Humboldt State University Brass Chamber Music Workshop
Composition Contest

Tips for Composers

To Composition Contest Entrants: Professional and skilled amateur brass musicians will evaluate your composition by listening to it and playing it. Here are suggestions to ensure your work gets considered in the best possible manner.

1 – Document tips

• Make sure your parts are really useable by the musicians who will play your music. If your part is 4 pages, print it on one 11x17 piece of paper and simply fold it in half. Double check the page turns. Don't hesitate to insert a blank page to make the page turns work out. If you must actually bind the pages, tape works very well (if you use good tape, such as 3M micropore white surgical tape). Spiral binding is less desirable. Comb binding is the least player-friendly.

• If longer than four pages, use the 11x17 for the outer pages, and insert the inner page in the middle, before binding.

• Use good paper. It should be heavier than 20 pound. Printing on 60-90 pound is best. Remember that your work may be played many times in the summer chamber music workshop once the contest is complete.

• For good examples of playable sheet music, look at the parts for the Malcolm Arnold Quintet published by Paterson's Publications, or the Ewald Quintets published by G. Schirmer, Inc. These are excellent publications, and are a good example of useable parts.

2 – Musical tips

• Use the ensembles WITHIN the complement. In a 3131 octet, there is a brass trio (tpt, hrn, trb), a low brass trio (hn, trb, tba), a cylindrical sextet (3 trpts, 3 trbs), a brass quintet (2111 or 212), brass quartets (2 trpt, hrn, trb or 2 trpts, 2 trbns), renaissance quartet (trpt, 3 trbs) an orchestral low brass quartet (3 trbns, tuba), and other combinations. Not every musician needs to be playing all the time. Your music will benefit from a variety of textures and colors, and the musicians who play it will benefit from occasional rest. The combination of horn & tuba, or horn, trombones & tuba allows for some nice color options, and gives the trumpets a 'time out.' Make sure the horn gets some rest, too!

• Please consider showing your parts to players of each instrument and ask, "Is this playable on your instrument?" You might ask them to play the part to see if it sounds as you intend.
• Know your transpositions & instrument ranges. Do you want bass or contrabass tuba (F/Eb, vs CC/BBb)? Consider using mutes and optional instruments (piccolo trpt, cornet, flugehorn, euphonium, etc.).

• Contest winners are chosen by professional and skilled amateur musicians who evaluate your music by actually playing it. Works are assessed not only on strong compositional content, but are also evaluated for both playability and audience appeal.

3 - Other tips that will help

• Putting your score in Finale or Sibelius will enhance your chances of a good playback. Make sure the parts have correct voicing assignments, and that the parts are balanced. Aria/Garritan playback settings always sound better than straight MIDI files.
• A live recording of the work, while challenging to create, shows the work at its very best, and will help you create the best possible expression of your musical ideas.
• Put your recording in a Mac and play it. Note that settings on a PC don't always translate to a Macintosh. Is your recording a good representation of your work? Before live musicians play a submission, each submission recording is played. This is the first time the evaluation committee will hear your work, and first impressions are lasting ones.