**Prism Concerts: *A Quick Start Guide***

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*Note:* This document is designed to be helpful and functional, with *brevity* in mind to save your valuable time – this is a greatly condensed version of my article, “***New Light On A Prism: The Concert for All Reasons***,” published in Music Educators Journal, Volume 90, Issue 4, March 2004.

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For more informational, read the full article and/or feel free to contact me.

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# **An Overview – *What is a Prism Concert?***

The Prism Concert *concept* is commonly attributed to Donald Hunsberger and Gustav Meier, who introduced it at the Eastman School of Music in 1975. In its most basic state, this unique format features different styles of music performed by a wide variety of types and sizes of ensembles, as well as soloists. *Much like a prism breaks light into its component parts, the Prism Concert breaks the department into its musical performance components*. The concert (which may also include artwork, acting, dance and other non-musical elements) becomes a collage of soloists, duets, trios, other chamber groups, and full-sized ensembles. The music is continuous; each performance *‘*morphs’ – *musically* and *dramatically* (with isolation via lighting) – to deliver the listener’s attention to the next one. Ideally, there are no interruptions from applause or staging concerns, and the entire venue is utilized, rather than just the stage.

The *audience* becomes an important factor in the success of a Prism Concert, so it is helpful to train them to remain silent, holding their enthusiasm and applause until the very end of the concert. To do so, consider projecting a carefully designed display on the screen, or provide each concertgoer with a written paragraph on the printed Program. For a more effective experience, however, I recommend delivering a brief pre-concert speech (perhaps coined a “*prismlogue*”) to instruct the audience about all aspects of the concert. Describe the basic format, which also includes the need to keep hands and feet out of the aisles because performers often travel in darkness. Ask them to help meet the goal of a seamless musical experience by *not applauding* after each “act” and, of course, by turning off their devices and staying seated until the very end of the concert. To help in this training session, I also recommend providing an exciting *Warm-up Act,* which might be only 15-30 seconds in length, and could even feature the performance skills of one of the teachers.

For example: during a pre-concert speech, the Speaker’s lights go dark, replaced instead by a single spotlight on a well-liked Student Teacher, who plays a very brief but highly-skilled jazz improvisation. The audience – wont to clap – must be interrupted quickly by the Speaker, who continues: *“Ah, but a most important part of* your *role as the audience tonight is to remain silent,”* followed by any other final instructions.

The entire event can be distilled to this brief blueprint:

**5 minutes:** Pre-Concert Lecture or projected/printed instructions, and a possible ‘warm-up’ act

**+/- 60 min:**  The Prism Concert, with numerous varied performances using all spaces (Stage, pit, perimeter, inner aisles, balcony, stairway, etc.). Consider a gradual trajectory from soloists and smaller groups toward larger ensembles, and perhaps a “grand finale” with the entire Department involved.

**2-5 min:** “Bows” and personnel recognitions (remember the crew!), perhaps like the end of a Musical

NOTE: With careful and methodical *planning,* a single musician *can* participate in several different performances, even at different locations in the venue. For example, “high-achiever Sarah” *can* successfully play Tenor Sax in the Jazz Band, and she can sing in the Mixed Chorus, perform a Piano solo, and play Clarinet in the Band, Wind Ensemble, and Clarinet Choir, all on the same concert.

# **Why choose a Prism Concert? – *Common problems and complaints in school concerts***

A Prism Concert can eliminate, control, or improve many of the problems common to music educators. Perhaps you or your colleagues have experiences one or more of these issues:

* ***The audience complains that Concerts are too long***
* ***Fewer people attend our Concerts than we’d like***
* ***Audience members leave when their children are done***
* ***Audiences display improper concert etiquette***
* ***The in-school community doesn’t attend our Concerts (peers, teachers, staff, administrators)***

# **How a Prism Concert can solve those problems … and *improve your program!***

* ***“Concerts are too long” –*** A Prism Concert’s length is completely controlled by organizers, and there is no lost time due to staging or student changeovers
  + Teachers/Organizers determine the exact length by choosing to include more/fewer acts
  + Setups are established before the concert. All equipment is organized precisely in its own space; there be slight alterations, but that work occurs *during* the performances
  + The ‘sneaky’ nature of the work enhances the enjoyment for performers/audience (students perform silent staging changes, and travel from one space to another)
* ***Fewer people attend our Concerts than we’d like –*** A Prism Concert is a *novelty* that draws new listeners – the audiences will come back
  + Prism Concert = large numbers = large groups = a larger audience
  + Each “act” brings its own set of parents, friends and other supporters.
  + We can include ancillary groups in the line-up to further increase the audience size
* ***Audience members leave when their children are done –*** Prism Concerts are short, fast-paced, and have no breaks; the audience will stay for entire concert, happily.
* The Prism format has a supercharged entertainment value – people *want* to stay
* The Concert takes place in mostly darkness – it is difficult (or uncomfortable) for audience members to leave
* Because performances use the perimeter and aisles of the space, at some point all audience members will be close to the action
* ***Audiences display improper concert etiquette.***
  + Use the pre-concert discussion to impart reminders about accepted etiquette
  + Use that time to *train* audience members to avoid applause between acts.
  + Small-group performances will encourage (‘force’?) audience members to stay quiet
  + The shorter format allows for better maintenance of attention
  + Theatrical (near-dark) lighting discourages people from using illuminated devices
  + Concert Etiquette among audience members will be an ongoing education – your suggestions will stay fresh and should carry over to traditional concerts.
* ***The in-school community doesn’t attend our Concerts regularly*** – By fostering involvement from other groups in the school, we can include more people which, in turn, creates a larger audience. Extra participation can be cultivated from groups including …
  + Your own music students, used in novel ways (as composers, conductors, or score-readers to assist lighting crew)
  + The Art Department – programs; artwork displays before/after or during the Concert (e.g. a slideshow of Impressionistic works to accompany music by Debussy); posters; backdrops
  + Dance groups or individuals to featured alone, or in conjunction with a musical performance
  + Forensics (debate) Club members can provide narration or spoken roles
  + Technology students – lighting; sound reinforcement; multimedia roles
  + Video Production classes – make/edit commemorative videos for afterward; make accompanimental videos to use during the Concert; provide a live-stream feed of the performance to the internet, or to an adjacent room for student performers to follow the concert; project close-up video of soloists onto a large screen in the concert theater itself
  + Home & Careers classes – research/suggest/create period costumes
  + Student Council or other clubs – serve as ushers, stage crew, or performance guides
  + Faculty members, community music groups, local professional musicians, or other schools – this is an outstanding forum for collaborative efforts. Note: this concert format is also a wonderful vehicle for *inclusion* efforts – everyone has a place to be successful

**Other considerations not mentioned yet:**

* ***Students sometimes lack true ownership*** *– the planning and execution details go to directors and officers.* In a Prism Concert, many tasks can be assigned to groups/committees/students. Students *practice* more, especially those who will perform featured acts. Since the students are exposed and responsible for the success of their act, the details become more important to them. NOTE: Much of a traditional Prism Concert is performed without a Conductor.
* ***The most outstanding performers often don’t get challenged****, and they rarely get to be recognized. Also, there’s not enough time for soloists/ensembles on our Concerts, although we try to focus on chamber music.* 
  + We use the average performance ability to choose literature for the large ensembles, so it’s common for the top performers to feel “bored” while less-accomplished players are frustrated
  + The Prism format allows soloists and ensembles to choose repertoire that *interests* and *challenges* them.
  + Since the smaller acts perform a large percentage of the Prism Concert, the large ensembles are under less stress – Sometimes the major ensembles prepare just *one* piece each.
* ***We often run out of rehearsal time; we’re stressed as the concert date approaches.***
  + Large groups (e.g. the band, the wind ensemble, the jazz band) may only have to prepare *one* piece each for this Concert
  + With challenging literature, the group can concentrate on details; conversely, when the group is *prepared,* the extra rehearsal time can be paid forward for work to a later Concert
  + While the Director is working on technical details with less-skilled players in the rehearsal class, it may be possible to allow student-led chamber groups to run their own rehearsals in an adjacent room
* ***During traditional Concerts, it may be difficult to house/monitor students until it’s their turn to perform.***
  + In some spaces and itineraries, large groups can be seated for the whole time
  + Soloists and ensemble members travel inconspicuously, then return to large groups.
  + For some venues, this plan may work: leave *all* doors open ~ with all lights off, students can creep through adjacent halls, aisles, and backstage areas.
  + Volunteers can monitor the progression of events and serve as guides (e.g. “Act #11 is starting; #12 should be in place”)
  + Students enjoy the stealthy character (*“wear all black, and just wear socks on your feet – no shoes!”*) and their behavior improves (“*be silent” … “move like Ninjas!” … “be respectful of everyone else’s performance, and they’ll be quiet for yours*”)
* ***We’d like to take risks with literature, but we worry about the audience’s reaction.*** When worried about the audience’s potential reception of an unusual composition, the director can still program the piece on a Prism Concert. Because it is sandwiched between two other performances, a listener with a distasteful opinion of any work will have a short experience, preceded and followed by other styles. *Regardless of the repertoire chosen, if we believe a piece is worth sharing with our students in the educational experience, it must also merit a public performance, risky or not.* 
  + This concert keeps a rapid pace, offering great variety – if someone doesn’t “understand” or appreciate a chosen title, they’ll only have to wait a few moments for something else to begin
  + The “theater-in-the-round” approach offers great entertainment value for audience members; even if they don’t love a specific composition, they’ll be engaged in the immersive experience. Therefore, the Prism Concert is the perfect forum for experimental programming. NOTE: I believe audiences are extremely receptive to non-traditional performances since this is a non-traditional concert event. Their enjoyment is magnified because the entire concept is so unusual.

For the handful of music directors nationally who have never experienced any of these problems or concerns, the Prism Concert is *still* an exceptional format, especially because it can be adapted to work for all types of music programs. It can be very helpful to smaller schools, particularly where the major ensembles may not be fully instrumented. It can also help to give extra performance opportunities to the outstanding students in larger schools. The Prism Concert is a wonderful education for novice audiences, who see and hear certain instruments and ensembles for perhaps the first time. For example, it is common to see some movement from trombone slides in the distant reaches of the band, but the Prism Concert might put a finely-rehearsed Trombone Quartet in colorful spotlights, just a few feet from the listeners!

A Prism Concert is well worth the effort, and unforgettable to all those involved.

# **Some suggested ways to incorporate a Prism Concert – *themes* and *templates***

Prism Concerts can be prepared simply to “perform the large-ensemble music, and add some chamber groups.” But there are innumerable ways to glue a Prism Concert together using a master blueprint or template as a unifying device. Consider these suggested possibilities:

***Large Ensemble Showcase*** ~ While not specifically recommended for a Prism Concert due to space issues, this is nonetheless a good way to start. Simply set up all large groups in a gymnasium, leave students seated in place, and run consecutive performances without time between.

***A Building-Wide Prism Concert*** ~ Perhaps the most obvious and common version, we present groups and soloists from the music department in one building (i.e. the high school)

***An “All-District” Prism Concert*** ~ Feature soloists and small ensembles representing all age-levels and all buildings within a school district, leading gradually to a *finale* that incorporates (for example) the combined members of the elementary, middle school and high school Bands.

NOTE: If you’re interested, contact me about a special arrangement called “*Joy For All Ages”* – this is a version of *Ode To Joy*, written in three separate skill-layers (Beginner, Intermediate, Advanced), to accommodate a collaborative performance by band students of all ages at once. Many thanks to David Norman, Department Chair for New York’s *Bethlehem Central School District*, for supporting the commission and allowing me to conduct more than four hundred participating students in its premier!

***A Themed Prism Concert*** ~ Unify the entire program by historical periods, composers, styles, or any other themes (i.e. “A World Tour”)

***A Multi-Media Prism Concert*** ~ This approach may easily incorporate dancers, gymnasts, poets, artists, actors, or other non-musical acts

***A Guest Artist Prism Concert***  ~ Invite exceptional soloists and ensembles from the community, area colleges, or professional ranks. This is *highly* recommended as a recruitment method to expose potential ‘clients’ to instruments needing more players in your program. For established programs and older students, consider presenting this Prism Concert at the conclusion of a day of clinics offered to your students by the visiting artists.

***An Original Compositions Prism Concert*** ~ The music performed on this program has been composed or arranged specifically for the event, perhaps by the students themselves.

***An Honors Prism Concert*** ~ This approach involves soloists and ensemble who have had to win a competitive audition for inclusion as featured performers. Try this approach with neighboring schools, or even at the county or regional level!

# **A select listing of repertoire: *Compositions already well-suited for a Prism Concert’s many benefits***

**These are just *some of* my favorite “Prism Concert” pieces that I chose to program over the years. These entries are anecdotal, so there are certainly some opinions involved *and* I’ve left some specific information in place, in case it offers you any ideas you can use.**

**In a Gentle Rain – Robert W. Smith**

[**https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wy-gf0P2n9U**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wy-gf0P2n9U)

This is a good choice for a technically *easy* voyage into interesting literature. It uses Piano, and includes the crowd “rain-making” with snapping fingers. There is not much going on for Percussion, however. Some of the Solo line(s) can be done by alternate instruments in order to feature hand-picked players.

**The Haunted Carousel – Erika Svanoe**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cILS6OLR7LQ>

Uses an I-Pad “Theremin” sound, for which a student *or* a beloved Teacher can serve as the “guest artist”. While it’s easy to play, students still *LOVED* it, and we added choreography and special lighting (glow-lights; fluorescent paint on clothing lit by UV “black lights”; battery-powered fairy-lights on people and instruments). Some students left the stage during memorized passages, walking near audience members in the aisles.

**GawdZilla Eats Las Vegas – Eric Whitacre**

[**https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xGxnfrNbUQE**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xGxnfrNbUQE)

This is a highly programmatic piece that will offer enough challenge to move your students forward technically while also letting them have a *great time* with fun music. Whitacre says,

“I thought it would be a blast to do something completely ridiculous. The players are called upon to scream in terror, dress like Elvises (Elvi), and play in about thirty different styles from mambo to cheesy lounge music. The audience follows a ‘script’ that I wrote simulating a campy, over the top **Godzilla** movie (is there any other kind?). The performers are encouraged to go crazy: wear showgirl costumes, Elvis costumes, act out scenes on stage, use video and lighting – anything to get a laugh.”

In our Prism Concert, we engaged our high school’s *Technology* and *Video Production* classes to create a video, which was shown on a large screen above/behind the band during the performance.

**Epinicion – John Paulson**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yRBRU2UxhcY>

This is a striking piece which uses aleatoric elements, tone clusters, fragments in temporal and symbolic notation, and other contemporary effects. This may also be a title that will be a difficult “fit” for traditional concerts; as such, it is a perfect match for the Prism Concert format (where listeners can experience a very *nontraditional* listening experience, sandwiched between other more tonal music). It also offers great opportunities for special lighting effects (e.g. perhaps individual spotlights on three Soloists remaining at the end, while the lighting for the rest of the band fades to black). Backdrop art, a photo montage, videos, actors, and dancers would also be supported. The composer says, “An epinicion is an ancient song of victory sung at the conclusion of a triumphant battle. The Greeks would sing it as they walked through the battlefield sorting the wounded from the dead.”

**Star Dance – Michael Sweeney**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPITe9_I8zE>

For this performance, I did *not* actually “conduct” … rather, with the help of the Technology class teacher, I pre-recorded the conducting ‘silhouette’ against a green-screen, and then surrounded that shape with supportive visual elements. The conducting was shown only on the full-size screen, and the performers played from all around the auditorium, some even IN the audience seats. The Percussion had to stay on the stage, but they came forward on the apron and faced 45 degrees, just far enough so they could also watch the “conductor”. Here are three sample screen-shots, below, extracted from the video. I also augmented the performance with a local professional’s portable stage lighting and some very striking effects (lasers and more) on the walls and ceiling of the audience-space. I believe a very inexpensive laser light (common at winter holidays as house decorations) would provide an easy way to provide a wonderful ambiance for this performance.







**Cave of the Winds – Russell Peck**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XbUurCq0Qyk>

Most of this was *memorized* so kids can walk around while performing, wearing their own lighting. If desired, students can provide “choreography” that they create on their own (an example is seen in this video). Students loved it, and it’s really novel visually while also being a great listeners’ experience.

**Foundry – John Mackey**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U9B-UisSW5U>

This is a great piece on its own musical merit, of course, and not terribly difficult at all. When we used it in the Prism Concert, we used minimal (but effects-based) stage lighting for the players, but we focused extra light on the stage apron with spotlights for the “dancers/artists”. I had prearranged assistance from the Art Dept., and I got some chorus students (who take dance lessons) to buy into it too. There was one main “artist”, and the dancers supported what was happening. The short version: when the musical performance started, there was a blank canvas on an easel on the front of the stage. During the music, the dancers – dressed as ‘mechanoids’ – brought paints, supplies, etcetera, to the stage and handed them with jerky, robotic movements to the artist. The artist (one of our Flute players, also using robotic movements) created a pre-conceived painting, using techniques meant to align *in real-time* to the sounds of the music. As the music finished, the painting was complete. I had intended to auction it off as a fundraiser after the concert, but the students wanted to keep it in the bandroom. It’s still there, I’m told. Oh, Percussionists can also have fun finding sound-sources from home, the shop, junk-drawers, scrapyards, etc. Thus, “Foundry” is performed using some “found” instruments.

**Voodoo – Dan Bukvich**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pboPJ_gvdiI>

You can do a lot with this, and it’s a pretty easy first approach into the visual aspects of a Prism Concert because it’s got pre-composed rhythmic flashlight effects that the students “perform” from the notated music. It also allows students to be IN the audience. (I personally like this much better than his ***Dinosaurs*** and ***Snakes***, but those pieces would also work very well!) Similarly, **Symphony No 1 (In memoriam - Dresden 1945) , by Bukvich** is a wonderful and emotional contemporary work offering a sonic telling of the firebombing of Dresden in WWII. It offers a great (but more advanced) experience mixing traditional notation with contemporary techniques including symbolic representations. *However*, Symphony No. 1 may not ‘fit’ the Prism Concert format as well because it is a multi-movement work. https://www.jwpepper.com/Symphony-No.-1/2260198.item#/

**Lights Out – Alex Shapiro**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eaNLCMWkjaM>

While this may be somewhat difficult for students to play, it is a *terrific* experience for listeners (viewers) and performers alike. Perhaps the main source of stress is on YOU, the conductor, as you must follow (well-written) technology instructions in order to get a click-track in your ear but not into the audience mix. The composer has provided a backing track which includes some count-off clicks; then, wearing earphones, you’ll conduct students to synchronize their playing (of Level 5+ funk rhythms) with the pre-recorded accompaniment. Students also get to *m o v e* around the space with this one, and it supports *all kinds* of lighting innovations. By the way, the composer will correspond with you, and may even make a virtual visit into your classroom!

**Kingdom Hearts (mvt. From “Video Games Live”, arr. Ralph Ford)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiwO6toc_Mk>

Our students really loved playing this music, and it’s a sweeping, symphonic sound for the listeners. This video is *not* what I used (and I think this may link to the Orchestra version … I didn’t listen to it fully). I still have “our” video saved, and perhaps I’ll post it to this website soon. My tech person added a (visual) count-off to the screen by inserting 4 timed light-flashes prior to the start of the video. To keep it synced, I found I had to hand-draw screen-shots onto post-it notes; with the post-it pictures AND some text instructions planted into the Score at exactly the right spots, I could align the “hits” so the music would support the video exactly. I liked ours much better, but this will give you the idea.

**Gettysburg: The Third Day – Jay Dawson**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TQ4f5E293tE>

I used this in the 150th anniversary year of this battle. We created a nice video to play on the full wall behind the band, used a little fog, and (oooo, the best part …) I got some Civil War Re-enactors to “appear” out of the video, and make their way *through* the Band to the front of the stage where they stood in full uniform with field glasses, a map, and some other trappings (just not the gun), and we put authentic-looking regimental drums in the mix too.

**Mekong – Robert W. Smith**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z1zZgQGKfpE>

Once again, students loved this piece. It uses Piano, “helicopters” (MB bass drums surrounding the audience), “fire” (by squeezing cellophane paper), gunshots, and a variety of sonic effects (I added fighter-jets in the PA speakers, and let them “pan” so it truly sounded like they were flying across the auditorium). It’s a little difficult, but very worthwhile. You could even lift the video right out of the YouTube link, as it’s a pretty good one. Consider the potential importance of alerting your audience about the realism of some of these sounds (especially valuable for Veterans of the Vietnam conflict).

**Star Crossed – Andrew Boysen, Jr**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yGBujzTNn9o&t=487s>

This one is a multi-media artistic creation, where the animated video *and* the music were designed simultaneously by two artists, Boysen and Erik Evensen (who just happens to be the husband of the composer of The Haunted Carousel). It’s a little long, but it would also be a really easy way to do a first-ever Prism multi-media performance because the video – an interesting “superhero love story” – is complete, and the combined music-video performance is very engaging for the audience.

**Arctic Fire – Robert Buckley**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q1sp2yxIog0>

This is a great “sonic” piece, and I think the performers and listeners will equally love the way the chords interact. Directors can easily design some innovative spatial/placement ideas, and surely some striking supportive lighting and/or multimedia effects.

**Villages – Michael Sweeney**

<https://www.jwpepper.com/Villages/10460873.item#/>

This is an interesting conceptual piece that sub-divides the Band into four separate ensembles – the ‘villages’ – that can be placed in opposing locations throughout the performance space. In the composer’s words, the performers and audiences will be exposed to a “wide range of harmonic and rhythmic interplay” and the composition creates a blank palette for concert organizers to fill with creative ideas.

**READERS:** If you’d like to submit *your* favorite Prism-worthy compositions, just send me a short anecdotal description, loosely copying the format I’ve used above. I’ll be happy to continuously ADD to this growing collection; your submission(s) will be helpful to others!