

CREATING STUDENT- CENTERED REHEARSALS THROUGH MINDFUL LISTENING

Initial Thoughts

- Obviously, students must know their own part before guided listening can really blossom, but it is a valuable rehearsal tool even in learning individual parts
- The goal of the rehearsal should be to try and create as many moments of beauty as possible
- Try to always find a musical reason to make the technique better (i.e. Giving those eighth notes some room helps create the weight Strauss wanted here, etc.)
- Make the music the master and the technique the servant, not an end unto itself (Kleiber-- It's very difficult to say let's take care of the technique and then we play with expression. Because strangely, the technique is the expression. If the technical skill is there but without expressiveness, it is nothing.)
- Be sure to focus on what is right as well as what can be better

General Listening Concepts

- Guided listening transfers more responsibility to the students and makes them more self-sufficient and independent, which is what we want
- The ability to listen is perhaps the most important thing students bring to rehearsal
- Schuller Hearing Areas—Try to regularly hit all 7 with these ideas (Rhythm/Articulation, Pitch/Intonation, Harmony, Balance/Orchestration, Color/Timbre, Dynamics, Line/Continuity)
- **DO NOT** tell them to watch. Tell them to listen, and ideally, who to listen to
- Get smaller with your conducting when you want the intensity of the listening to increase
- Always prepare with the breath

How Great Ensembles Play Together

- Breathe together (closed eyes exercise)
- Subdivide the pulse internally
- Move while playing
- Discover who generates the internal pulse
- Players watch each other, turning the entire rehearsal into chamber music
- Listen louder than you play

Conductor's Role in This Process

- Prepare the breath (Think a triplet)
- Breathe with ensemble—natural, not forced
- You must know what you want the music to sound like—have the aural image (third ear) completely internalized, otherwise you will not be able to ask precise questions
- Ask more directed questions rather than providing answers—you are trying to get your students to demonstrate THEIR knowledge, not the other way around
- Try to conduct the music, not the beat
- Provide recordings of your music for the ensemble players to listen to. Encourage them to have ideas so it's not “trickle-down musicianship”.

Beginnings of Rehearsal

- Try to begin from silence
- Begin with musical sounds (long tones, chorale, etc.)
- Allow the warm-up to sensitize the ears—I like to do chorales or other slow music and give the players a chance to lead without me conducting—You will be surprised at how quickly they catch on after a few tries
- Establish listening roles even in warm-up (i.e. “Flutes, listen and try to fit inside the clarinet sound here” or “Trombones, can you match the tuba intonation?”)

Harmony

- Even in middle school, you can talk about how chords are structured and how harmony determines form.
- “Does this sound like it could end here, or does it sound like it needs to go on?”
- Have the ensemble sing to establish roles
- Who has the root (At the beginning sing the root for them, then have them use their ears to figure out who has that pitch and have them play it back).
- Same with the 3rd, 5th, etc.
- Always try to ask the students first before telling them, and if they’re not sure, play it again.

Dynamics

- A useful soft dynamic exercise: Have the first clarinet play low E softly. The rest of the ensemble must be able to hear it no matter what they are playing.
- Cresc./Dim. Exercise w/different leaders (assign different sections to lead the crescendo/diminuendo; can be on a single note or chord)
- Dynamics are always relative to the piece at the moment. Ask questions about texture. Avoid blanket statements!

Balance/Orchestration

- Von Karajan: “85% of great music-making is knowing who has the melody and making sure they can be easily heard.” Clarity comes through great balance.
- Engage the students’ analytical judgment: “Who thinks they have the melody here? Ok, play it for us.” Then, guide them rather than doing it for them.
- Have melody play so students understand what it sounds like (“Here’s what the trumpets have” is better than “listen to the trumpets here”)
- Practice the wrong way to emphasize what to listen for.
- Conversational metaphor: intimate one-on-one, small group, or soapbox moment?
- It’s not always “The Pyramid”. Let the music determine who leads the balance.

Color/Timbre

- Use a shared melody exercise (i.e. flute and clarinet). Have the students who are playing discuss differences.
- Avoid non-descript terms such as “dark” and “bright”. These don’t carry much meaning. Emphasize resonance, the center of the sound, and overtones vs. a thin or thick dead sound.
- Discuss vibrato, if it’s appropriate, how fast it should be, and how it applies.
- Vibrato with non-vibrato (consider what you want). Go for more than “I like that better”.
- Try to relate colors to singing/speech. Often, having students sing will make a big difference in sound quality.
- Use imagery/metaphor to create relatable examples for students.

Rhythm/Articulation

- Sizzle rhythms (use particularly when styles/note lengths don't match)
- Use an external source of pulse (such as a student playing eighth notes on a snare drum or other students counting a pulse)
- Engage ensemble's ears for evaluation: "Is it better? How does it need to improve?"
- Draw attention to a line that generates the pulse, have them play, then have ensemble listen and find the line in context.
- Highlight who's doing it right.
- Use imagery/instrumental model (chime, bell, pizzicato, clarinet release, etc.)

Pitch/Intonation

- Quality air support aids tuning
- Ask students “Is the trumpet higher or lower than the horn pitch”, etc. to evaluate what they are hearing.
- Tune through tuba foundation or fitting inside a given pitch from oboe or clarinet.
- Dick Floyd “Tune/Balance your trio”
- Listen for waves and always assume you are at fault; this is what pros do. It’s a trait of a good musician to adjust to those around them.
- Tuning is a process, not a state of being.

Line/Continuity

- Emphasize playing THROUGH notes. Many young players (and teachers) only worry about beginnings of notes. Notes need BODY.
- Highlight connections between moments. Music is a living, breathing entity. Find the “tendons”.
- Have students listen for contour. Use contour as a base point for phrase shaping.
- Think about individual lines in regard to vocal inflection. (Casals-A Horse)
- “Hierarchy of Notes”—Which notes get more weight?
- Relate the line to the architectural whole. Avoid “manufactured moments”. Shape organically.

Seating/Setup

- Mixed Ensemble
- Concentric Circles
- Perc. in middle or front of group
- WWs face brass with conductor in middle
- Quartets/Quintets
- Monk Rehearsal (works better for slow music where not much extra info is needed)

Contact/Questions

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