

DEVELOPING ENSEMBLE QUALITY IN THE MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL BAND

**Demonstrating strategies, techniques, exercises, and daily drills
for the development of characteristic tone quality, intonation, balance, and
stylistic articulation during the warm-up period**

Richard C. Crain, Presenter

**Featuring the Clarendon Hills Middle School Band
Terry Milbourn, Director**

**THE MIDWEST CLINIC
December 20, 2007**

“Tone quality, tone quality, tone quality. . . . That’s what it’s all about!”

-Dr. William D. Revelli, National Concert Band Festival, 1996

“It is all about the clarity!” Those words have echoed in my mind over and over again. Ensemble sound is composed of lots of different concepts that all influence the clarity of sound. Once I fine-tuned my ear... I became obsessed! Mr. Crain was right. It really is... “All about the clarity!”

-David Vandewalker, Director of Bands – Harrison H.S., Cobb County, GA

“Mr. Crain and his techniques have been invaluable to the progress and successes of the Lockport Township High School band program as well as my own teaching. His instructional methods allow the students to discover the purist tone and clearest resonance of their instruments, while simultaneously developing listening skills to balance and blend within the ensemble. My students and I owe a great deal to Mr. Crain for the tools, teaching techniques, high standards, and excellence that he has shared with our program and that I know he enjoys sharing with others.”

-Brian Covey, Director of Bands – Lockport Township H.S., IL

Appreciation is expressed to Terry Milbourn and the Clarendon Hills Middle School Band for serving as the demonstration group for this presentation!

Workshop is sponsored in part by Phi Beta Mu International Bandmasters Fraternity.

rcrain34@comcast.net

THE WARM-UP

ENSEMBLE PREPARATION

The most important period of time during the rehearsal is arguably the time at the beginning of the class when the students are preparing physically, mentally, and musically. Too often this period is a part of a routine that disintegrates to merely a repetition of notes each day with no meaningful, lasting goal or results. Although raising the temperature of the instruments might be realized by this repetition, the warm-up period of the class or rehearsal should also contribute to the conceptual growth of the students. Goals and objectives for the warm-up period should be established and followed.

Quality rather than quantity should be the focus during warm-up periods. Performing fewer exercises well is more important than performing numerous lines of exercises whose only result is solely repetition. The director should not be distracted with other responsibilities such as checking roll or performing other paperwork duties during this time. The director should check the roll as the students enter the room and then begin the official warm-up. There should be constant feedback from the director to the students to assess and to instruct.

Ideally, the warm-up/ensemble preparation should begin with breathing. These exercises will help the students focus mentally as well as physically. Not only will they help develop the support of the airstream that is essential for characteristic tone quality on wind instruments, but also they will promote an awareness of timing for the entire ensemble. The breathing exercises also tend to help the students relax.

Students should be learning listening skills that can transfer directly to the performance of the literature that is to be rehearsed. The ensemble's preparation period should result in the students developing all of the listening skills that go into a characteristic band quality. These skills include tone quality, intonation, balance, proper articulation, scales, and playing together in time. Certainly, long tones with a steady sound are essential to the development of this process. The exercises can be written or prescribed orally to the students. A simple chorale can allow the students to perform all of these elements. Singing can be incorporated into the warm-up period and can further extend the listening skills.

The director needs to decide how long the students should be allowed to warm their instruments individually. A basic individual warm-up should be described to the students. "Over-zealous" and extreme-range playing during this initial warm-up of the instrument can be detrimental.

The following are some exercises that are recommended to be included in the ensemble warm-up:

ACTIVITY

DESIRED RESULTS

Music Stand Elevation

Music stands should be elevated to a position that promotes proper posture and allows for a good line of sight over the stand to the director.

Posture	The position in which the body can most easily bring air in and send it out. The student should sit in a position that allows the student to stand with no effort. The diaphragm area should feel no restrictions.
Breathing	The director should vary the number of beats of inhale and exhale and should gradually increase the tempo over the semester. Air in and out should leave the student's body tension-free. Breathing exercises will also help the students relax and improve focus.
Brass Mouthpiece	While the woodwinds play, direct the brass players to respond by buzzing on their mouthpieces. Playing on the mouthpieces alone allows for a less stressful brass warm-up and helps the performers to match and center pitches more accurately on their instruments.
Unison Long Tones	Sustained notes must be an unwavering, straight-line sound starting in the middle range of the instruments. "Note maintenance" is a very important concept for students to develop. Sustaining a note full value with good energy and support to the release is very important. Students should think and visualize "straight-line" sound.
Lip Slurs	Lip slurs are beneficial to both brass and woodwind students. Flexibility can be realized. Another goal should be to develop the consistent, unwavering, straight-line sound through this interval exercise. The tempo should be varied from slow to a faster tempo only if quality and accuracy can be maintained.
Building Concert F or Other Notes	Start with the lowest voice instruments and ask each succeeding group ascending to enter every four counts. All students should sustain the note until all have entered. Students should breathe as necessary in order to continue playing until the release by the director.
Concert F Relay	The students can match their sound with other sections regarding quality, pitch, and balance. Performance of this exercise should be seamless as each section enters and releases. This exercise can be performed by both individual students and by sections. The students should "make their sound fit in."
Intervals (Remington)	Starting in the middle range of the instruments, performing intervals can help improve flexibility and accuracy. Each note should have the same intensity, color, and quality. (Concert F, E, F, Eb, F, D, etc.) Then ascending from concert F, alternate woodwinds and then brass.

Articulation Drill	Proficiency of tonguing different articulations (staccato, tenuto, legato, marcato) on unison pitches can be achieved and then transferred to the music being performed. The style of the literature being performed can be greatly enhanced. The students should keep their faces “still” during these articulation exercises. The tongue returns to the same place.
Crescendo / Decrescendo	The goal should be to develop the control of the tone quality and pitch during the performance of a crescendo or decrescendo. Performing on a unison pitch, there should be no change in the tonal center and tuning of the note for the duration of this exercise.
Open Fifths	Interval study in fifths can help develop listening/intonation skills. Example: Woodwinds ascend diatonically playing notes $\frac{1}{2}$, $\frac{1}{2}$, whole; $\frac{1}{2}$, $\frac{1}{4}$, $\frac{1}{4}$, whole; $\frac{1}{4}$, $\frac{1}{4}$, $\frac{1}{4}$, $\frac{1}{4}$, whole while brass sustain concert F or perform first three intervals of the Remington. Add all down $\frac{1}{2}$ step on Concert F & C to E & B.
Scales	Scales are a basic element that can serve to develop the students’ musicianship and technique. These scales should be played with quality of performance as the goal.
Chorale	For students to hear their sound within the ensemble and within a chord is another very important concept. Clarity and transparency of the ensemble should be the goal. Balance and intonation as well as tone quality are elements that can be refined by playing a simple chorale. A better understanding of phrasing and shaping can also be realized through the performance of the chorale.

The director is encouraged to expand on these suggestions by using their imagination to create different variations on these exercises.

With the exception of the chorale, these components of a daily drill can be more effective if the students are instructed verbally on what exercise to perform. By not having to read music, the students can concentrate on the basics of producing fundamental tone quality (a single concept) and enhancing their listening skills during this period.

Realistically, there may not be enough time to perform all of these fundamentals in a single class period. However, all should be addressed during the course of a semester.

The successful development of all of these qualities will be realized only if the director and the students are actively engaged in this process in every rehearsal. The highest quality of the performance of these fundamentals by the students should be the goal.

REINFORCING FUNDAMENTALS

EMPHASIZING CORRECT POSTURE

Correct posture should result in the body being in the position that can allow for air to most easily be brought in (inhale) and air sent out (exhale).

1. Sit in a position with the feet generally aligned with the shoulders in order that standing can be achieved with no extra motion or effort.
2. The body should be soft. Arms are free – elbows should not touch the body.
3. Push the backbone against the navel. No restrictions.
4. Place the head in its natural position so that the ceiling and the floor can be seen without having to move the head. Only the eyes move.
5. The eyes should be kept on the “target.”
6. Make sure the music stand is at the proper height to promote good posture and an optimum line of sight to the conductor.

BREATHING

1. Breathe through the mouth only.
2. Keep the body “soft” with good posture so that the body is balanced as if walking. The rib cage is lifted.
3. The students should think of “breathing in all the way down to their toes” or “to the bottom of the chair.”
4. There should be no shoulder movement. Shoulder movement indicates that students are not breathing down to the diaphragm.
5. At first, students should breathe in (inhale) for two counts.
6. Breathe silently. If there is audible noise during this exercise there could be an obstruction. If present during breathing it could also be present during the playing of the instrument.
7. Do not hold air in! Air comes in and goes out smoothly. The students should think “cold air in” and “warm air out.”
8. Aim the air at a chosen target. Using the hand to visually follow the air in and provide a target for the air being exhaled is a useful practice. This exercise can also be practiced with the students directing the airstreams toward the palm of their hand so they can feel exactly when to start and stop the air.
9. For another exercise, ask the students to place the mouthpiece in such a manner that air can be blown through the instrument with no tone being played. The intensity of the airstreams can be thus be heard and measured.

“STRAIGHT-LINE SOUND”

Unless students can produce a sound that holds still and steady, it will be impossible to tune, work on characteristic ensemble sonority, or shape phrases.

1. The student should understand that he/she makes the sound, not the instrument. The instrument is an amplifier.
2. The student should keep the air stream steady, smooth and constant.
3. The students can imagine that the sound is actually coming out of their eyes while focused on a designated target. The sound is traveling to the designated target as if it were a laser beam.
4. Often the designated target can be the director. This practice can improve the focus of the band not only tonally, but mentally as well.
5. Encourage the students to “hold you up” with their sound.
6. The goal is to make every note sound like concert F.

CONCERT F RELAY (F AROUND THE ROOM)

This drill is a matching exercise that can be rehearsed section by section, or individually, in order to teach the students how to enter and exit different textures and styles within the musical selection.

1. This drill can be started in one of three ways:
 - At the bottom of the harmonic series (tuba to flute followed by a percussion roll or scale).
 - With a section that demonstrates the style best and then goes back to the bottom of the harmonic series.
 - The top of the harmonic series down to the lowest.
 - With sections or with individuals.
2. The drill should always end with the full ensemble playing a concert F.
3. Every student should understand that when they enter this exercise they should try to “fit in” to the sound that is already being performed, either by section or individually, and not interrupt the sound, texture or style.
4. Every section or individual needs to feel that the air at the end of their note fuels the start of the next note.

This exercise can also be performed by building the unison note section by section and/or individual by individual from tuba through the flute, and can be performed in reverse order.

ARTICULATION STUDIES

Four fundamental styles of articulation are:

1. Legato – notes touch with a soft start, the air never stops.
2. Tenuto- notes touch with a definite start, the air never stops.
3. Lifted – notes have a definite start, the air and energy should be short and compact to allow for greater space between the notes.
4. Staccato - Notes have a definite start, the air and energy should be short and compact to allow for greater space between the notes. Notes should be thought of as being light, not heavy and ponderous.

Air:

1. Air and energy must remain constant, steady and smooth.
2. The air is interrupted by the tongue but not stopped by the tongue.
3. The shorter the note length, the quicker/sooner the air must get to the end or back of the note.
4. Students should practice blowing air against the palm of the hand for different note lengths and styles. The students should feel a difference in the duration of the air as it hits their hand and for each articulation style.
5. Brass players must always think about getting their air past the mouthpieces.
6. Vibration of the embouchure or reeds should never be stopped, only interrupted.

Embouchures:

1. The face, jaw, throat and other features must remain still when articulating.
2. The corners of the mouth should not move as the tongue is moving.
3. A good habit to observe is for the students to keep their embouchure set one beat after a release.

Articulation:

1. A “dah” or “doo” syllable is preferable.
2. The tongue moves in an up-and-down motion to and from the teeth or reed, never back and forth.
3. The young players must avoid the tendency to move their tongue back and forth as they inhale and exhale.
4. The tongue must move to the exact same place on the teeth or reed with the exact same energy, speed, and strength throughout a given style.
5. The longer the note length, the quicker the tongue must move up and down.
6. When playing from one style to another, it is very important that the first note in a new style be correct and exact. Too often young players will not change styles on the first note of a new articulation.

Releases:

1. All notes end with an open-throat release.
2. Simply stop blowing the air to stop the note. Keep embouchure set.
3. Always exhale on a release. Never inhale on a release.
4. Air should never be stopped by “choking” off the air with the throat.
5. The air should never be stopped with the tongue. No articulated release.
6. The body should always remain soft and in its natural state.

TECHNIQUE BUILDING

All music is scalar or intervallic and styles represented in a musical selection can be reinforced through the following exercises.

Scales:

1. Utilizing scales in the daily drill builds coordination and rhythm technique between the fingers and the tongue.
2. The students should keep their fingers close to the keys at all times. This is especially necessary in order to build speed in their technique.

Arpeggios and Clark-Style Studies:

These exercises can be introduced to the students by explaining that music can be more interesting if some of the notes are left out of the scale.

1. Reinforce the emphasis of the weak notes and make sure that all notes are tonally balanced.
2. Rhythm must be created with the fingers and the tongue or just the fingers if played slurred. (If students are having difficulty in playing slurred passages at a brisk tempo, ask them to go back and articulate these slurred figures until the rhythms “line up.”)
3. The knowledge learned in these exercises can be transferred to the musical selection by teaching the students to understand how to find the stress points in a phrase, the phrase direction and how to balance note to note.

All technique-building exercises can be played against a tonic pedal to help balance weak notes. All exercises can be performed with different rhythms, articulations, and style in order to help reinforce what is present in the musical selection.

Best wishes to you and your band for a very successful year!

“There are those who present information and those who have the ability to transfer knowledge! We should all strive to be in the latter.”