

“Ensemble” Is An Adjective!

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While the word “ensemble” is used as a noun in the English language [*a group producing a single effect*], its Latin origin is as an adjective [*“insimul” - at the same time, together*]. In this workshop, we will reconsider our approach to “ensemble” music-making—the “how” we make music together. As a model, we will examine great ensemble-minded musicians such as those of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra to identify their collaborative, often chamber-music-based methods. With the assistance of a demonstration group, we will illustrate elements that can be employed in bands and orchestras at every level.

What is an “ensemble-minded musician”?

Ensemble-minded musicians unify aspects of the music through direct communication and collaboration with one another, even when performing in large conducted groups.

In other words, they work together independently to produce a unified musical product to which the conductor can then respond and influence.

To ensemble-minded musicians, it is more important to be unified than to be individually “correct.”

How do ensemble-minded musicians impact the role of the conductor?

When musicians themselves take more responsibility for unification, the amount of time and attention that conductors must deal with these aspects is exponentially diminished, and the less often they are required to “conduct defensively.”

As a result, directors are freed to be the kind of artistic “conductors” that they dream to be!

Two underlying principles of ensemble music-making:

1. Ensemble musicians unify not only through sound but with sight.
 - Communicate not only “when” but “how”
 - Proportion of aural and visual cues depends on their geographic position in the group
 - Listening backward, looking forward, and doing both of side-to-side
2. Paying attention to what is notated is necessary but insufficient.

Through a rehearsal process, the ensemble aspects to be unified can be categorized into five general areas. In each of these areas, there are opportunities for the development of ensemble music-making skills!

1. Issues of Timing

The conductor has only a limited capacity to control timing issues.

The reality is that focus on the tip of the baton alone will seldom unify sound (particularly front-to-back) due to physics. Sound is very slow!

Ensemble-minded musicians learn to respond to the conducted gesture within an ensemble context.

Ensemble unity through direct communication is more important than being exactly with the baton!

1. Unification of entrances in time
 - Gesture of the breath
 - Not all instruments respond equally
2. Establishing a “groove”
 - Unification of rhythmic feel
 - Motor of the inner pulse
 - Consensus feeling of the larger phrase
3. Fluidity of melodic lines handed-off sequentially
 - Maintaining groove when “playing silence”
 - Knowing “from whom” and “to whom”
 - Visual component

SPEED OF SOUND TIME DELAY DATA

Feet	Delay in Milliseconds
10	9
20	17.9
30	26.8

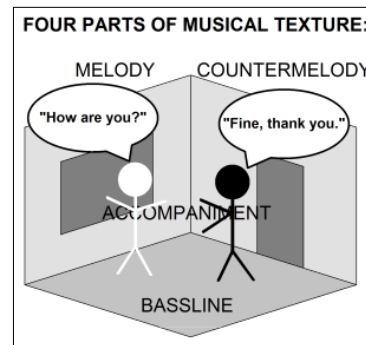
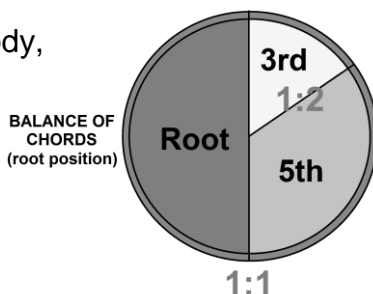
2. Style: Articulations/Phrasing

1. Unification of the character of articulations
 - Communicating not just “when” but “how”
2. Unification of the shaping of phrases
 - Communicating visually
 - Unifying lines with contrary motion
3. Unification of accompaniments
 - Following contour of thematic material

3. Balance

Contextualizing one’s personal dynamic based on a variety of factors:

1. Textural Balance
 - Roles of melody, counter-melody, accompaniment, and bassline
2. Sonority Balance
 - A matter of proportion
3. Acoustical issues effecting balance
 - Shared lines in octaves



4. Blend

Making “soup” not “salad”

1. Listening “outside” oneself and being flexible.
2. Accentuate one’s sound with the qualities of the other
3. No instrument has a single, generic tone color
4. Establishing parameters based on style, composer, etc.

5. Tuning

Requires both individual and ensemble accountability

1. Individual solutions won’t always fix ensemble issues
2. “Agreement” is what is most important.
3. Lowest sounding voice as the reference point
4. Agreement with fixed-pitched instruments

Final Thoughts

Directors often focus disproportionately on individual elements and can get bogged-down in the rehearsal process by taking too much of the responsibility for unification of elements instead of empowering the musicians to take this responsibility for themselves

The reality is that it is necessary to make the investment in time to introduce and promote these ensemble skills in a group in which they have not yet been developed.

Ultimately it is time well spent as rehearsals will become more engaging and efficient, and ultimately more satisfying for all!

THOMAS VERRIER

Thomas Verrier is Director of Wind Studies at Vanderbilt University's Blair School of Music. He serves as Conductor of the Vanderbilt Wind Symphony and Artistic Director of the Vanderbilt Music Académie in Aix-en-Provence, France. His teaching duties include undergraduate and graduate courses in conducting, pedagogy, education, and wind literature. In addition, Dr. Verrier has served as the Program Director of the *Sistema Nacional de Educación Musical Instituto de Desarrollo Musical* in San Jose, Costa Rica and is also the Founding Director of the Conductors Lab (a joint project with musicians of the Berlin Philharmonic). Dr. Verrier's interests in collaborative arts prompted him to study acting techniques with director John Strasberg in New York.

Dr. Verrier is recognized both for his artistic approach as well as his pedagogical knowledge. Dr. Verrier has accepted invitations to conduct throughout the Americas, Asia, and Europe. He has conducted honor bands and all-states throughout the United States and has conducted performances at conferences of the *Congreso Iberoamericano de Directores, Compositores, Arregladores e Instrumentistas de Bandas Sinfónicas*, the International Society for Music Education (Tenerife, Canary Islands), the Asian Pacific Band Directors Association (Macau and Hong Kong), the Hong Kong International Band Fair, the College Band Directors National Association [CBDNA], and the North American Saxophone Alliance. He has been a guest conductor of numerous professional ensembles including *Bandas Nacionales de Conciertos de San Jose, Heredia, and Cartago* (Costa Rica), *Banda del Ejercito CFSOL* (Tabatinga, Brazil), *Banda Sinfonica de la Fuerza Aerea del Perú* (Lima), the Military Band of the Peoples' Liberation Army (Beijing, China), and *Banda Sinfónica Municipal de Albacete* (Spain).

Dr. Verrier is an active member of the College Band Directors National Association; he is the organization's National Executive Secretary and a member of the organization's Executive Board.

MUSICIANS

Erin Morrow, Flute
Blair Reinlie, Oboe
Brian Cooper, Clarinet
Lydia Nance, Bassoon
Sophia Chen, Horn
Dani Hoisington, Violin
Isabelle Wong, Violin
Mary Loftus, Violin
Elizabeth Doubrawa, Viola
John Yang, Cello
Joe Donley, Bass
Nicole Long, Percussion

John Williams, Student Assistant