

The Secret Revealed:

Japanese Ideas for Band Teaching and Their Practical Use for Your Classroom

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How/why is it different from America: Background of band teaching in Japan

In Japan, school band activities are extracurricular; therefore, both directors and students are volunteers. This concept applies to all schools, public and private, and concerns all large ensemble participation, including instrumental and vocal.

Because band directors are hired as academic teachers (in general music or other fields) they spend much of their time dealing with curriculum, class management, and meetings. While band “clubs” meet outside of the academic school day, their sponsors are often so busy with duties that the students must rehearse themselves. Consequently, members learn to organize their practice and train themselves as tutors and independent musicians. Even when a director is present, she/he often lets students continue to rehearse themselves. This fundamental, student-led training process typically occupies the majority of rehearsal time.

By Japanese tradition, younger students have to respect senior students, and elder students are expected to educate the young. This concept applies to all school activities. In fact, younger students respect elder students as they do their directors, and seniors have a responsibility to improve their juniors. Therefore, beginners are usually taught and mentored by their elders in school bands, in both elementary and secondary settings.

Three unique teaching ideas in Japan

American directors may find some teaching concepts to be uniquely applied in the Japanese band rehearsal setting. Three ideas that are especially important include 1) fundamental training of ensemble, 2) sectional rehearsal, and 3) “elders teach beginners” system. All of them, especially the last two ideas, are typically organized by the students themselves.

(1) Fundamental training of ensemble

Japanese band directors believe that doing fundamental exercises before playing music is essential to reinforce students’ sense of intonation and ideal sound and also to help change their state of mind from regular class to band activity. Through these exercises, students gradually refocus their attention towards a musical and rich sound. Although various kinds of training are included in this concept, three exercises: balance training, scale training, and harmony training are reliably applied to school bands in Japan.

(2) Sectional rehearsal

Band clubs usually meet every day, but full ensemble rehearsals are not always held because of time limitations. Ensembles are typically rehearsed once or twice a week (and on weekends, in particular), and members are required to prepare for each ensemble rehearsal. Since individual practice is difficult for younger members, students often practice in part groups or sections. Although a “part leader” directs their practice, all are encouraged to share musical opinions.

(3) “Elders teach beginners” system

It is a tradition that an elder student teaches his/her junior in Japan. Therefore, even in individual practice time, juniors often rehearse with leaders. In order to educate juniors, senior students are expected to understand fundamentals of performance such as breath control, good posture, embouchure, fingering, how to read music, and nomenclature. It is felt that senior students will improve their own abilities because they will better understand music, performance, their instruments, and practice concepts through the act of teaching.

Problems of Japanese ideas

Because good sound and uniformity are valued in Japan, directors can spend more time with fundamental exercises than with teaching music. As a result, students sometimes believe that pitch, balance, and accuracy are more important than musicality. Directors must reinforce the idea that good sound and uniformity are not the main goal of music performance.

It seems wonderful that students can organize rehearsals without supervision. However, students are not perfect. They sometimes misunderstand, mislead, and idle away their time. Directors must not just leave students. They should be watched and occasionally advised, and band directors should communicate with students and assure that they understand practice goals.

How to apply Japanese ideas to American classrooms

The basic structure of Japanese band club training will not easily transfer to the American class setting. However, proven methods are still useful for all educators. These suggestions might encourage directors to reexamine their strategies and manage rehearsals more effectively.

- (1) If you spend the first fifteen minutes of your rehearsal on sound fundamentals, improved intonation and blend will allow players to focus their musical attention on a rich, full sound.
- (2) Having students organize and run part rehearsals and share their musical ideas directly involves them in the training process. Accepting the practice of peer teaching promotes group maturity and sense of product responsibility.
- (3) If you have available space, let students practice in groups to prepare for full ensemble rehearsal. It is important that the director help establish practical goals. As students achieve positive results, identify, encourage and reward them clearly.

Reference materials

Basic Training for Concert Band. Brain Co., Ltd., 2004. DVD. [BOD-7001]

Building a Great Junior High Band. Brain Co., Ltd., 2006. DVD. [BOD-7006]

Rehearsal Technique for Concert Band. Brain Co., Ltd., 2007. DVD. [BOD-7013]

Young Bands/ Young Directors: Fundamentals for Successful Programs. Brain Co., Ltd., 2008.
DVD. [BOD-7016]