

YOUR MONTHLY BAND AND CHORUS UPDATE

By: Essence Ocean

This school year has been a wacky and experimental year filled with missing assignments, turned off cameras, and more in person and online changes than “on again, off again” couples. Band specifically has had their seasons turned upside down, as well as choir students and their missing monthly concerts. This pandemic has taken a lot away from many and has kept us quite distant from each other, so what better to reconnect then see how the East competition winning band and choir departments are doing. Mr Hassal, one of Belleville East’s valued band directors, and Mrs Williamson, one of our gifted choir directors, were so kind to give me an update on their specific departments of expertise. Mr Cowell, another experienced choir director, has been completing his dissertation and preparing for his upcoming trial, so he will be interviewed for another article later.

In the meantime, please enjoy this interview with both Mr Hassal and Mrs Williamson!

How has choir/band been going?

Mrs Williamson: “Choir has been going pretty well all things considered. Like most things it all depends on how much effort students are willing to give it. Most of our students have put forth amazing efforts to keep choir going and it has been a pleasure to see what they can accomplish.”

Mr Hassal: “It has been very challenging. Like other performing arts, it hasn't quite had the “community” feel that is crucial to performing together. Fortunately our administration has made some wonderful investments to make it as close to normal as possible, and the students still have great attitudes.”

What were new approaches you had to create to stay by covid guidelines?

Mrs Williamson: “I had to learn A LOT about video and sound editing to take our socially distanced parts and put them together in some semblance of a choral sound. It's REALLY hard for choir students and teachers to hear each other so we've had to adapt several times throughout the year. We've completed virtual performances where each student had to record their part and we edited it all together, students singing into individual microphones so they can hear each other in-person, finding the best masks for easy singing and even using the piano less so it wasn't always covering up students' sound.”

Mr Hassal: “We have had to do a lot of physical things, such as staying six feet apart, constantly wiping down surfaces, emptying water from our instruments in designated areas, etc. We have also had to purchase instrument covers as well as special masks for playing instruments.”

How has this pandemic affected you as a teacher? As a person?

Mrs Williamson: "I'd like to think I've really grown as a teacher. I'm definitely more forgiving of small lapses and have been able to refocus on the big picture-keeping students engaged in school through music. Much the same has happened personally. I have been able to step back and really focus on what matters to me most and focus on those things more."

Mr Hassal: "As a teacher, I have learned how to better use technology to educate. Many challenges existed which forced us to leave our comfort zone, and as non-communal as the situation is, it has allowed me to better educate the individual."

Are there any choir/band events to look forward to?

Mrs Williamson: "I'm so excited that we are going to be allowed to do an outdoor concert in May! Most of our students are in choir because they enjoy performing and there haven't really been any performances this year. It's really nice to have something to work towards. It's hard for both choir teachers and choir students to engage where there isn't something to look forward to and an end date or production to work towards."

Mr Hassal: "We are having an outdoor concert on May 11, playing at all of the graduation ceremonies, doing the Memorial Parade, and performing in the Shriner's Parade."

Do you believe choir/band will go back to how it was in previous years once we return to a normalcy next school year?

Mrs Williamson: "I think many parts of choir will look and feel the same as they did in years past, however the smaller class sizes have really allowed us to learn our students' individual voices and what they need to work on. I think the marriage of technology and music is just beginning, but we are hoping to utilize it to create better live performances. The ability to do recorded concerts and productions have been a blessing this year, but nothing and I mean NOTHING beats performing and listening to live music!"

Mr Hassal: "I believe we will still have some restrictions, and with programs as large and involved as the band program, a good chunk of the year will be re-learning what normal was; but yes, I believe we will return to about 95% normal next year."

Any comments you want to say to your choir/band students?

Mrs Williamson: "I am so proud of what my students have been able to accomplish through all of this crazy year. They've worked hard and it's been nothing short of amazing to see how resilient teenagers can be. I think going through this has really shown a lot of people how to appreciate the good things in life and my choir students, the conversations we have and the music we make together are all bullet points that I count on my good list!"

Mr Hassal: "I think the most powerful words are "thank you" and "I love you." I try and say that throughout the year because I care for them all very dearly and I am grateful for their presence

in the program. I am proud of all they do, especially this year in the face of so much adversity. So, I would like to thank them and tell them I love them.”

As you can tell, both the band and choir departments have been doing their very best with adjusting to the weirdness this pandemic has thrown at us. Hopefully you feel a little updated on how the East band and choir students and teachers are doing! Stay tuned for future articles, and please show your support for the mentioned upcoming choir and band events!