

Creating a School Assembly Program

By Mark Shelton

“The grant that will allow our fine arts series to book your percussion quartet for an evening concert stipulates that the artist must also present an assembly program in a local elementary school. Can you do that?”

Hmmm. You have not set foot in an elementary school since you were in fifth grade. What goes into such a program?

Developing an arts-in-education assembly program can be well worth the effort.

Many musicians find that performing these programs are fun, artistically rewarding, and a good source of income. Since most assembly shows are booked for younger students rather than for high school, this article focuses on developing programming for elementary students.

While simply playing a concert can be acceptable, many sponsoring organizations prefer programs with an educational component. This is the main characteristic that distinguishes a performance from an arts-in-education program.

A good arts-in-education assembly program features an interesting balance of performance and information, entertainment and education. Percussionist and teacher Bob Bloom states, “When a performing or visual artist utilizes an art form as the medium to teach academic subject matter to students, that’s arts-in-education.” The academic subject matter can range from social studies to science to literature to music. The program may also address a topic that includes ties to multiple areas of the curriculum. Many programs have been developed that do not fit within a strict arts-in-education definition, but rather focus on developing positive behavior such as teamwork, a drug-free lifestyle, recycling, etc.

PLANNING THE PROGRAM

As you begin to plan your program, keep in mind that the standard length for school assembly programs is 45–50 minutes. This allows time for the students to be brought in from their classrooms, the program to take place, and the students to return to their classroom within a single one-hour class period. This



ELIZABETH SHOWALTER HP ARTS

length also works well with the attention span of an elementary student.

Your program should revolve around a main theme. This central point will provide the major learning objective and give continuity to the program, just as in a lesson plan. You need a theme that is narrow enough to be covered sufficiently in 45 minutes.

An examination of your current repertoire might suggest a theme. What do those pieces

have in common? Are there threads that link some or all the works? If a theme is evident in a portion of your repertoire, consider using those works and finding or composing other pieces to support that main idea.

While allowing your current repertoire to suggest a theme is the more organic approach, you can also decide on a central point that can be taught with your art form and find or compose repertoire that supports the concept. Perusing your state’s learning standards for various subjects studied by elementary students can be a source of inspiration. (These learning standards can usually be found at your state’s department of education website.)

The theme should be appropriate for the grade levels to which you are performing. Make sure that the theme is a part of the title of your program.

SELECTING MUSIC

The music in the program should relate directly to the theme while also being entertaining. Even if you have allowed your current repertoire to suggest a theme, scrutinize each piece to make sure there is a strong and obvious connection to that central point. Consider performing a short excerpt to demonstrate a point, rather than an entire eight-minute movement. If a certain aspect of the theme needs to be addressed and nothing in your repertoire demonstrates it clearly, compose a brief example.

As you make your choices, consider if any of the works could include audience participation.

Whether you are teaching body music, singing, or clapping rhythms, allowing students to “get into the act” can make for good teaching and a good change of pace for the program.

Plan audience participation that includes the entire audience. (One child playing a shaker on stage does not count as audience participation.) Seek to involve the students in activities in which the desired results are attainable but have some degree of challenge

and sophistication suitable to the age level. Clapping a 3:2 clave rhythm can be handled by most fourth-grade crowds, but the corresponding cascara rhythm will probably be too challenging for a large group of nine-year olds.

Take care that the technical and logistical demands of all the pieces can be met at 8:15 A.M. on a small cafetorium stage with one electrical outlet. (If you cannot perform a piece without warming up for 20 minutes and having theatrical lighting, don't program it.) Avoid titles that are inappropriate and/or controversial in a school setting.

Remember the attention span of a third grader. Is every piece of music capable of sustaining the interest of an eight-year-old?

After making your initial decisions, prepare 20–25 minutes of music. The other 50 percent of the show will consist of speaking and audience participation (and hopefully some applause). My preference leans toward six to eight pieces with an average length of three minutes per piece. (Think about the brevity of most pop music.)

Although the explanation of the theme will determine the order to some degree, also consider the program with the same criteria as with any concert: keys, tempo, instrumentation, contrasts, logistics, etc. I always program a strong opening number that can rally the audience into investing its attention. I prefer ending with something exciting. The beginning and conclusion of a school show should not include much *adagio* or *larghissimo*.

SPEAKING TO THE AUDIENCE

The next step is planning the speaking portions of the show. For many musicians, this is the most challenging part. Think about the point that you are explaining with each piece of music and plan exactly what you need to say. Writing it out will help you focus and hone your wording. Pay attention to your grammar. You are setting an example for the students *and* speaking to school teachers. Keep the speaking segments short and make the points obvious and clear. Unlike a classroom teacher who sees the students five days a week and can repeat material, you have but a moment to teach. Make your words count. Always use language that is grade/age appropriate.

In the show, you will probably use several words and terms that are unfamiliar to the audience. Take advantage of those teaching moments and give clear definitions to the students. Consider displaying the word on a sign, orally spelling the term, and/or having the audience repeat the word aloud.

If you do a lot of these presentations, you might consider preparing a PowerPoint or Keynote presentation on your laptop computer, but be forewarned that not every school will have the necessary projector, cables, or projection screens, so you might not always be able to use it. Check with the school in advance,

Involve the students in activities in which the desired results are attainable but have some degree of challenge and sophistication.

and even if they say they have everything you need, get there early enough to set it up and test it.

Avoid over-explaining and cluttering your point. Remember that the music will do part of the teaching.

Once you have written your script and begin to rehearse the show, you may find yourself rephrasing some points, but starting with a written “spiel” will lay a firm foundation and assist you in staying focused on the topic.

MAINTAINING INTEREST

Capturing and sustaining the attention of elementary students can be a challenge. In addition to your carefully chosen repertoire, expert playing, and carefully crafted educational discourse, consider the following suggestions to further hone your presentation:

- Start with the art. Avoid beginning the show with speaking. You are a musician; they expect music. Begin with some music that will capture their attention.
- Use this basic teaching format: Tell the audience early in the show what they are about to learn, teach it, and in your conclusion, give a recap (tell them what they've learned). It's a part of good teaching *and* (mark my words), many teachers will be impressed that you used this framework.
- Try to include some humor. Find a spot early in the program for some comedy. Laughter can put the audience at ease and help you to establish rapport.
- If there is more than one performer, make sure that all ensemble members speak during the program. This provides variety and helps to hold attention (and students want to know that all the people on stage are capable of talking).
- Avoid establishing a predictable “talk-perform-talk-perform” pattern. For example, you can finish playing a piece and, after applause, begin a new song, stop part way through, explain something, and then resume playing.
- You can quickly draw the eyes and ears of the crowd by breaking through the “fourth wall” and moving out into the audience to speak and/or play.
- Enthusiasm for your art should be contagious. Show your passion for the music and it can spread to the audience.

A well-received, meaningful, and fun arts-in-education show can be thrilling for both audience and artist. A “teaching artist” with

a well-conceived and rehearsed program can affect a room full of elementary students by conveying information, arousing interest, deepening appreciation, and provoking a few laughs—all in about 45 minutes.

Mark Shelton has presented hundreds of arts-in-education performances as a percussion soloist and as leader of the world music ensemble Tin Roof Tango. From the early days of his career as Visiting Artist at Coastal Carolina Community College to his current work as a soloist, clinician, sideman, and entrepreneur, Mark has created programs, products, and educational services for a variety of ages. A member of the PAS Interactive Drumming Committee, Mark was facilitator of the Friday Night Drum Circle at PASIC 2009. Mark's experience in contemporary praise and worship music is highlighted in the Gateway Create DVD series *Worship Team Director*. For more information, www.marksheltonmusic.com.

PN