

1. Spinning Plates

From Philosophy to Practice: The Road to Band Whispering

I organized the majority of this book into chapters that correspond to the rubrics found on a typical music ensemble or instrumental solo judging sheet. These include tone/breath support, pitch, balance/blend, rhythm/reading, accuracy, articulation, technique, dynamics/written expression, phrasing/musicianship/style. However, I caution you to *avoid thinking of those rubrics as distinct qualities that are mutually exclusive* from a teaching point of view. (Would it make sense for a band to be playing with great style if it had poor tone quality, or to be playing with immaculate pitch if it couldn't play together?) The rubrics should be viewed in a unified manner to establish a *synergy* of individual musical components into a beautiful and artistic *whole*.

The Problem: Balancing the Big Picture and the Details

While we can all agree that every performance should display an artistically complete outcome, in the rehearsal process, it gets tricky. How does one keep things unified and homogenized in rehearsal when so many distinct and diverse qualities demand individual attention? On the one hand, we don't want to completely sacrifice attention to particular issues for the sake of the big picture. On the other hand, we hope to avoid getting bogged down in details to the detriment of synergistic flow.

How often have we observed band directors make or imply the following comment: "First, we are going to learn the notes, then later (sometimes much later) we will work on dynamics, phrasing, and musicianship." Taken to its extreme conclusion, this approach alludes to one saying, "Today I will breathe, but not eat or sleep. Then tomorrow I will not breathe at all, but I will eat. The following day I will only sleep." Taking our rehearsal scenario to the opposite extreme, we don't want to hear the following either: "We'll just keep running through the piece until the band can play it."

Neither of the previous two scenarios comes close to creating a productive and satisfying experience for music students. At best, the first results in a technically accurate, yet dry, performance. The other produces a sloppy, unintelligible one.

The music educator's problem, then, manifests itself in balancing the need for addressing a variety of individual musical and technical issues with a desire for developing and maintaining a context for performance synergy to create beautiful music. Just as an ensemble performance must consist of a symbiosis of musical qualities along with a focus on both detail and flow, so must the rehearsal reflect this pattern...not an easy task for the music teacher!

2. Tone

Tone, TONE!

Tone must be listed first in any discussion of music ensemble pedagogy because it affects and is affected by everything else. It is the aural manifestation of all of the other technical and musical spinning plates. It may be dark, or bright, or rich, or harsh, or thin, or characteristic, or uncharacteristic, or resonant, or dull. Whatever else it is, tone is always the highway by which one travels to musical expression. It's the fundamental life force that makes beautiful music possible.



Furthermore, because tone production shares fundamental embouchure, breath support, and conceptual requirements with many of the other plates, an ensemble that plays with good tone will very likely also perform with good pitch, blend, and balance.

A Small Bit of Science

Before launching into the tools portion of this chapter, a little acoustical theory is in order. Understanding the principals behind tone production will help you to more skillfully and appropriately apply those tools in rehearsal.

Setting a string into motion (vibrated, or resonated) causes a fundamental air disturbance produced by the entire length of that string moving back and forth, pushing and pulling air molecules with it. That push-pull of molecules travels through the air as a wave would through water after its surface has been disturbed. This continuous compressing and rarefaction of successive groups of molecules occurs at a specific frequency (the speed of which is determined by the length of the string) until it reaches the ear. Once there, the waves sympathetically set the eardrum into back-and-forth vibrations that become translated into electrical signals transmitted to the brain via nerves. The brain then re-translates these signals into what we think of as sound. The faster the vibration (based on the length of the string), the higher the pitch of the sound.

The story does not end here, however. The Greek philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras discovered that a vibrating string oscillates not only at its full length, but also at half its length, one-third its length, one-fourth its length, and so on, in smaller and smaller fractions. He found that these “partial” vibrations *also* produced air molecule disturbances interpreted by the brain as higher and higher pitches.

3. Pitch

If teaching resonant and characteristic tone is a primary goal of the music educator, then building the ability to match pitch cannot be far behind on the list of priorities.

The beauty and majesty of music result from a balance between two primal forces: **power** (energetic sounds) and **control** (the ability to match and blend those sounds into a disciplined and, therefore, communicative system). As beautiful as this is, we must be vigilant, as this binary delivery system can quickly break down for lack of pitch control, causing the yin and yang of musical expression to rapidly degenerate into chaotic noise. As such, an essential job of the music teacher is to maintain the discipline of pitch—to keep the pitch plate spinning, as it were.



Tell me, and I'll forget; show me, and I may remember; involve me, and I'll understand.
Chinese Proverb

Before proceeding, I wish to again remind you of the primary importance of teacher aptitude and artistry in applying pedagogical tools. As I haven't thus far provided much direction in this department, I reluctantly confess that I have struggled mightily to come up with descriptions of exactly how to develop and apply effective teaching skills. I finally concluded that describing is necessary, but not sufficient, to ultimately make the point: I must find a way to generate an *experience* for you.

A few years ago, I watched a sci-fi film about a fantastic invention that allowed people to record their brain waves and then play them back in other people's heads. One particular scene that caught my attention depicted a concert pianist recording her thoughts as she performed a particularly difficult piece. The thought recording was then played back in the head of a person who had never touched a piano, as he played the piece note-for-note perfectly with compelling artistry and expression. (Wouldn't that make our lives much easier?)

Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately), we live in a world that cannot share brain waves, where each living creature experiences that world slightly differently, and therefore learns differently. Absent the thought recording device from the film, I must go beyond explanations and descriptions and move to generating *feeling*.

In light of this goal, I divided each topic on pitch below into two parts. The first part is informational, or strategy-based. The second leans toward a more experiential, feelingful, scenario-based approach, with

4. Balance & Blend

“What's wrong with the way this sounds?” I asked a young sixth grade band during a rehearsal of “Take Me Out to the Ball Game.”

After the group sat for several moments of stumped silence, I rendered both parts for them by first covering my mouth and very softly singing the melody...and then by yelling quite loudly the “Oom-pa-pa” accompaniment. Well, they just thought it was hilarious, even ludicrous, for me to behave in such an outrageous manner!



Flute *pppp* Take me out to the ball game,

Tuba *ffff* Oom - Pa - Pa! Oom - Pa - Pa! Oom - Pa - Pa! Oom - Pa - Pa!

I quickly pointed out, however, that my ridiculous performance was mirroring back to them what they played to me; the way I was singing wasn't half as inappropriate as the way they were playing. This gave them pause and served as a transition to a discussion about balance and blend. (In case that you might be thinking right now, “Huh! Sixth graders; what do you expect? My middle school/high school/college band would never have this issue,” I've got some news for you. I have worked with all of those levels on this very same issue. Perhaps it was more subtle, but it was there.)

Yet another one of my theories provides just the segue that we are looking for here. As mentioned in the preface, we must first understand that students want to play well, and most of them possess the innate listening skills to do just that. Given the opportunity and instruction, band members will perform with good tone, pitch, balance, and blend. Often, it's the environment that holds students back.

And this leads me to my **Refrigerator Theory**. Wait...what? On its face, a theory based on refrigeration seems a bit of a stretch for a discussion about developing instrumental music ensemble skills. Hopefully, however, this theory will help reinforce the point that we don't need to spend a lot of time and energy forcing the resolution of a pedagogical issue. Instead, we can engineer an environment where that issue will resolve itself. I am speaking here about an environment that parallels the thermally evacuated space inside a refrigerator.

6. Technique

Imagine a master plate spinner: by all appearances, effortlessly calm and in control. Appearances, can be deceiving, however. Because much energy is expended under the surface, what we see is somewhat of an illusion, as the performer is making a difficult task look easy. Many hours of disciplined training have honed this performer's skills to an extremely high level of competency and efficiency, where spinning all of the plates just right has become second nature. The result is that the audience can relax and enjoy a demonstration of precision and skill without worrying about any impending disasters.



The same should be true of music ensemble performance. When the musicians are prepared and in control, their audience may relax and enjoy the presentation. Each listener is free to communicate directly with the composer through the musicians on stage without worrying about technical problems.

Thus far, we have dealt with eliminating some rather significant potential distractions to musical communication, including issues of tone, pitch, balance, blend, and rhythmic distortion. Attention now turns to the next potential roadblock to musical communication. It is technique, a factor that might be described as the “engineering” phase of making music—how a performer articulates and manipulates an instrument in order to render the music on the page.

Good instrumental technique requires attention on two fronts:

- ◆ **Articulation**—the method of attack and breath support (stroke in the case of percussion).
- ◆ **Fluency**—the control of the fingers, hands, and arms to produce even and effortless sounding performances.

Articulation

People are made up of many thousands of moving and non-moving parts that interact with one another in complicated and unpredictable ways. While teaching music, we must, therefore, be constantly vigilant that correct procedures are being followed when articulating an instrument, lest bad habits start to develop. The following material highlights some concepts that suggest proactive methods for ensuring the development and maintenance of healthy articulation habits.

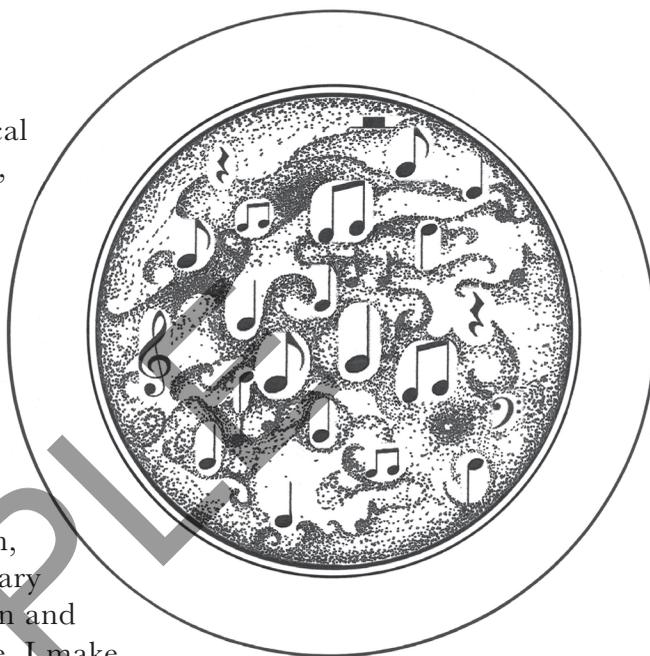
7. Written Expression, Style, Phrasing, & Musicianship

I've combined the final four qualities of musical performance—written expression, style, phrasing, and musicianship—into one chapter because I believe them to be inextricably connected. This is reflected in the plate picture, as it mingles the concrete notational aspects of music with the less defined, more ephemeral and elusive qualities of artistic performance.

These properties occupy two sides of the same musical coin. The first includes written markings indicating tempo, dynamics, phrasing, articulation, style, and other directives that are absolutely necessary to the process of making music, but not sufficient in and of themselves to breathe life into notes on the page. I make this distinction because I believe that truly expressive music is more than simply a collection of accurate notes that are performed with proper duration, volume, length, tessitura, syntax, shaping, and grouping. A non-living machine can produce sounds that are stronger or weaker, longer or shorter, higher or lower, etc.

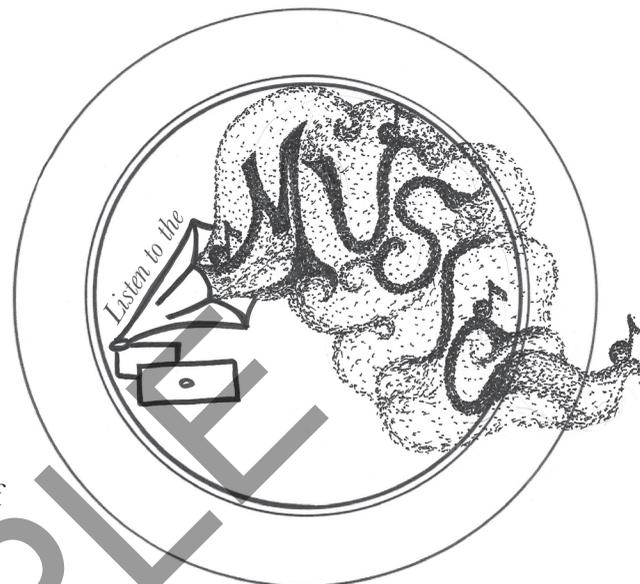
What a machine cannot capture, however, are the complex and uniquely satisfying musical qualities—the communication of both emotion and aesthetic—provided by an artistic human performer. Machines just miss the mark when attempting the non-verbal artistic communication that *Homo sapiens* crave because it has no means of replicating true elements of musical artistry and cannot create that delicate entity which emerges from a symbiotic relationship between conductor, performer, and listener. Human Musicianship, then, is the other, shinier, side of our expressive coin. Musical expression not only requires faithful adherence to the composer's intent as written in the score, but it also strives to communicate what is in the composer's head and heart. Further, as written and aesthetic/emotional expression are both exceptionally fragile, they must be tended to carefully. Just as a bit too much pressure on a chisel may cause irreparable harm to a sculpture, a misplaced note or inappropriate expression rendered by a player might seriously disrupt musical communication and expression. (A significant difference between these two situations is that the sculptor has to get it right with the chisel only one time; the musician has to get it right every time when performing a musical composition. Hence, the New York City taxi driver's adage: "How do you get to Carnegie Hall? PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE!")

Keeping all of this in mind, it becomes incumbent upon conductors and performers to transform the notes and markings on the page—those concrete affectations—into sympathetic, communicative,



8. Harnessing the Power of Band Whispering Setting the Table

Many thanks to you, the patient and diligent reader. You have waded through all of my carefully-stacked pedagogical plates. I now ask for your indulgence as we set the table with those plates in preparation for a whispering feast. It's time to tie all of the previous information together and focus it through the lens of *The Band Whisperer*.



The Limited Value of “Best Practices”

A vast amount of music education literature available today (including much of this book) offers readers an extensive collection of rehearsal tools, recipes, and tricks—along with “best practice” advice on how to apply those little gems of wisdom. Yet despite the abundance of outstanding resources, the occurrence of amazing musical experiences in ensemble classrooms is disproportionately small. Why is that the case?

Although I believe that tools and “best practices” are absolutely *necessary* for productive teaching, they are not *sufficient* for success, in and of themselves. Tools are *only as good as the craftsman who wields them*. I strongly assert that *creativity* and *artistic instruction* must be present throughout the teaching process for success to follow. Indeed, a great educator must thoroughly know the subject matter. However, only when used in the proper intuitive context can knowledge, no matter how extensive, become the catalyst for outstanding instruction and learning.

The majority of how-to books lean toward disseminating information and improving teaching systems (best practices) rather than developing artistic and creative teachers to implement those systems. This omission in the literature fails to acknowledge that a master teacher can achieve outstanding success regardless of the system used. In contrast, a less able educator may fail, or find only limited success, when using the same material in the same manner with the same students. There is something intuitive—almost unconscious, or *subconscious*—that creative and artistic teachers bring to any situation. That, of course, is *whispering*. I am beyond excited about the possibility of helping you find the absolute best whisperer in yourself!