

Touring with Your Community Band: Why?

~ Brian Clissold

I had the pleasure of hosting Gail Brechting and the West Michigan Concert WINDS for their recent performances in Chicago and New York (see “A Trip of a Lifetime: The West Michigan Concert Winds Play Carnegie Hall” in the February 2018 *ACB Journal*). My background includes participation in more than 100 concert tours as a singer, player, conductor, tour guide, or some combination of several of these roles. My conducting career has blessed me with more than 20 years of community music making, having served volunteer choral and instrumental organizations for the vast majority of those two decades.

To see if traveling with your ensemble might be a worthwhile endeavor, you should first spend some quality time with your organization’s mission statement. Having read many such statements, and helped to write several, I imagine words like “community”, “engage”, “opportunity”, “artistic excellence” and “educational” appear in yours. All challenges and opportunities must be mission-based. Who are we? Who do we represent? What do we offer and to whom? Why is our organization important? And, the toughest one for me, “who are we NOT?” The topic of performance travel must also be approached this way. How does a tour to Ireland, China, a different region of the U.S., a major concert venue, etc. further our mission? Will this experience help us remain true to ourselves and to our community, or is it a distraction from our core mission?

I am firmly and unapologetically biased towards the idea that the vast majority of community music organizations should include group travel in what they offer. I am also very aware that it might not be the right fit for all. What’s most important is that there is unity in the decision to pursue such opportunities. Board members, staff, and members need to agree that such a venture should be a priority.

Continuing to focus on connecting your performance travel opportunity with your mission, it is vital that you understand the various different options that are available, which is the best fit, and why. Some options include performing at a conference (ACB, Midwest Clinic, state music conference), traveling to a city/country/region and performing in notable venues (cathedrals or halls in Italy, Ireland, etc.), educational experiences that include some kind of clinic or workshop with a reputable guest conductor, a performance in a major venue (Carnegie Hall, The Kennedy Center).

In addition to advancing your organization’s mission, performance travel can be key to building community, achieving a higher level of artistry, retention of members, recruitment of new members, and increased publicity/visibility/notoriety for your ensemble.

I rank “building community” at the very top of the list for all group travel, but most especially for community music ensembles. We can offer social gatherings, retreats with bonding activities, and short “run-out” performances in nearby towns. But there is simply

no replacement for members traveling together, experiencing new cultures, foods, attractions, and performance opportunities. The time spent getting to know one another in rehearsals leading up to the tour, traveling on the bus and/or airplane together, new friends made while exploring museums and landmarks...it’s priceless, and there is no substitute.

The idea of “building community” reaches well beyond the music organization itself. As you prepare for this venture, get the town behind you! Publicize your upcoming trip far and wide! It can boost concert attendance and connect you with businesses and local officials. Use this opportunity to raise money for the trip for the organization itself while heightening the profile of the ensemble and conductor.

In the process, your musical community will extend well beyond the players themselves. Sharing meaningful musical and social experiences together, all over the world, will create a bond that extends to family members and lasts well beyond any singular trip.

Performance travel is a means to achieving new levels of artistry. Knowing that you are going to perform in a historically significant place (preparing British brass band music for your tour to England, or rehearsing to perform *The Hippodrome March* at Carnegie Hall) is sure to raise the performance level of your ensemble. You may hold additional rehearsals preceding the tour. There will undoubtedly be a more focused approach to rehearsals and individual practice time among your members. I have even found that my own preparation and rehearsal astyle was more efficient and effective when preparing for tour performances. I mean, who wants to forget what meter he’s in while conducting in a mass at St. Peter’s Basilica?? Your ensemble will rehearse better, perform better, and even return as stronger musicians. This increases exponentially if your tour includes a workshop or clinic of some kind.



The author with his ensemble at St. Peter's Basilica

... Touring with your band

Improving artistry can be directly linked retention and recruitment of members. These are somewhat self-explanatory, but without exception, every time I announced a performance tour for one of my ensembles, new members (often some very strong musicians) were brought on board because of the excitement. Other musicians who had been thinking that they just didn't quite have the time to commit anymore decided to stay, and later told me how glad they were that they did.

Increasing the visibility of your organization is a solid reason to consider performance travel. Now more than ever, people have a myriad of choices as to how to invest their time, talents, and treasures. We are busier than ever. Our *kids* are busier than ever. I suspect that there are quite a few musicians in your community that don't even know you exist. There are others that may know you're out there but don't fully appreciate all that you have to offer. The publicity you gain from announcing and promoting an exciting tour helps elevate the visibility of your band and gives you something new and different to share.

Finally, it almost goes without saying, that performance tours are FUN! Zany things happen on any tour, acquaintances become friends, friends become extended family, and folks meet new friends from all over the world.

I will submit that the "how" factor here should be a separate article or two entirely: Logistics, Funding, Planning, Timing, and

Repertoire choices are all critical components to a successful tour. Ponder the "why" first. Once you've answered that, then you can work to make a performance tour a reality for your community ensemble.



Gail Brechting conducting the West Michigan WINDS at Carnegie Hall

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