

# Honour Bands: Why and How

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Many of my fondest musical memories are from my participation in various honour bands. I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to play with the National Youth Band of Canada, the National Concert Band (now the Canadian Wind Orchestra), the World of Winds in Norway and Germany, and the International Youth Wind Orchestra in Sweden.

I distinctly remember my first year with the National Youth Band of Canada, in 1998 in Vancouver, and how the hair stood up on the back of my neck during our opening performance. I had never played with such a talented group before, so the high level of music-making made a big impact. But there was also something special about how quickly students from across the county bonded in that environment. Looking around the stage during that concert and recognizing those bonds, the unified purpose and friendship made the musical journey even better. I can definitely point to the overall experience of that week, and specifically the opening concert, as one of the major factors influencing my decision to apply to university music programs the next fall.

Along with a huge up-side, students' participation in national or provincial honour bands also requires some sacrifices. There are application and registration fees, travel and food money, missed classes and rehearsals at school, and the need to reschedule or drop other commitments. For many students (and teachers), some of those issues may create enough resistance that they avoid even auditioning for honour groups. Factoring in the busy schedules of today's students, including extra-curricular activities, jobs, and volunteer work, such sacrifices can seem even more difficult to justify.

That said, I believe the experience provided by these fine programs warrants serious consideration and a concerted effort by both teachers and students to conquer the challenges. So, this article has two main focuses: the "why" and the "how" of participating in honour bands.

## **Musical Development**

From my perspective, the over-riding benefit from participating in honour groups is the high-quality learning experience. But the process of simply recording an audition, if taken seriously, can result in significant improvements in a student's playing. While some teachers encourage their students to record themselves regularly, many students lack the motivation to undertake critical recording work. The clear purpose associated with honour-band auditions is one way to provide that often-missing motivation.

I'll admit that my initial audition for the National Youth Band was the first time I ever recorded myself, listening critically for strengths and weaknesses, practicing what needed improvement, and repeating the process. I remember recording for hours in my high-school auditorium, and needing dozens of takes before I was satisfied with the final product. But I viewed the process as a challenge to sound my best, as opposed to being negatively critical, and it ended up being fun and rewarding. This approach also proved invaluable when I later prepared for university auditions and solo competitions.

While the recording process provided an opportunity to learn through my own efforts, the honour-band experience of learning from inspirational conductors, excellent peers, and virtuosic soloists was of incomparable value. The conductors I played under in honour-band settings were all excellent musicians: Christian Lindberg, Gary Hill, Glenn Price, Gillian MacKay, Mark Hopkins, Jeremy Brown, Gerald King, and Bobby Herriot. The soloists were equally impressive, and included Ole Edvard Antonsen, Alain Trudel, Daniel Doyon, Julia Nolan, and John Griffiths. It was inspiring to interact with world-class experts, to learn from their musicianship and work ethic, to experience their generosity, and to see their humanity. I think that the energy inherent in the youth-band experience brings out something extra-special in conductors and soloists, as well as the student participants.

Honour-band members learn perhaps even more from each other. I can well remember enviable strengths in the playing of my peers, both trumpeters and others, that I worked hard to mimic over the years. Some played effortlessly and had a silky smooth tone, while others had power and chops to burn. There were those with fluent jazzy inflections, and still others with impressively polished classical technique. Each of the five years I was principal trumpet of either the NYB or the NCB, I felt lucky to have that opportunity, given the quality of the other players in the section.

Many of my honour-band peers have gone on to pursue successful careers as performers and teachers, while other fine players never had that intention. The principal trumpeter of NYB in 1998, for instance, clearly loved music but he was aiming for a medical career. Regardless of anyone's career aspirations, for me the great thing about honour bands was how invested everyone was in the music. We all wanted to sound our best individually and collectively, and what resulted was superb.

## **Achievement and Motivation**

Earning a position in a provincial or national group of any kind looks good on any student's résumé, and honour bands are no exception. While this latter achievement can help a student be accepted to, and receive scholarships for, university music programs, it can also be a great résumé builder even for those not planning to pursue a career in music. Earning a spot in one of these bands is a testament to a student's dedication and work ethic, which can make a student appealing in both academic and

employment settings. Further, winning a competitive audition can provide the student with a genuine sense of achievement, while raising levels of both self-confidence and motivation.

### **Bringing it Back to School**

Any high-school student who successfully auditions for an honour band is likely a leader in the school-band program already. That being the case, it may be painful for the school's band director to lose him or her for a week to participate in the honour band. But the long-term benefits to the program can far outweigh losing that musician for a few rehearsals or even a concert.

Participation in a group like the NYB can transform a young musician because it can be a truly ear-opening event. Many students will never have played in an ensemble with the quality of musicianship, intonation, tone quality, and rhythm that is standard in honour bands. For most students, it is an unforgettable experience; for some, it may be the musical highlight of their lives.

When honour-band participants return to their school bands, the improvements they have made can rub off on others over time. For example, there will likely be changes in their approach to intonation and rhythm, which in turn will provide new standards for the rest of their section, and possibly for the band as a whole. They may also become stronger leaders in rehearsal etiquette, which could have positive outcomes in the efficient use of rehearsal time.

Outside of the rehearsal room, recognizing a student's achievement in winning a position in an honour group is something that both the student and the teacher should be proud of, and can provide great P. R. for a school-band program. Such a success might even help in obtaining more money from the administration and/or parent donations.

Finally, given an encouraging environment, one student earning the opportunity to play with an honour group can easily have a ripple effect on other students at the school, who will gain confidence from the success of one of their peers and practice harder to try to achieve similar results.

### **Networking and the Social Experience**

Through my honour-band experiences, I have met remarkable musicians from every province in Canada and from around the world. I still keep in touch with many of them, and have visited a few on my travels. For example, I spent a memorable week with a trumpeter friend while he was studying in Munich. I was able to observe lessons, attend concerts, and learn new practice techniques such as trading off with three players on fundamental exercises. On top of the musical elements, experiencing everyday German culture with the locals, and celebrating the World Cup (of soccer) with them, was very enjoyable.

In addition to networking with fellow students, honour bands present opportunities for participants to make connections with the conductors and soloists. Gillian MacKay and Glenn Price, in particular, had major impacts on my musical journey long after I played under them in the National Youth Band.

The bonding experiences that occur in honour-band settings are also unforgettable. The week normally consists of rehearsals, sectionals, and concerts, along with free time for sightseeing, jamming, and relaxing. In fact, my experiences with national honour bands were nothing less than musical utopias: like-minded individuals gathered in one location from all over the country with nothing to worry about other than preparing for, and performing in, a series of great concerts.

The positive energy was almost palpable, and was never quite replicated for me even in higher-caliber university ensembles. Unlike school ensembles, there was no grade attached to the outcome, no-one needed to participate to meet graduation requirements, and there were no outside distractions; music-making was the highest priority for members of the ensemble for the entire session.

### **Recording a Successful Audition**

If approached correctly, the process of preparing an audition recording provides an excellent opportunity for students to improve. The most important factor in maximizing the learning experience is for the student to use the feedback from the recording to influence practicing over a series of recording sessions. A reasonable goal would be to start recording at least a month before the submission deadline. The student should then listen critically to the result of the first recording session, and focus on a few things to fix over the next week before recording again. Repeating this process a handful of times will do wonders for the final product, as well as the student's sense of accomplishment.

While everyone hopes to improve continuously, some students peak during the spring concert and festival season, and may not be quite up to that standard again when audition recordings are due in the late fall. Jim Forde, the long-time manager of the National Youth Band and an absolute idol of many participants, repeatedly suggested recording the audition in May or June. Of course, students can always try to record even better auditions in the fall and submit the best one.

It should not be overlooked that the audio quality of the recording plays an important role in the overall impression a musician leaves with the committee. While it may seem unfair, adjudicators have no way of determining how much better a musician's tone quality would be with better recording equipment; so, they must judge the audition recording submitted exactly as it sounds. Technology is improving so rapidly that high-quality recording devices, such as the Zoom H2, are now available for under \$200. If neither the teacher nor the student has access to a good-quality device, it is worth asking around in

the music community to borrow one.

### **Scales**

Many students do not like practicing scales, but having full control over scales is incredibly important for a musician, and is valued highly on audition recordings. When I listen to auditions, the quality of the scales is the one aspect that sticks out the most to me; I find it easier to forgive small mistakes in the repertoire if the scales are solid, because I know that student has taken the time to learn the basics.

The three aspects of scales to focus on are rhythm, tone, and intonation. The rhythm needs to be absolutely steady with a subtle sense of pulse showing the intended metre. A trick for younger students is to try recording with a metronome silently flashing, as long as this does not become a crutch and the student realizes the importance of developing rhythmic independence.

The tone should be beautiful, sound easy, and be consistent across registers. A goal to strive for is to be able to play the scale ten times in a row without missing a note and with minimal tension. If this is challenging over multiple octaves, start with just one octave and build from there. Finally, poor intonation can unfortunately make the most beautiful tone sound rather sour. A great way to practice intonation is with a drone (and a tuner at first for further reinforcement).

I have my students start with long tones and experiment with purposely bending the note both slightly sharp and slightly flat in order to hear the “beats.” I recommend *Tuning Tactics* by Chase Sanborn but there are also free drones available on-line. Once the student can hear and manipulate the “beats,” they are ready to move on to slow scales and, eventually, faster scales against a drone.

Beyond the above basics, auditions are even more impressive with contrasting dynamics and articulations on various scales, unless otherwise specified in the audition requirements. Speed is also great but accuracy is more important. I can’t stress enough the importance of obtaining virtually perfect scales on the recording – use as many takes as necessary! When I was preparing my first audition for NYB, I recorded each scale more than twenty times over the course of a few days, and that was after plenty of advance practice.

### **Repertoire**

For the best success in the audition, repertoire the student can play well should be selected. Try to include technical skills that are not new to the student so the performance can flow naturally and musically. That said, hearing a student conquer challenging repertoire is, of course, always impressive. One solution may be to practice extra material that includes a difficult selection as a fun challenge in addition to contrasting selections that the student can already handle. After some hard work and a couple of recording sessions, it should be possible to narrow down the repertoire, if desired. The final selections should show variety in

characteristics such as style, dynamics, articulation, velocity, range, and musicianship. It would be advisable to have a teacher listen to the recording at various stages to provide guidance throughout the process.

### **Fund-raising**

One hopes that all the hard work preparing an audition recording pays off and the student is offered a seat in the honour band. At that point, money can become a major issue for many families but I would encourage students to attempt fund-raising before declining the opportunity. I know many students who have obtained significant amounts of money through donations, grants, scholarships, and fund-raising sales. Though such activity is typically more challenging at the high-school level, universities often have travel funds available through applications to the student union and/or music department.

If no money is available through the school, local businesses are sometimes interested in supporting talented students who are trying to participate in national-level undertakings. It is best to approach them with a polished proposal including: a description of the experience and why it is important to the student, the student’s musical résumé, a list of expenses, other sources of funding, and how the student plans to recognize the business’s donation. A similar approach could be used to raise money from family friends and relatives, with perhaps the additional promise of providing a recording of the group if the donation is large enough.

Other options include contacting your city and/or province to inquire about grants or scholarships. These funds are likely very difficult to obtain in today’s economic climate, but I was fortunate to obtain a modest level of support from the city of London in the late 1990s. Finally, it would be worth checking with your provincial band association to see if it has any funds available for deserving students, and for further advice on obtaining funding otherwise.

### **Conclusion**

I am indebted to numerous people and organizations that have supported me in my musical career, but the National Youth Band of Canada, and honour bands in general, are near the top of my list. I developed a great deal musically and personally through these experiences, and cannot imagine I would be where I am today without those experiences. I hope that more and more students are informed about the quality of these opportunities, and are inspired to work hard on audition recordings, which can spark musical growth and value regardless of the result. I am confident that students fortunate enough to be selected and able to participate will have wonderful musical experiences and cherish those memories for the rest of their lives.

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Mount Allison University. He has performed in Canada, the USA, Europe, and China, and is active as an adjudicator and clinician. His honour-band experiences include the International Youth Wind Orchestra, the World of Winds, four years with the National Youth Band of Canada (three as principal trumpet), and two years as principal trumpet of the National Concert Band.

