

“Hai!”: Practical Applications of Japanese Band Methods in Urban Schools

A Midwest Clinic Presentation

Wednesday, December 14th, 2016 - 10:30-11:30 - Conference Room W184

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Forward:

For decades, musicians have admired the high level of performance typical of the common Japanese school band. At the same time, many directors have dismissed their pedagogy as “too foreign” or “not practical” for the American band room. Mr. Das will share systems, techniques and strategies that are standard practice for many Japanese bands. These methods can be utilized by any band program regardless of size, previous experience, schedule constraints, or socio-economic background. Students from Pritzker College Prep, a Title I school, are on hand for live demonstration of each topic.

Introduction:

The Conditions at Pritzker College Prep:

- Non-selective enrollment public 9-12 high school
- 94% free or reduced lunch
- Total enrollment=998
- Enrollment in band=235
- Students choose 1 of 5 electives at the beginning of freshman year
- Only 144 scheduled minutes a week (two 72 minute classes a week)
- Classes are not tracked by ability, instead they are scheduled by grade level
- Two freshman sections, two sophomore sections, three junior-senior sections
- Honors Band and Jazz Band are after school “clubs” that rehearse 1-3 times a week
- 95% play school-owned instruments
- No private lessons
- 90% have never played an instrument before high school

- Specific to this school year: On September 12th, 2016, Kiran Michael Das was born.

I have been on partial-paternity leave and have only attended half of the school days this semester. In my absence, student leaders (Senpai) ran the class. There was an in-house substitute teacher on days that I was out, but that teacher was not musically trained and was specifically instructed not to do anything other than take attendance. Our choir instructor, Mr. Pavloff, opened up the band room one hour before school every day to maintain the “office hour” culture that I had already established. During this time, students would run sectionals, peer-tutor, or prepare for upcoming auditions.

The Conditions of the Typical Japanese School Band: Schools with great bands differ as to whether they are public, private, selective or non-selective. Let us begin by debunking common misconceptions American band directors might have about Japanese bands. I've put these misconceptions in quotes because these are actual statements I've heard fellow band directors and musicians make. (SMH):

- "They're all affluent." False. Just like here, Japan is economically diverse.
- "The students all take private lessons." False. Even within the most competitive school bands, very few students take private lessons.
- "They all start in ____ (fill in the blank) grade." False. Two years ago, Saitama Sakae (featured Midwest group) had a bassoonist that had only been playing for three months.
- "Bands are run like dictatorships, with the director in front of the band the entire time barking orders." False. Less than half of most rehearsals include the director at the podium.
- "The Japanese are inherently smarter than us." False. All people are created equal. 😊

Japanese bands do however have two critical advantages over American bands that are related to society and culture: The development of "the ear" before learning an instrument, and the amount of time dedicated to playing once they start.

The Ear: As a country, Japan embraces the most essential music educational norm- students sing early, sing often, and sing with the purpose of making a great product. Whether a Japanese student starts an instrument in 5th grade or 9th grade, they most likely have hundreds of hours of choral singing under their belt. By the time they start playing, a strong sense of tonality and musicality have already been established.

Dedication/Time: Band, sports and other clubs are not scheduled during the regular school day. Students are expected to pick one extra-curricular and devote themselves to it. For the most competitive schools (the ones we watch with awe on YouTube), rehearsals are usually every day after school for 2-3 hours, and another 6-8 hours on Saturday. Last year, Shujitsu (featured Midwest group) said they only took one day off that year.

From Shujitsu's 2015 Midwest Clinic handout:

"After school clubs, like band club, are done for the development of character, humanity, a sense of teamwork, etc., not to train future musicians or athletes. Though, company and community bands are very popular and offer a lifelong hobby. The Japanese work and social culture values loyalty, and accordingly, students belong to one club, and give it their all. Students are primary organizers of the club, handle most of the logistics, focus training and recruitment, and have a strong sense of ownership. Better band clubs have an extensive organizational structure, where everyone is given some sort of responsibility. Time spent with the club, like on weekends, depends upon the enthusiasm of the student staff or adult sponsor, or ambitions of the administration. Being voluntary, though, means the passion is real, no matter what the art."

Okay, we've acknowledged the differences, no more time for excuses.

Discipline and Ownership

- The two should be in balance, and directors should not be dictators
- Perfect Posture, 100% of the time
- Students organize room for rehearsal
- Students clean band room and organize music
- Every student has a say in making the music better

Senpai and Kohai: older students teach younger students

- "Each one, teach one"
- Apprentice system
- Students lead sectionals, run warm-ups, and peer-tutor

Pendulum Metronome

- Loudspeaker and flashing strobe metronomes serve their purpose, but garner different results. More than just a timekeeper, a pendulum metronome heightens focus and helps give students a visual target to project their sound towards. Since students must look up to see it, better posture and breathing are implicitly encouraged. This practice is less about playing with "metronomic precision" and more about the sway and flow of the pendulum.
- We use the Wittner 5403 which can be purchased for just under \$60

Breathing Exercises

- Breathing tubes: cost-efficient, time-efficient, and effective
- Toilet paper roll, cut in half, wrapped in duct tape
- Most breathing exercises you already do can be made more efficient with breathing tubes
- Directly relate breathing exercises to playing exercises (This can be an entire presentation of it's own)

Intro to the Yamaha Harmony Director (HD-200), aka "Japan's Secret Weapon"

- Brief overview (This can be an entire presentation in its own right)
- Tone matching, drones, pure/just temperament, metronome
- Practical use will be demonstrated throughout the presentation.

Just/Pure Intonation

- Required reading: Beth Bronk's Texas Bandmasters article titled "It's Just Intonation".
 - <http://apps.texasbandmasters.org/archives/pdfs/bmr/2010-12-bronk.pdf>

The following chart explains how to alter pitches to create pure harmony. These alterations are not fixed/set in the key of Bb. Rather, they represent how to alter chord tones based on a Bb Major or Bb minor chord. For instance, a Bb major triad can appear as the IV chord in the key of F. The bass/root note is always in equal temperament.

Major Chords- Scale Degree:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Adjustment (cents):	0	+3.9	-13.7	-2.0	+2.0	-15.6	-11.7	0
	Bb	C	D	Eb	F	G	A	Bb

Minor Chords- Scale Degree:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Adjustment (cents):	0	+3.9	+15.6	-2.0	+2.0	+13.7	+17.6	0
	Bb	C	Db	Eb	F	Gb	Ab	Bb

- Overtone examples adapted from "Sonority for Winds" DVD, Bravo Music
- Have students hear and sing the overtones.
- The ultimate goal is resonance.

Singing - Brian Pavloff, Choir Director, Pritzker College Prep

- Encourage choral tone
- Start with a hum, create intense resonance in the head, and lower the jaw
- Sing on "Ma" syllable, somewhere between "mah" and "maw"
- Practical use will be demonstrated throughout the presentation.

Balance/Unison Training - From "Basic Training for Concert Band" DVD, Bravo Music

- Students enter in order of voice (SATB) from low to high.
- The goal is to paint on another layer and enhance the sound, not cover it up.
- This practice allows mental time and space to evaluate the three levels of listening while playing: individual, section, ensemble.

Harmony Training - From "Basic Training for Concert Band" DVD, Bravo Music

- Simple I-IV-V-I progression
- Students are taught which chord tones they are playing, and subsequently how to balance and tune based on their chord tone:
 - Thirds are lowered by 13.7 cents and in volume, fifths are played "fast" (2 cents higher) and "strong", sevenths... etc. The HD-200 displays all of these alterations, and they can also be found in Beth Bronk's article mentioned earlier.

Tuning Ritual - From “Basic Training for Concert Band” DVD, Bravo Music

- All tuning is done by ear with the HD-200, Cleartune (app) or Tonal Energy (app)
 - It should be noted that many Japanese bands use visual tuners as well. However, they are not relying on them- the ear is first and foremost. As stated earlier, Japanese students come in with a firm ear. Since our students come in with little to no prior training, we choose to tune solely by ear.
- Tune a series of notes to identify tendencies, and avoid the “Concert Bb” rut.
- Do↓Sol↑Re↓Ti↑Do in the key of Bb, except for Eb instruments in the key of Eb, and French horn in the key of F

Chorale Training - Inspired by Saitama Sakae’s 2014 Midwest Clinic presentation

- “Amazing Grace” from Frank Erickson’s “66 Festive and Famous Chorales”
- Play it, sing it, play it again.
- Students have already identified pitch alterations to strive for pure intonation.

Applying techniques in rehearsal

- Don’t try to play “dark and blended”, try to play full, in tune and balanced. The result will be a resonant, blended, and “organ-like” sound.
- Students identify chord tones and trouble spots.
- Mark major 3rds with “L3” indicating to lower it.
- Play chord changes like Harmony Training to better hear chord changes and direction.

Selected Works for Today’s Presentation

- “Into Moonlight’s Mist” by Richard Saucedo, Hal-Leonard Corporation, Grade 4
- “The Stormchasers” by Robert Sheldon, Alfred Music Publishing, Grade 4
 - *A very special thank you to **Robert Sheldon** for working with our students!*

Please write down questions, and ask at the end if time allows. If time doesn’t allow, find me over the next three days- I LOVE talking about this stuff. I am also responsive with email (bdas@pritzkercollegeprep.org), and would be happy to follow-up over the phone after initial email contact is made.

Resources

- Winds DVD Series from Bravo Music
 - The scores and parts from the above exercises can be purchased from Bravo as part of the series.
- Sound Innovations, Alfred Music Publishing
 - “Book 1” (blue book): Beginning/Freshmen Method
 - “Ensemble Development” (green and purple books): additional chorales, balance, technical and scale exercises.

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