

### **The Unique Attributes of a Collegiate Ensemble Director**

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As an aspiring college professor, there are a variety of positions one might consider for the future. Collegiate music faculty generally fall into three main categories: academic instructors, applied music instructors, and ensemble directors. Not only are these very different types of positions with radically different daily duties, but within each position, applications can vary greatly.

How, then, does a student make an informed decision about which jobs to apply for and what type of career they would most enjoy? One answer is to seek advice from knowledgeable faculty already in these positions as to the positive and negative aspects of every job and institution. This article attempts to aid in such a search by sharing the wisdom of six collegiate ensemble conductor/teachers and their insights into the different world their positions occupy:

1. Dr. David Vroman, Professor of Music, Director of Bands, and Chairperson for the Department of Music at Bradley University, Peoria, Illinois
2. Dr. John Jost, Retired Professor of Music and Director of Choral Activities at Bradley University, Peoria, Illinois
3. Steven D. Davis, Rose Ann Carr Millsap Missouri Distinguished Professor of Music, Director of Bands and Wind Ensembles at the University of Missouri-Kansas City
4. Dr. Joe Parisi, Professor of Instrumental Music Education and Associate Director of Bands at the University of Missouri-Kansas City
5. Dr. Ryan Board, Associate Professor II of Music and Conducting and Director of Choral Activities at Pepperdine University

6. Dr. Robert Olson, Professor and Director of Orchestras at the University of Missouri-Kansas City

The purpose of these interviews and research was to discover the similarities and differences in career positions of ensemble directors versus the positions of academic and applied faculty in collegiate music departments. What are the unique attributes of an ensemble conductor's job? In what ways do they function similarly and differently from other collegiate music faculty? What advice would established ensemble conductors have to share with a student looking forward to this position? While there are many different areas to cover in such a discussion, this article chooses to focus on the following ten:

- Recruiting
- Preparation Time
- Budget
- Collaboration & Community Connections
- "Limelight" Pressure
- Research Area
- Ensemble Teamwork
- Faculty Relationships
- Administrative Work
- Variety in the Position

As an introduction to the heart of the issue, here are the thoughts of Dr. David Vroman on the subject of the difference between his ensemble director position and that of academic and applied university faculty:

Let's start with what is the same. I have a syllabus, scheduled class meeting times, lesson/rehearsal plans, goals and objectives, texts (music), a system of evaluation/grades. The success of students depends on my ability to communicate.

The big difference at the University is that of performance. I take my class out to a public forum and display what it has learned on a regular basis. The second difference is that in any performance, it is OUR work that is judged by the listeners, not an individual performance or accomplishment as in other classes. Sure, there are individual differences in ability and performance, but our work is about how the

ensemble sounds as a whole.

Finally, as a result of these two differences, there is an esprit de corps that becomes a part of a successful ensemble that you might not see in an academic class or the applied studio. Students are engaged through active involvement, and the conductor/teacher focuses his or her involvement on the key elements of the music in front of him.<sup>1</sup>

### **Recruiting: Is it an Issue?**

All six interviewees agreed that recruiting for their ensembles was a prominent issue and that the quality of the ensemble depends, to a large degree, on the quality of its members. One collegiate band director gives this perspective: “Absolutely. I recruit both music majors and minors who have the potential and ability to impact my ensembles. At the university level, it is the only way to manage instrumentation. I look to a very large pool and invest lots of personal time to see a small portion of that group become enrolled at the university and then enroll in my ensemble.”<sup>2</sup> This recruiting pressure varies from the perspective of an academic teacher, as they are more often assessed on the level of their own work and less on the work of their students. Applied teachers depend on the quality of their studio and also have significant recruiting responsibilities.

Ensembles are typically some of the more visible parts of a conservatory or department of music. This visibility puts their directors in a unique position and provides both more and fewer opportunities to recruit. For instance, a band director might feel as though he could recruit beyond his own ensemble and gather promising students for all of the music department’s programs. An orchestral director, however, may believe that he has less recruiting potential because a great student studying performance is hoping to work with an excellent applied teacher, not necessarily to perform in an exceptional orchestra.

Beyond these larger issues, the conductors interviewed shared some insight into various recruiting methods. Almost all agree that a director should create a high-quality product and then make that product visible to a large audience. Performing at national, state, and regional conventions can greatly increase the audience base of the ensemble. Increased visibility as a conductor can be gained by adjudicating and working with All-State, All-Region, and

Festival ensembles.

Another common recruiting technique is to invite area groups to campus by hosting an Honor Band or Honor Choir weekend. Some of the best recruiting comes from teacher’s recommendations to their students as to which college institutions to attend. Lastly, graduate strong students who will then go out and be advocates for their program.

### **Preparatory Time: Same or Different?**

“Compared to a great academic instructor, I think my time is about the same. To those who are repeating their classes and lectures without any creativity or enthusiasm, I am putting in more time. One thing I enjoy about conducting an ensemble is that my curriculum (music) changes every semester. It keeps things fresh for everyone involved in the ensemble.”<sup>3</sup>

The largest and most obvious difference between professors in the academic, applied, and ensemble areas is the type and amount of preparation required. Accomplished ensemble directors are constantly preparing new music for their groups, typically on some type of large-scale rotational system to ensure quality literature that covers all major genres and styles. This means a large amount of new preparation every semester, every concert.

An academic instructor usually has a great deal of up-front preparation for a new course and then adjusts the syllabus each semester adding new or redefined course material as necessary. An applied instructor must learn a quantity of new music at first and then repeats a substantial amount of repertoire each semester for teaching purposes. Thus, ensemble directors typically work with larger amounts of new material each semester than do academic or applied faculty.

Preparation is similar for faculty across the music department as they develop a system and implement it consistently with any type of course. The difference comes in how the musical preparation changes in scope and proportion each semester and can provide a constant source of variety and creative stimulation. “[The preparation] is different;” states Dr. John Jost, “not as much time evaluating papers and projects, but working constantly with new material (not just repeating a syllabus with minor changes from year to year).”<sup>4</sup>

The following is one perspective on preparatory time from Steven D. Davis:

“I can only speak about my prep. The minimum amount of time I spend with a score is one hour per one minute of music. Thus, a 25-minute work requires a minimum of 25 hours of preparatory time. I study scores from 8:00 am–12:00 pm each day and am always studying scores for the next concert by the time the first rehearsal for the current concert takes place. Altogether, I prep around 100 pieces a year the same way.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Budget: More Difficult or Easier?**

“It depends on how the budget is handled. I have no set budget and have never been denied what I requested.”<sup>6</sup> This interesting quote comes from Dr. Joe Parisi, who notes that at times the ensemble director’s budget can be easier to handle versus another music faculty member’s budget. Unfortunately for most collegiate ensemble directors, this type of budgetary ease is not the norm.

According to the conductors interviewed for this project, oftentimes an ensemble director’s budget faces more demands from extensive use of manpower and natural resources. This includes such details as performance venues, equipment rental, contracting additional players, and the purchase of ensemble outfits and music.

For today’s wind ensemble, for instance, music is only available for rent and can cost up to \$2,000 per concert.<sup>7</sup> Due to all of the above factors, and many more, ensemble directors typically have larger budgets to manage than do other music faculty. “An outstanding college choir director must be both an outstanding administrator and an outstanding performer.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Collaboration: To Be or Not to Be**

It seems that a high point of their position for most collegiate ensemble directors is the great variety they find in their jobs, both from day to day and across a lifetime. One source of variety can be collaboration. For an ensemble director, this comes in many forms inside and outside of the music department and inside and outside of the university—from invitations to applied teachers for solos, to working with a local high school ensemble. These collaborative opportunities can both aid in positive relationships with fellow faculty members and provide excellent recruiting prospects.

One significant aspect of a collegiate ensemble director’s

position that can be enhanced by collaboration is community relations. Sometimes good collaborative opportunities can result in better community relations and performance venues for the ensemble that otherwise would have been closed.

Because ensembles are such a visible part of the music department, some directors feel a responsibility to cultivate an educated concert audience through collaboration. As stated by Dr. Ryan Board: “There is a current and general disassociation within society with the highly cultivated art forms. Our art forms do not create the immediate satisfaction the public wants. We have a greater challenge to connect with contemporary audiences.”<sup>9</sup> In a positive situation, an ensemble director can broaden the horizons of an audience and afford themselves greater creative license within a community at the same time.

Although most college directors enjoy collaboration and believe it to be a positive experience for their students, it can be a negative musical experience for groups that are always in demand. “Everybody wants a piece of the orchestra. We service the opera department, composition department, the concerto/aria folks, and the choral department! I have to try and find a balance. We only do 2½ concerts of our own each year; at best, I do 50% of the material I want to do. Ask an academic faculty member how much he would enjoy teaching a class in which he chooses only half of the material!”<sup>10</sup> Dr. Robert Olson.

### **The “Limelight” Pressure on a Conductor**

A collegiate conductor’s job is one that garners much attention from a great variety of people, including other faculty, administration, area professionals, and the community at large. By far, the majority of ensemble directors feel pressure in their position. “Sure, I feel pressure every day. The band and choir directors on any campus are some of the most ‘front and center’ people. Every single concert is an evaluation.”<sup>11</sup>

Conductors and their ensembles are being constantly evaluated, and the results of that “team effort” are very public, including featured performances at state and national conventions. While the director may not be wholly responsible for every sound emanating from the group, he or she is responsible for the complete product, which includes the performance of each individual.

It is surprising, then, to note that the conductors interviewed consistently felt more internal, rather than external,

pressure. To continue the quote from Professor Davis: “I do not feel as much pressure externally, however, as I do internally. I blame myself for any problem.”<sup>12</sup>

Although academic classroom teachers may be “on stage” when they teach as are ensemble directors, applied studio teachers are not.<sup>13</sup> Even when lecturing, a classroom instructor typically has fewer students at any given time than does an ensemble director. This means that a conductor is literally being evaluated by more students, more frequently, and then by the general public at concerts, than are academic and applied faculty.

### What about Research?

Depending on the college or university where a music faculty member is employed, there are varying requirements for a research component in a professor’s workload. Many institutions of higher learning consider performance as a music faculty member’s research. The amount of research required also varies by institution, but it seems that a fairly typical workload expectation is 40% teaching, 40% research/performance, and 20% service.

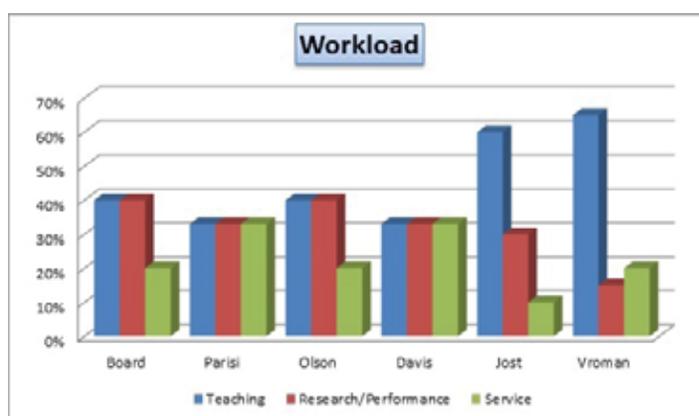
An institution’s mission statement will often tell a prospective candidate something about these expectations. A research institution, for example, will have greater expectations in that area than a performance or teaching institution. The latter will, in fact, most likely have a stronger expectation in the teaching area and less in research and service.

What, then, do most collegiate ensemble directors consider to be their primary source of research in their prescribed workload? “My primary scholarship is performance, but not at the University. To be scholarship, it has to be beyond the bounds of local performance. In my case this is presenting clinics, guest conducting, private instruction in conducting and horn, etc. These activities are the ones that also assist in building the ensemble program because it can be an integral part of recruiting strategies that are so important to what I do.”<sup>14</sup>

Scholarly activities vary widely for ensemble directors. Some have an emphasis on performance, which might include performing viola in the local symphony orchestra, or 20–25 concerts conducted each year. One professor plans and executes an international Mahler festival each summer as his research/performance component<sup>15</sup> and another plays trumpet in the faculty wind quintet.<sup>16</sup> Conductors with a research emphasis may write journal articles, give conference

presentations, or produce a CD with their group.

The following chart shows the professional workload of all six conductors interviewed for this article. The information appears in approximate percentage of their yearly work time spent in each area (all professors total 100%). Notice that the first four professors listed are employed at a performance institution, whereas the last two professors work at a teaching institution. It is also pertinent that professors Parisi and Davis serve on the most faculty committees of any of the interviewed professors.



### A Sense of Teamwork

In the article “Teaching Jazz: Practical Tips for the Classroom,” author J. Richard Dunscomb states that when working with an ensemble, creating an atmosphere of teamwork is essential,<sup>17</sup> a statement with which all of the interviewed collegiate ensemble directors agreed. Dr. John Jost’s answer exemplifies this ideal. “Absolutely. A choir of highly trained individuals is not a choir. Members must listen to one another and make a unified sound without losing their own personal sound. We work on this a lot in warm-up exercises, and it is a major goal of my rehearsals. Creating a positive, supportive, affirming atmosphere helps. Respect for students, humor, introducing the unexpected, admitting mistakes, and willingness to try crazy ideas helps.”<sup>18</sup>

Creating one unified team from students with a variety of backgrounds and previous experiences can be a challenge especially for ensemble conductors. Directors begin this process at the start of the year with extra care given to a student seating chart and syllabus. They often work to establish a consistent routine and break negative habits. Instrumental directors, for example, may carefully instill an expectation of coming to rehearsal with the music already learned.

The beginning of a new school year is the best time to

establish a personal connection between director and ensemble. Professor Davis takes a minimum of thirty minutes at the beginning of the first semester to meet with each ensemble member individually to create a personal relationship with them.<sup>19</sup> Dr. Parisi posts recordings of the upcoming music on the school's virtual classroom to allow students to connect with each work prior to the first rehearsal.<sup>20</sup>

Once established, maintaining this respectful relationship between student and conductor is vital to a sense of teamwork. Keep punitive matters in private and let students know immediately if their actions are not up to the standards of the group. Take a concerned approach and make the creative process about an exchange between director and ensemble rather than a dictatorship.

Lastly, the good conductor is always evaluating his or her communication skills. Many directors record their rehearsals not only to improve their gestures but also to evaluate their verbal communication. Look for efficient ways to communicate instructions in the least amount of time.

"The bottom line is that you could be an incredible musician, a genius in knowledge of pedagogy and literature, an expert in theoretical analysis, a master of gestures and have perfect pitch yet you cannot make an ensemble sound good because you can't communicate very well. You have to understand how organizational structures work and how your own personality and style must be displayed to achieve a sense of teamwork with an ensemble. I record my rehearsals not to just listen to my ensemble but also to listen to myself. What did I say and how did I say it that simply did not work? What did work? I listen to see what musical response I get from the ensemble to see if I was successful. I have to manage other people, and that means the first person I have to manage is myself."<sup>21</sup>

### Faculty Relations

"You never teach a colleague even when asked!"<sup>22</sup>

Faculty relationships are crucial for a successful college teaching career, and of all the collegiate ensemble director's many tasks, nurturing good relationships with colleagues can be the most difficult. Conductors are in a unique position within a school of music. They see more students and collaborate with more colleagues than do most other faculty members. For directors who depend on applied studios for their best students, there is a delicate balancing act between

the director's concerns and that of the applied faculty. All of these elements make good faculty relationships essential for any collegiate ensemble director.

"Generally other faculty are somewhat jealous of the popularity an ensemble director has. They don't experience the frustration and challenges that student performance offers, and they also don't get to experience the huge sweeping enthusiasm when things go right. I have to be sensitive to these feelings that they have. I have to communicate with them on a regular basis, and that communication needs to be 80% positive. I also hold realistic expectations; I look for insight into how students perform better, but I do not expect the studio teacher to be teaching students the ensemble music."<sup>23</sup>

The ensemble directors interviewed have at their disposal an impressive arsenal with which to improve faculty relations. First and foremost, directors must choose their battles carefully and watch where and when disagreements are discussed. The hallway, bathroom, or parking lot is no place to discuss students, nor should a director discuss one or more ensemble members with another student. If there is an overarching problem, address it privately with the applied studio teacher.

Many directors plan positive interactions by inviting other faculty to concerts and attending their events. Invite them to perform a solo or guest conduct a rehearsal, thank them publically for their work, acknowledge their achievements. Try to schedule concerts and tours carefully, taking into account other faculty schedules. The bottom line is to avoid conflict before it arises as much as possible.

### Administrative Details

The administrative details handled by a collegiate ensemble conductor are wide ranging. Bradley University's Dr. John Jost offers here a wonderful list for your consideration. "Recruiting, auditioning, evaluating, preparing syllabi, handouts, translations, scheduling, recommending scholarship amounts, choosing music (huge), ordering music, supervising student choral managers and librarians, finding accompanists, engaging guest artists and preparing payment forms for them, coordinating rehearsals with orchestra or other instrumentalists, preparing written programs, writing press releases, supervising publicity in general, planning and coordinating tours, ordering equipment, supervising recordings, auditioning choirs for festivals, planning and publiciz-

ing honor choirs, festivals, and clinics for high school choirs, and keeping track of budget.”<sup>24</sup>

Along with those activities, the ensemble director has other administrative tasks including: securing and setting up venues, choosing and distributing attire, student advising, obtaining additional equipment, contracting additional players, moving risers, networking with other leaders in the community and nationwide, instrument and music inventory, coaching and teaching, and essentially coordinating an entire department/program. It is common for collegiate ensemble directors to have far more administrative tasks than other music faculty. In Dr. Bob Olson’s words, the daily grind of details takes an enormous amount of time.<sup>25</sup>

### Conclusion

Although collegiate ensemble directors have an enormous amount of responsibility, they also have many positive aspects to their work. All of the interviewed conductors mentioned how variety in their work was an important positive aspect of their position. For a conductor, this can come in many guises: variety in literature, types of classes taught, lecture vs. ensemble preparation, and collaboration.

Thus, along with their many responsibilities, ensemble directors also experience a large cross-section of life in the music department, often wearing many hats and teaching a variety of courses. For many, this is a job they would not trade for the world.

We finish with the perspective of one collegiate ensemble director, Professor Steve D. Davis of the University of Missouri-Kansas City. “Ensemble directors become the face of the conservatory, interface with the public more, deal with more students, and have more evening commitments. The ensemble director has to be a performer and teacher. We are the culmination of all other coursework in the music department. The people that are great are involved 24/7. I don’t know one professional with a balanced life that is at the top. I came to realize that my balance point is work-a-holism; all really successful conductors are workaholics.”<sup>26</sup> If you are already a workaholic who loves students, enjoys variety, and does not mind administrative details, you are in the right profession.

### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> David Vroman, letter to the author, 24 March, 2009.
- <sup>2</sup> Vroman
- <sup>3</sup> Vroman
- <sup>4</sup> John Jost, letter to the author, 22 March, 2009.
- <sup>5</sup> Steve Davis, personal interview, 3 April, 2009.
- <sup>6</sup> Joseph Parisi, personal interview, 18 March, 2009.
- <sup>7</sup> Davis.
- <sup>8</sup> Jost.
- <sup>9</sup> Ryan Board, personal interview, 17 March, 2009.
- <sup>10</sup> Robert Olson, personal interview, 1 April, 2009.
- <sup>11</sup> Davis.
- <sup>12</sup> Davis.
- <sup>13</sup> Olson.
- <sup>14</sup> Vroman.
- <sup>15</sup> Olson.
- <sup>16</sup> Parisi.
- <sup>17</sup> J. Richard Dunscomb, “Teaching Jazz: Practical Tips for the Classroom.” *Down Beat – Jazz, Blues & Beyond* 69.9. (September 2002): 80.
- <sup>18</sup> Jost.
- <sup>19</sup> Davis.
- <sup>20</sup> Parisi.
- <sup>21</sup> Vroman.
- <sup>22</sup> Davis.
- <sup>23</sup> Vroman.
- <sup>24</sup> Jost.
- <sup>25</sup> Olson.
- <sup>26</sup> Davis.