

Better Music Every Year

With 700 Band Students at Lakota West H.S.

An Interview with Greg Snyder

By James M. Rohner

Greg Snyder is exuberant because the top band at Lakota West High School in West Chester, Ohio was invited to perform at the Midwest Clinic a second time. This spring four bands at this school earned top ratings at the state contest, and Snyder recently became one of the few school directors to be inducted into the American Bandmasters Association. In the 18 years Snyder has taught in this suburb of Cincinnati the band program has increased from 100 to more than 700 students. In this period the district itself has grown dramatically and nine years ago was split into two high schools and a freshman campus. The Lakota West band program includes six bands, four jazz ensembles, and many

chamber groups. Snyder studied under Mark Kelly at Bowling Green University and received a master's from VanderCook College of Music.

What have you learned from your first Midwest appearance in 2000 about how to prepare for this performance?

This time I feel less stress in much the same way that there is less anxiety about the birth of a second child. The event is still exciting, but I know more about what to expect. My oldest son was one of the graduating seniors who helped us earn the Midwest invitation, and my youngest son will be one of the students who performs in Chicago.

Snyder directing while his son, Alex, performs a concerto with the Symphonic Winds





However, the method for reserving music has changed since 2000 and it is done entirely online. Beginning at 10:00 a.m. on May 2 there was a race to reserve pieces on the list, and I lost out on several works by just a few minutes because my computer wasn't fast enough. We decided not to commission a work for this performance as we did in 2000 because the experience was a little too nerve-racking. Besides music I chose from the restricted list, I am still looking for a piece that features a woodwind quintet with the band. There are five graduates of Lakota West who became professional musicians and are willing to play with us in Chicago. Preparation for the Midwest is a juggling act of many variables, but picking music is a blast. There is so much to choose from that I feel like a kid in a candy store.

We won't hold any rehearsals in June or July, and the marching season begins in August. Concert band rehearsals will start on the first day of classes. I have scheduled some outstanding conductors to work with the band this fall, including Robert Sheldon and Barry Kopetz. Before going to Chicago we will play several concerts at local universities to gain experience.

The most important thing I learned from the trip in 2000 is to focus on making this the trip of a lifetime for students. Among those who made the trip in 2000, almost 20 became teachers or professional players. I often wonder how much the power of the Midwest experience might have pulled students toward a career in music. Afterwards every student wrote an essay about the trip, and whenever I feel discouraged I read some of these essays for relief. One student wrote that he did not know how many people to expect at the Midwest performance and was awed by playing for a sea of people.

How busy a concert schedule do you maintain each year?

We usually give four concerts and perform at the district and state contests. With so many ensembles at the school we hold both 7:00 p.m. and 8:15 concerts on one night, but the freshman ensembles perform on a different night. There are standing-room-only crowds of about 700 people at our concerts, which are held in a relatively small auditorium.

My goal is to choose interesting and educational music that students will like and enjoy. There is so much trite music available that I frequently use C.D.s and the internet to sort through the mountain of music and look for good music that students can really sink their teeth into. I am one of the dying breed of directors who are enthusiasts for marches, and I will include a march on almost every concert. Concert programming should be a combination of music that the audience will want to hear but students can learn from and play well.

Our spring concerts often include such lighter works as Donald Hunsberger's arrangement of *Star Wars*. For the senior concerto contest we performed *Rhapsody in Blue* and Rimsky-Korsakov's trombone concerto. The crowds flock to the spring concert to hear lighter works and the final performances by graduating seniors.

What is your approach to rehearsing and performing during marching season?

We start each August with a week of marching rehearsals from 7:00 a.m. to noon and leave for band camp the next week with 300 students and an entourage of parents. Students love to hate the band camp, but the camaraderie we build during those hot August days lasts through the marching season and beyond. We motivate students to work hard by reminding them that marching band becomes more fun as they improve.

During the school year the marching band rehearses three times a week from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. We develop a pregame show of patriotic tunes and follow this with a fixed competition show. We try to avoid boring the halftime crowds with the same show all season. Our halftime shows are modifications of the competition show. We will use drill charts from our competition show and set them with different music each week. Each year one halftime show includes the freshman musicians, who only perform with the marching band for this show. We will have 500 musicians on the field for that night. At the end of the marching season the show spotlights the graduating seniors. Unlike bands that choose either to compete or give halftime shows, we try to do both well.

Certainly marching band doesn't dominate the band program. The concert band is the heart of everything we do. I firmly believe that a better

concert band contributes to improved marching shows but that too many directors focus excessively on a complex drill and neglect the basic musical skills that will last a lifetime.

Where does chamber music fit in with the band program?

In my early days I was a control freak and didn't want to waste rehearsal time on chamber groups. I gradually realized that the time in small ensembles pays dividends tenfold. Now every student plays in a small ensemble that selects music during the summer. Every Wednesday is devoted to chamber ensemble rehearsals or to sectionals. The top band meets every day for 90 minutes and on Wednesdays the woodwind ensembles will meet for the first half of the period while the brass have a sectional rehearsal. For the second half of the period the brass and woodwinds switch. Every small ensemble will perform somewhere in the community every nine weeks. Nursing homes, churches, and schools regularly call to ask for a group to play for them. Besides the experience students gain, these performances develop community support for the music program.

How much do you work with the junior high programs that are the source of new students for the high school bands?

Our success is a credit to the team teaching that begins in the sixth grade band. The junior high directors are terrific and send about 175 freshmen to the high school program every year. The high

school directors visit the junior highs regularly and keep open lines of communication with the directors there. All the junior high directors are part of the high school marching band staff, so we become friends by spending time together.

For many years we have held a week-long summer band camp for junior high students. All of the Lakota directors teach this camp, which is a voluntary event for students with sessions that run from 9:00-12:00 each day for a week. The seventh graders rehearse for 45 minutes as a full band while the eighth graders hold sectionals with the junior high directors. The director at the other high school in the district and I alternate conducting times so students get to know us. At the end of the week we give a concert on Friday night for parents. The result is that both parents and students develop a lasting enthusiasm for the program.

What fundraising projects have been the most profitable for the band?

Our boosters recently raised \$8,000 with a pancake breakfast at which all of the jazz bands performed. We raised \$18,000 from donations to the uniform fund. Although fundraising is the part of this job that I like least, every year the parents and students rise to the occasion and make it a success. Some families prefer to write a check and bypass the fundraising altogether. For the trip to Hawaii in 2005, the cost was \$1,800 per person and nearly every student went. Some students hustled with summer jobs to earn the fee for what turned out to be an incredible trip.



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What type of school schedule does your school have?

We are on a modified block schedule. On Monday, Tuesday, and Friday we have a straight seven-period day. On Wednesday there are only periods 2, 4, 5, and 6 and on Thursdays there are periods 1, 3, 5, and 7. Period 5, which meets every day, is the lunch period and also when the top band meets. Most students have 30 minutes for lunch, the study hall for 30 minutes, and then a class for an hour, but students in this band do not have a study hall; instead they meet for almost 90 minutes of band every day of the week. I see students in the other bands for 45 minutes three days a week and for 90 minutes one day a week. We have to work hard to defend rehearsal time for our ensembles. It never gets any easier.

How much support does the band receive from administrators and the community?

The school superintendent went to the Midwest with us in 2000 and still raves about the trip. A principal once declared that the bands are the most successful program at Lakota. Still, many in our community are more excited about sports than music. We have some difficulty getting the local press to write about our successes at state contests or even about the invitation to the Midwest Clinic. They seem more willing to write about bad news than about success stories. Fortunately we play for the love of music not for the recognition.

What methods work best to maintain discipline in a program this large?

We distribute a handbook at the start of the year and have few discipline problems. I used to think all students could be saved and turned into great musicians, but over the last 10 years I discovered that enrollment actually increases when some of the less-motivated students are allowed to quit. With only students who really want to work at music, the band enrollment has grown even faster. We weed out some freshman students who do not want to work to improve and overall we do a good job of evaluating the work ethic of each student. Someone who does not show up for a concert is not

with us much longer. Even with a large program we still make time for weekly playing tests during sectionals, and this tells us who is working hard.

All students in the top band take private lessons, as do about half of the players in the other ensembles. In the past we automatically admitted students into the top band who earned a top rating at a contest, but so many flutes, trumpets, and saxophones now reach that level that we cannot take them all. We also encourage participation in honor bands and have 13 students in the all-state band and many participants in college-sponsored honor bands.

I am particularly proud of the many seniors in our second and third bands who continued to work hard through all four years. These students may not take private lessons or practice enough to make the top group, but they make good music and have benefited from playing in our ensembles. Band does not exist solely to teach music. We also teach lifelong skills, a love of music, dedication, and discipline.

How has listening to other bands and bringing in guest conductors improved your program?

Directors can be great musicians but be unable to relate to and teach students well. They also need to have a clear concept of the sound they want to hear and work with students to create this sound. In 2000 I was so proud that my top band had earned the invitation to play at the Midwest until I heard Donald Hunsberger conduct *Star Wars* with the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music Wind Symphony. I was so impressed with the sounds he drew out of the groups as a guest conductor that when I came into rehearsal my top band they sounded like sixth graders. I was disheartened for a moment.

After I considered that they were musicians at a different level I realized that listening to other groups in concert or on recordings is essential. Too many directors hear the sounds of another group but do not pay attention to the details of performance. As an adjudicator I hear so many poor tones or programming choices. Directors are foolish to choose certain pieces simply because they like them or want to prove that their ensemble can play such difficult works.

Directors get in ruts because they never invite others in to work with their band. We regularly have

outstanding directors work with our bands. We conducted a phone interview with David Gillingham about *Council Oak*, which we were playing. These guests come in for all of our bands not just the top band. When I am at state contests, I often hear a band I think I could improve in a limited amount of time. I am always learning from people; anybody who claims to know it all is certainly wrong.

Too many directors are afraid to hurt the feelings of students and tolerate poor playing. I will often go down the line and ask several players in a row to play a part for the whole band even though students hate this. I used this approach recently with a freshman band and two girls freaked out. One of them came back the next day and said, "Mr. Snyder, I didn't play this part well for you yesterday, but I spent hours practicing last night. Could I play it again for you?" This is the attitude I hoped for.

As a band parent I understand the benefits of playing in a program with high standards. I am even more proud to be a band director than I was before my sons joined the band because I have seen how much it has helped them to grow up. It is not always easy for a child to have his father on the podium, but my son adjusted and has decided to major in music. I am proud of him. Sometimes people comment that we have it made at Lakota West, but I well know that success is not automatic. I previously taught at a school that has not earned a top rating at state contest since I left 19 years ago. Children are the same everywhere, but our skills and expectations affect how much they accomplish.

How do you teach fundamentals in a rehearsal?

We work on the circle of fourths and all 12 major scales during the freshman year. In every rehearsal students in grades 9 through 12 play these in varied scale patterns and degrees. Chorale books are standard in all bands and rehearsals begin with different rhythmic exercises. In a 90-minute rehearsal the top band may spend 20 minutes tuning and warming up, but with other groups this may be only 10 minutes of the 45-minute period.

What inspired you to become a band director?

As a high school junior I traveled to Europe with the Band of America and decided during the trip that I wanted to conduct bands for the rest of my life. The audiences in Europe were overjoyed with our playing, and this is a powerful influence on a teenager to experience such a response in a strange country. That was my epiphany. I couldn't have done any of this without my faith in God. I look at music as my ministry and try to be an inspiration for students.

I played trumpet in high school and switched to horn. For the Bowling Green audition I played both. I was a mediocre trumpet player, but they



needed horns so I played horn. I worked very hard to improve, but I certainly am not an outstanding horn player. I do have a passion for music and I never doubted that this is what I want to do.

How prepared did you feel in your first years of teaching?

I went to Bowling Green State University and studied under Mark Kelly and felt well-prepared to teach. I taught junior high for five years with another director who was a master teacher and a great friend. He used to say, "Don't let your highs get too high and your lows too low." He encouraged me to set high standards for musicianship and tone and never settle for less.

The key to great teaching is passion, but I do not know if that can be taught. Some directors are great musicians but not as good on the podium because music came too easily to them. Because I wasn't the greatest musician in the world but worked hard, I can relate to the students more about the effort necessary for good performances. I always loved band but was never an all-star. I often say there are several types of students including the natural musician who hardly ever practices and the student who is less talented but works hard. My favorite students are those who are naturally talented and work hard.

What lessons have you learned over the course of your career?

I have learned that I do not have to do it all. Students can take responsibility in many more ways than we expect, running their own sectionals and chamber groups. Certainly they need guidance but older kids in particular can accomplish much of the work on their own and the more responsibility you give to students the more they are going to step up. At this stage in my career I still like having all my ducks in a row, but no longer feel the need to control everything. □