simple, cheap and quick to produce. Often, that's exactly what ensemble directors need. If you want to take things to another level, here are some ideas to try:

- Use high-quality paper to improve the look and feel of the program. Test anything glossy ahead of time to make sure that it's still legible.
- List students by instrument and include soloists or principal players where applicable.
- Include program notes for the repertoire. Many directors leave these out of the program and have the MC describe the piece before it's played.
- Put your design skills to the test by making the cover graphic more intricate.

Some programs use advertising from local business and parents in the program as a way to fundraise. This isn't something I have experience with – I was always out to make quick, effective programs – but it can be very effective.

Whether you keep it simple or build a professionally-designed program, I wish you the best of luck on your concerts this year!



Ryan Sargent is an active music educator, performer, and MakeMusic's social media manager.

You can read his articles and bio on the [SmartMusic blog](#).





We hope you've enjoyed these tips for planning a successful holiday concert.  
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