

Attending the ASCI

This spring, I was honored to receive a Sigma Alpha Iota Professional Development Grant to attend the Atlanta Summer Conducting Institute (ASCI), which took place at Georgia State University from June 26-30. As a Wind Band Fellow, I worked with Dr. Robert Ambrose from Georgia State University and Dr. John Lynch from the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point throughout the week through seven conducting rounds and daily large group sessions.

What is a conducting symposium?

A conducting symposium is a place to grow as a musician through the art of conducting. Though each one is different, my experiences with band-specific symposia have all included some large group sessions on movement and conducting technique, lectures on topics relating to conducting and rehearsing, individual podium time, and social events.

Who is it for?

Generally, anyone willing to put themselves out there and improve their musicianship. Some symposia have targeted tracks based on your level of experience and career goals, but others have people from all walks of life learning together for the duration of the program. I attended my first conducting workshop as a first-year teacher and have worked alongside all kinds of people: undergraduate music education students, graduate conducting students, fellow young teachers, experienced and well-respected teachers, and even someone who had retired from teaching but was still looking to improve themselves for the sake of their community band. There is usually an auditor option as well, if you are interested in learning more but aren't quite ready to conduct on your own.

My ASCI Experience

My week started on Sunday, June 25 with my flight from OMA to ATL. I spent Sunday evening exploring the area around my hotel, which included Centennial Olympic Park from the 1996 Olympics. Monday morning was the official start of ASCI. One unique thing about this symposium was that it included tracks for both band and choral conductors, so our first session was together. I had the pleasant surprise of meeting up with one of my SAI sisters, Emma, at this session! Emma and I were on the Executive Board for Iota Alpha together

and we hadn't seen each other since COVID shut everything down during my senior year. It was great to see a familiar face and to make connections with some of the choir conductors. Even though we conduct different types of ensembles, we have a lot more in common than we sometimes think.

Each day for the band conductors started with a session as a full group. We worked through stretching, breathing, preparations, releases, Laban movement principles, legato patterns, and more over the course of the five mornings we were together. Some key takeaways from the morning sessions include:

- Dr. Ambrose's mantras: I am perfectly imperfect. I am a good enough musician.
- Dr. Lynch's conducting principles: Float, less is more, energy, resistance, flow.
- Dr. Lynch's conducting mantras: All gestures come from the core; the more joints in motion, the more fluid the motion.

The second half of each morning was spent in full band conducting sessions. Each fellow had four opportunities to conduct the lab band, which was made up of the other fellows, auditors, and GSU students. I chose to conduct *Chasing Sunlight* by Cait Nishimura, movement 1 of Holst's *Second Suite in F*, movement 4 of *Simple Gifts* by Frank Ticheli, and John Mackey's *Sheltering Sky*. This part of the workshop is what the clinicians described as "a private lesson in front of all of your peers." Though it can be intimidating to stand in front of an ensemble of high-caliber musicians and be critiqued with all of them watching, I was more relaxed at this symposium than any of the previous ones I had attended. The extremely supportive environment coupled with the fact that I have done this several times now helped me have my best experience yet.

One of the highlights for my week was conducting *Sheltering Sky* on the last day. I chose to start in the quietest part of the piece with the intention of working to keep my gestures an appropriate size for the intended dynamics and build up to the climax without getting too big too fast. We ended up working on none of that — sometimes what you think you need isn't what you actually need. Dr. Ambrose pushed me to hear every dissonance and release within the excerpt and connect with the players to pull out the sounds I wanted. It turned into one of the most meaningful musical experiences of



my life as I was able to put aside past negative experiences and feel the music how I wanted to feel it — not how anyone else told me it should go.

After lunch, we started the afternoon with lectures by Dr. Lynch and Dr. Ambrose. We learned about the ideal band sound, maximizing rehearsal efficiency, score study, and improving pulse and rhythmic accuracy. We also diverged into group discussion at several points, where respectful disagreement was encouraged. Some important notes from these lectures include:

- Force and resistance must balance to achieve the most resonant tone on an instrument.
- Don't stop an ensemble in rehearsal without telling them why.
- Only about 60% of music is notate-able – the rest is up for interpretation.
- Record your ensemble and slow the recording down by 20% - you will quickly discover if they are actually playing in time.
- Think deeply about the music and how you want it to sound before ever stepping in front of the ensemble.

For the second afternoon session, we broke up into two smaller groups for flex band excerpt conducting. This was something I hadn't done at a symposium before, but I liked that it gave me the opportunity to work on more specific technical aspects of conducting without having to deal with an entire piece of music. It was also very valuable to have three more chances to work one-on-one with the clinicians. I chose to conduct excerpts from movement 5 of Persichetti's *Divertimento for Band* and movement 4 of Gounod's *Petite Symphonie*, which allowed me to work on gestures of syncopation and conducting in a light style with dynamic contrast.

On Friday, we ended with a final discussion instead of flex excerpts. Dr. Ambrose and Dr. Lynch answered our outstanding questions from the week and left us with inspiring parting words. Before we left, Dr. Ambrose encouraged us to say goodbye to each other – no one should leave without talking to every other person in the room. While we could have done this quickly and went on our way, every single person stayed and had a meaningful conversation with every other person. Over an hour after the official ending,



Conducting *Sheltering Sky* and receiving feedback from Dr. Robert Ambrose

many of us were still there talking about band and life. I sometimes feel like I'm not taken seriously because I'm still a fairly new teacher, a woman, I teach in a small school, I teach beginners, or any number of other reasons; none of those things mattered throughout the week and I am so appreciative of the way we all grew together despite our differences. The group of fellows, auditors, and clinicians was so collaborative and non-judgmental, and this was the perfect way for us to end our time together.

My flight was on Saturday night, giving me a day to explore Atlanta before going home. It was a very hot day (106° heat index at times!), but that just gave me the full "Georgia in summer" experience. I walked nearly 12 miles while visiting Martin Luther King, Jr.'s childhood home and church, the Sweet Auburn Municipal Market (where I had some quintessential Georgia peaches), Piedmont Park, and the neighborhoods around those areas. I finally arrived home shortly before 2am on July 2 – just in time to get a little bit of sleep before starting Independence Day gigs with my community bands!

Advice

- Apply for an SAI Professional Development Grant! It may not cover everything, but can help make your experience more financially manageable.

- Join the Instrumental Conducting Workshops group on Facebook to find out about conducting symposium opportunities around the world (for both band and orchestra).

- Get to know the other participants. You can learn just as much from them as you do from the clinicians. Many clinicians will tell you that they are still good friends and close colleagues with people they met at symposia earlier in their career. I have stayed in touch with Dr. Ambrose and one of the other band fellows since ASCI ended, and we have had some great discussion that has helped me find more meaning in beginning band music and will subsequently help my youngest students have a better band experience when I see them again in the fall.

- Find out what the playing opportunities are in addition to conducting. I personally prefer attending symposia where the conductors play in the ensemble when it's not their turn to conduct. I have an easier time paying attention during long conducting rounds, and I feel that I learn more when my playing is personally affected by the person on the box rather than just watching it from afar.

- If you're going to a city you've never been to before, build in some time to explore. I scheduled my flight to Atlanta a day early and stayed a day late so I could find out what the city was like beyond the GSU campus. I was able to see Centennial Olympic Park, the Georgia Aquarium, Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historical Park, the outdoor sculptures at the Woodruff Center for the Arts, and explore the Downtown, Sweet Auburn, Midtown, Piedmont, and Buckhead neighborhoods.

- Just do it, even if it scares you. You can't grow without being a little bit uncomfortable. In my experience, the clinicians have always been extremely compassionate and excellent at meeting the participants where they are and building them from there. You don't need to be the world's best conductor, you just need to have a desire to get better and a willingness to accept feedback.

Braeden Weyhrich is an alumna of the Iota Alpha Chapter of SAI at Oklahoma State University. She currently serves as the 5-12 Band Director at Hinton Community School in northwest Iowa.