

Sound Before Symbol: Building Musicianship in Beginner Band with Aural & Improv Activities

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Why Develop Aural & Improvisational Skills in Pre-Band/Beginner Band?

- Helps students internalize **pitch, rhythm, and musical expression** before reading notation
- Lays the groundwork for **strong, lifelong musicianship**
- Nurtures **creativity, active listening, and ensemble awareness** from the start

Overview: Sound Before Symbol Approach

- Emphasizes **listening, singing, and playing by ear** before introducing written music
- Builds **accurate pitch, steady rhythm, and creative confidence** naturally
- Provides a solid foundation for **reading and performing**



How It Works

- Students **hear, sing, and play music** before seeing notation
- Encourages **engagement, creativity, and musicality**
- Focus on **listening and improvisation** first

Additional Benefits

- **Flexible, uncluttered classrooms** without books or stands
- **Clear sightlines** for teachers to monitor all students
- **Ensembles can experiment** with seating, movement, and interaction
- Supports a **focused, interactive learning environment**



- Please don't hesitate to ask questions
- Feel free to adapt these ideas to fit your own teaching situation

My Learning Environment

- Beginner band (~18 students)
- 35 minutes every other day
- Flexible seating so I can circulate easily
- Clear sightlines to Smart Board
- Goal: every student receives positive feedback each class
- Pacing is critical → more playing & hands-on activities
= stronger engagement and buy-in
- Notation integration: music reading concepts are introduced gradually
- This is a hands-on session →
if you haven't grabbed an instrument, please do so now!
- Thank you so much for attending!

Echo & Rhythm Activities



Echo Rhythm Games & Pulse Awareness

Goal: Build rhythmic memory & active listening

- **Simple Echo:** Teacher claps → students repeat
- **Rhythm Walk:** March in place on pulse while echoing rhythms
- **Layered Rhythms:** Groups clap different complementary rhythms
- **Rhythmic Chain:** Each student adds to a growing rhythm chain

Rhythm Improvisation

Goal: Encourage creativity within rhythm frameworks

- **Solo Within the Pulse:** Improvise 4-beat rhythms while keeping steady pulse
- **Rhythmic Conversation:** Pairs create call-and-response rhythms

Echo Breathing Exercises with Hissing Sounds

Goal: Develop breath support, control, and aural attention



1. Simple Echo Hiss

- Teacher demonstrates a short hiss (3–4 sec)
- Students inhale deeply and echo exactly
- **Tip:** Focus on steady airflow, not loudness

2. Dynamic Echo

- Teacher hisses at varying dynamics (p → mf → f)
- Students match length **and** volume
- **Goal:** Develop awareness of breath pressure & control

3. Crescendo / Decrescendo Hiss

- Teacher starts soft, crescendos, then decrescendos
- Students follow precisely
- **Goal:** Smooth breath control & attentive listening

4. Rhythmic Hiss

- Teacher hisses short rhythmic patterns
- Students echo while keeping steady airflow
- **Goal:** Combine rhythm, breath, and listening

Making Music with Your Mouthpiece



1. Buzzing Long Tones

Goal: Develop airflow, embouchure strength, and tone control

- Students hold their mouthpiece and buzz a single pitch as long as possible
- Encourage smooth, even sound from start to finish
- Vary dynamics: soft → crescendo → decrescendo
- Practice tonguing: “interrupt” the air with the tongue
- **Variation:** Class challenge – hold a steady pitch with a beautiful sound while counting out loud; see who can sustain the note the longest

2. Rhythmic Buzzing

Goal: Combine rhythm with steady embouchure and airflow

- Teacher demonstrates a rhythm on the mouthpiece
- Students echo the rhythm while maintaining pitch and dynamics
- **Variation:** Advanced class challenge – divide into “layers” with different rhythms to create a small ensemble of buzzers

Tips for Success:

- Emphasize good posture and deep breathing—especially when using just the mouthpiece
- Encourage fun and playfulness—explore squeaks, glides, and dynamics

Active Playing: Building Pitch Awareness



Stepwise Playing Exercise (Call & Response)

Objective: Internalize pitch relationships, improve listening and matching skills

Instructions:

- Teacher plays B on the instrument - Students echo
- Teacher plays A on the instrument - Students echo
- Teacher plays B → A or A → B - Students echo
- Teacher plays G on the instrument - Students echo
- Teacher plays G → A - Students echo
- Teacher plays G → A → B - Students echo
- Teacher plays G → A → B - Students echo

(Any order including skips)

Tips for Success:

- Keep rhythms simple; focus on steady tone and accurate pitch

Active Playing: Building Pitch Awareness

(B → A → G)



Integration of Notation

Objective: Connect previously learned pitches (A–B–G) to simple notated patterns

Sample 4-Measure Exercises:



Tips for Success:

- Keep range and rhythm simple for quick success
- Emphasize *listening first, reading second*

Active Playing Activities: Expanding Musical Creativity



Pattern Expansion (Improvisation) – “Pitch Playground”

Objective: Encourage musical creativity while reinforcing pitch set (B, A, G)

Instructions:

- Students improvise 2–4 note patterns using only **B, A, G**.
- Start with simple **rhythm patterns** you provide (e.g., quarter notes, half notes, and eighth notes)
- Let students explore short melodies freely—call it a **Pitch Playground!**
- Encourage variety in **dynamics** and **articulation**

Tips for Success:

- Highlight creativity—there’s no “wrong” answer

Additional Active Playing Activities:



Ensemble Listening Game

Objective: Strengthen **group listening**, **blend**, and **musical awareness**

Instructions:

- Divide the band into **2 groups** and select a **student leader**
- **Student Leader** plays A → **Group 2** responds with B → **Group 3** adds G
Rotate roles to add variety and encourage more student leaders
- Encourage **dynamics**, **long tones**, **accents**, and **smooth transitions**

Tips for Success:

- Ask students to **listen closely** and match tone and volume—it's a “conversation” between groups

Playing by Ear: *Claire de Lune* & Theme Variation



Learning the Melody by Ear

Objective: Develop **aural skills** and **pitch recognition** while playing a simple 3-note melody

Instructions:

- Introduce the **3-note melody** (B, A, G) by **playing and echoing**:
 - **First part of the phrase → Second part → Combine both.**
- Repeat several times, encouraging students to **listen carefully while playing.**
- Play the melody with a **backing track**, emphasizing:
 - **Tone quality**
 - **Breath support**
 - **Smooth transitions between notes**



Creating a Variation

Objective: Explore musical creativity using **theme and variation**

Instructions:

- Ask students to **alter the rhythm** or **change notes** while keeping the melody recognizable
- Encourage experimenting with **dynamics, articulation, and phrasing**
- Share and perform **student variations** in small groups or as an ensemble

Tips for Success:

- Highlight that **every variation is valid**—this encourages improvisation and creative risk-taking

Introducing the Note C & *C Jam Blues*



Learning the Note C

Objective: Expand the pitch set and prepare students for simple melodies

Instructions:

- Introduce **C** on each instrument using **call-and-response**
- Play **long tones** on C to develop tone quality and breath support
- Practice smooth transitions **G → C**
- Play **“Guess the Note”**: teacher plays G or C, students identify by ear



C Jam Blues (Duke Ellington)

Objective: Reinforce G and C while building **ensemble awareness, rhythm**, and exposure to jazz/blues/swing

Instructions:

- Teach the melody using **G and C** with a **C Blues backing track**
- Echo teacher with **simple improvisational patterns**: start with G only, then C only, then G+C
- Invite students to **volunteer short improvisations** over the backing track

Tips for Success:

- Call it a “**Jam Session**”—focus on **fun, creativity, listening skills**, and ensemble collaboration



Adding Notes D & E – Introduction to the Pentatonic Scale

- **Objective:** Expand the pitch set (B, A, G, D, E) and introduce the **pentatonic scale**

Key Points:

- Pentatonic scale = 5 notes, no semitones → all notes naturally sound good together
- Ideal for **beginner improvisation** – students can create music effortlessly

Instructions:

- Introduce E, then D, using call-and-response
- Practice moving smoothly between
G → A → B → D → E → G
- Reinforce tone, articulation, and breath support as new notes are added

Tips for Success:

- Highlight that this scale allows **safe improvisation**—every note sounds good!



Learning *Mo Better Blues* – Phrase by Phrase

Objective: Teach the melody gradually to reinforce pitch accuracy and phrasing

Instructions:

- Teach **first 3 notes of Phrase 1**, then add **last 2 notes**
- Repeat for **Phrase 2**, then combine **Phrases 1 & 2**
- Explain **Phrase 2 repeats**, then add **Phrase 3**
- Teach **final Phrase 4**, then perform all **4 phrases together** with a **backing track**

Tips for Success:

- Go slowly, allowing students to **hear and feel the melody** before adding new notes



Call & Response and Improvisation

Objective: Strengthen musical conversation, creativity, and understanding of song form

Instructions:

- Begin with **call & response** on **G only**, then gradually add all 5 notes of the pentatonic scale **G → A → B → D → E**
- Improvise for **8 measures** (length of the melody)
- Encourage students to think about:
 - **Articulation**
 - **Varied rhythms**
 - **Dynamics**
 - **Flow and phrasing**

Tips for Success:

- Emphasize “**musical conversation**” —students are interacting, not just playing notes, Provide **positive reinforcement** by highlighting successful use of these elements



Creating a Group Arrangement & Performance

Objective: Combine melody, improvisation, and ensemble creativity into a final performance

Instructions:

- Add a **response** to each phrase of the melody
- Perform the **full version** of *Mo Better Blues* with:
 - All 4 phrases
 - Improvised solos
 - Using Backing track accompaniment
- Encourage **ensemble listening**, expressive playing, and confidence

Tips for Success:

- Highlight how students are now creating **their own version** of the song while keeping the structure intact

Wrapping Up: Sound Before Symbol



Key Takeaways

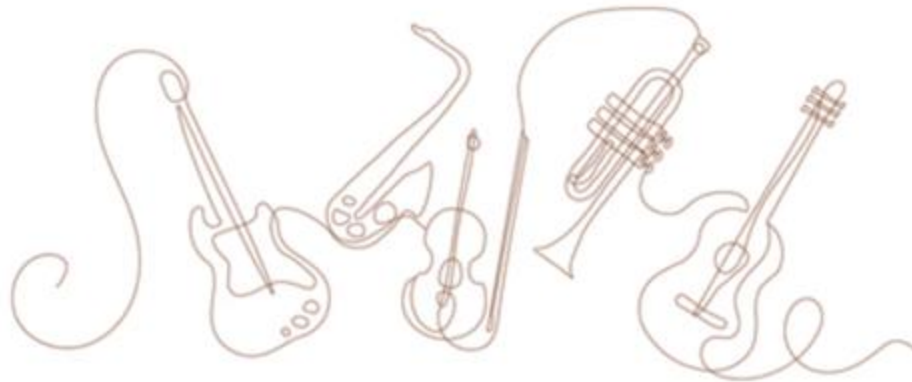
- Developing **aural and improvisational skills** lays the foundation for **lifelong musicianship**
- Playing by ear, exploring rhythms, and improvising builds:
 - **Pitch accuracy**
 - **Steady rhythm**
 - **Ensemble awareness**
 - **Creativity and confidence**
- Beginner-friendly approaches like **pentatonic scales, echo games, and theme & variation** make music-making accessible and fun
- Hands-on, interactive learning engages students and nurtures a **musical conversation** from day one

Thank You For Attending This Session



I am deeply grateful to:

- The many **musical mentors** who shaped my teaching and musicianship
- Oxbridge Academy and Head of School Dr. Ralph Maurer
- My **wife and family**, for their love, support, and help in creating this session



Keep exploring, listening, and playing—music begins with you!
If you have any questions feel free to reach out at emills@oapb.org