

You Have Great Stick Technique...NOW WHAT?

Developing Rehearsal Techniques for Young Band Directors

The 66th Annual Midwest Clinic

December 21, 2012 - 10:00a.m.

Brief Background

Often times, many conductors think that if they have great conducting technique, the ensembles they are leading will produce remarkable sounds. However, this is not always the case. While it is certainly an advantage to have superior conducting skills, there are additional facets that are just as important, if not more important, in your quest to become a great conductor. Unfortunately, many times these aspects are simply overlooked.

At some point, conducting has to become something much more than baton technique. Listed below are four general areas that contribute to the making of an effective conductor:

- (1) Musical Knowledge
- (2) Ensemble Pedagogy
- (3) Leadership Skills
- (4) Conducting Technique

Musical Knowledge

A conductor must be a good musician with an understanding of theoretical and historical concepts. Likewise, it is essential that the effective conductor be aware of quality literature available for his or her ensemble performance medium. Additionally, it is recommended that the wind band conductor have a working knowledge of intonation deficiencies of wind instruments and their corrective measures.



Ensemble Pedagogy

Ensemble pedagogy is perhaps one of the most important aspects of becoming an artist teacher/director. This requires you, as the conductor, to take sound, style, and emotional concepts that are in your head and break them into digestible chunks that can be consumed and then realized by the learners in your ensemble (regardless of age: middle school through premier university wind ensembles). To achieve this goal, the conductor must have a keen sense of aural acuity. It is this awareness that gives the conductor the ability to discern subtle differences in tone quality, balance, blend, intonation, articulation style, ensemble precision, and musical artistry.

Without a doubt, the **development of characteristic tone quality** is the most important factor in achieving a superior ensemble sound. In contrast, if an ensemble generates tones that are unpleasant, no one wants to hear it, regardless of how amazing the technique might be. Instrumental conductors must possess a concept of sound for each instrument used within the band setting. Additionally, it is recommended that the teacher be able to produce a characteristic sound on each of the instruments. It is this ability that allows the conductor/director to communicate accurate performance information or descriptors.

The conductor must realize that tone quality affects a multitude of additional ensemble concerns including balance, blend, intonation, and the outcome of phrasing. The great pedagogue Nilo Hovey states,

“More than any other factor in performance, the quality of an organization’s sound becomes an identifying mark of its conductor.”

Achievement of proper balance and blend are also major issues in acquiring a desirable ensemble sound. The conductor must understand that development of characteristic tone quality is a necessary prerequisite to achieving ensemble balance and blend, as it is impossible to balance or blend a sound that is uncharacteristic. Additionally, it is beneficial to stress to ensemble members that if they hear themselves above everyone else in the band and it is not a solo moment, they are either too loud, out of tune, or both too loud and out of tune.

Although closely related, balance and blend are not identical terms. Balance may be described as the correct relationship of volume between two or more tones and blend as the sameness of timbre produced by two or more like instruments. In *The Band Director’s Companion*, Gary Garner supports this assertion by saying,

“The ideal blend in the clarinet section, for example, would be achieved by a combination of tones that are identical in quality. The ideal balance would be represented by each of the first clarinets all playing the same volume, as well as the seconds and the thirds, and each of the

three parts being heard in the desired proportion of sound to the other two.”

It is the responsibility of the conductor to make critical decisions regarding balance and blend and effectively communicate these choices to his or her ensemble, either visually or verbally.

Conductors must stress the importance of **playing in-tune**. Again, good fundamental tone qualities are essential in achieving this goal. Focus on achieving good individual pitch, followed by good sectional pitch, and finally good ensemble pitch. Development and establishment of good ensemble intonation is an ongoing process that begins in the formative years of band instruction and continues all the way to premier university wind ensembles and beyond to professional bands.

Even if you, as the conductor, are not sure about the sharpness or flatness of a particular note with poor intonation, you should still mention the concept of playing in-tune. The pitch will, by virtue of making the ensemble members aware that there is an intonation discrepancy, improve. Also, provide your students (especially less mature ensembles) with options for raising and lowering pitch. It should be understood that ensembles that play with good intonation are constantly listening and adjusting.

Another important aspect of ensemble pedagogy for the conductor is **making decisions about articulation style**. Uniformity of your prescribed method should be communicated effectively to the ensemble. The conductor must make choices about the style of attack such as *do* or *da*, for example. Should the notes be played *long* or *short*? Should the notes be played as *block* sounds or as *decays*? Should the passage be played *with emphasis* or *without*? Should the passage be played using *legato* style? The majority of these decisions should be made during score preparation. The use of the breath impulse technique is also beneficial in achieving certain articulation styles. (See Breath Impulse Article on pages 3-4.)

Effective conductors will insist that their ensemble perform with **good ensemble precision**. Students should be instructed early in the formative years to internalize the pulse. For

younger students, this obviously begins with the use of a foot pat. Through the course of a student's development, the process of using a foot tap may be eliminated. Conductors must also stress the importance of articulating together as it is impossible to perform with good ensemble precision when tones are initiated late. Consequently, this error leads to a host of other performance issues.

The **development of musical artistry** is the final piece of the puzzle as it relates to performances of great merit. It is the responsibility of the conductor to develop an inward feeling of phrasing and phrase shaping and then instill these values within ensemble members. The conductor must also understand that expressive qualities cannot begin to emerge until fundamentals are solidly in place.

Leadership Skills

Being an effective leader is a vital element in becoming a successful conductor. The conductor who leads is organized and prepared for rehearsals. This preparation demonstrates that you respect the time of your ensemble members. It also allows you the opportunity to have a commanding presence during rehearsal. Remember, if you are not prepared, it is hard to expect that your organization will be prepared!

Provide vision for your ensemble and its members. It is your responsibility, as the conductor, to set goals and objectives for your program and then work collectively with ensemble members to achieve them. By striving for excellence in every aspect of your teaching, you have the opportunity to be a highly effective leader.

The following are quotes regarding leadership for the effective conductor:

- *The important thing is this: to be able, at any moment, to sacrifice what we are for what we could become. – Charles DuBois*
- *You cannot stay on the summit forever; you have to come down again. So why bother to go there in the first place? Just this; what is above knows what is below, but what is below does not know what is above. One climbs, one sees, one*

descends. One sees no longer, but one has seen. There is a way of conducting oneself in the lower regions by the memory of what one saw higher up. When one can no longer see, one can at least still know. We live and love by what we have seen. – Rene Daumal



Conducting Technique

Obviously, it is a major asset when an ensemble director demonstrates superior conducting ability. Practice is essential in acquiring these skills. This is best achieved by practicing in front of a mirror or by video recording your practice or rehearsal sessions. Each of these methods provides the conductor with instant self-evaluation. Strive to have clean, readable gestures. Be careful not to over conduct, but, at the same time be inspiring on the podium. Most importantly, be determined to be an effective conductor by constantly pursuing musical growth for yourself as well as members of your respective ensemble.

The Breath Impulse

When I first arrived at Southern Miss six years ago as Associate Director of Bands, I was amazed at how few students had heard of what apparently is a "hidden jewel" when it comes to the development of tone quality and clarity of articulation on wind instruments. This "hidden jewel" is known as the Breath Impulse. Simply stated, the Breath Impulse is a pedagogical technique used to train the diaphragm to exhale air in a controlled manner while playing a wind instrument.

The Breath Impulse concept originated and evolved in the Norman (Oklahoma) Band Program during the mid 1950's to late 1960's. Its developers, William C. Robinson and James A. Middleton used this practice to create better rhythmic development, specifically with the dotted-eighth/sixteenth rhythm. The two discovered that incorporation of breath-pulses (as a means of sub-division) destroyed any triplet feeling that

often and incorrectly occurs in the performance execution of the dotted-eighth/sixteenth rhythm.

Robinson and Middleton believed that students should be introduced to the Breath Impulse concept during their first year of instruction, as there is generally little student resistance at this stage in their development. I agree with this premise and generally introduced this practice to my students near the mid-point of their beginning band instruction (after embouchure formation has clearly been established). Additionally, students who are trained in using the breath impulse as beginners have the opportunity to “grow” into the concept.

There are three ways to incorporate the use of the breath impulse system: first by pulsing only, second by pulsing on the mouthpiece, and finally by pulsing a note on the instrument. I recommend that each of the three ways be introduced first by using quarter-note rhythms. To practice pulsing only, you may hiss four-quarter notes through your teeth loudly with incredible force. You may also use the syllable “HAH” to achieve the same objective (the method I employed most often.). You demonstrate and then have your students echo. Generally, students will grasp this concept rather quickly and be ready for the second step of creating the same pulsing effect on the mouthpiece alone (brasses buzz the mouthpiece, flutes pulse on the head-joint, clarinets and saxophones pulse on the mouthpiece, and double reeds “crow” the reed). This procedure should be completed without tonguing. Again, you should demonstrate and then have your students echo. The final step of the equation is to incorporate the same pulsing effect on the assembled instrument. You may select an easy performance pitch for beginners such as a concert F. You may choose to begin this process by having students play four quarter-notes while moving the tongue (as in *too-too-too-too*). Next, have students perform the same four quarter-notes without moving the tongue (as in *who-who-who-who*). This may be aided with a foot pat (as in *down-down-down-down*). As always, you should demonstrate and then have the students echo. Once students have successfully mastered quarter-note breath impulses, you may proceed to eighth-notes. This may additionally be aided with a foot pat (as in *down-up, down-up, down-up, down-up*).

There are a number of benefits in utilizing breath impulse teaching. Rhythmically, use of the breath impulse technique helps students acquire an understanding of rhythmic sub-divisions of the beat. Implementation of this concept also helps in the improvement of breath support, thereby creating a more resonant tone quality. Utilizing the breath impulse technique trains students in placing breath pressure at the “front” of the note, helping with the production of a more supported tone quality as

opposed to a “flabby” or unsupported sound. The breath impulse technique aids in developing a natural use of the diaphragm within the student, allowing for cleaner attacks, releases, control of instrumental sound, and better intonation. Utilizing the breath impulse technique saves instructional time as teaching is made more effective. As a stylistic device, development of the breath impulse technique will aid in the preparation of works within rehearsal, especially when incorporating march-style or passages to be emphasized. This technique can prove to be priceless during the sight-reading process, when time-saving devices are crucial. Instructions like, “play all accented quarter notes with a breath impulse and tongue without a space” OR “play all accented quarter notes with a breath impulse and tongue with a space” are clearly understood by students as they have been versed in the process since their first year of instruction. Finally, incorporation of the breath impulse technique establishes the basic pulsation that leads to a natural breath vibrato used by many fine musicians. Even if another method of vibrato is preferred, the development of the breath impulse technique is very helpful in establishing the model of a highly skilled sound.

I encourage you to take the time in training your students in the utilization of the breath impulse technique. The costs associated with this investment are so small when compared to the musical dividends gained over the course of a student’s band career. Enjoy!



Mohamad Schuman is the Associate Director of Bands at The University of Southern Mississippi. Prior to this appointment, Dr. Schuman successfully taught in the public schools of Mississippi. During his tenure at Stone High School, his bands established a reputation for excellence and performed at various prominent events including the 2001 Midwest Clinic, the 2002 Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade, and the 2005 Presidential Inaugural Parade. Dr. Schuman has twice been honored by the National Band Association with its Citation of Excellence and was selected as one of three national winners that traveled to Rome to conduct the Italian Army Band during the 2004 NBA International Conducting Symposium. Dr. Schuman holds both the Bachelor and Master of Music Education Degrees from The University of Southern Mississippi and the Doctor of Musical Arts Degree in Conducting from the University of South Carolina. In 2011, he was elected to membership in the prestigious American Bandmasters Association and most recently served as a contributing writer for Volume IX of *Teaching Music Through Performance In Band*.