

Embracing our Similarities: Sharing Concepts Across the Band and the Orchestra

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Introduction:

Many commonalities exist between the band and orchestra, yet an unnecessary divide can develop between the two. As leaders of large ensembles we are united by many common factors. Some of these factors are quite obvious and others may be less so. It is obvious that critical listening skills are mutually important; however, we propose that some less obvious commonalities between the band and orchestra become evident when critical listening is employed *across* the divide.

Regardless of ensemble age or stage of skill development, critical listening ability is fundamental to all music-making. Musicians must listen to other players in their section; musicians must listen across sections to how their part fits in; the conductor must listen to the ensemble (in multiple senses) to appropriately guide it; and conductors must listen across disciplines, genres, and styles to what their colleagues are doing. It is easy to become immersed in *only* the sound of our specific ensemble, yet there is much we can learn from each other.

Things Bands Can Learn From Orchestras (a wind conductor's view):

Ensemble Distinction - Transparency of Sound:

- A string section is capable of producing a far more transparent sound through which featured winds can easily project. For example, large numbers of strings do not create as dense a sound as large numbers of winds.
- In the band world, supporting voices are often large in number (perhaps a full clarinet, saxophone, flute, or brass section). The larger the number of wind players on supporting material, the harder it is to bring forward the intended leading line.

Possible Solution:

- Learning to alter dynamics, blend, and/or balance of sound to allow for *transparency* greatly improves the overall clarity and balance of the band.
- Realizing that sometimes content in a score should be more felt than heard, especially when serving in a supporting role.

Ensemble Distinction - Resonant Sonority:

- The nature of string playing tends to be more horizontal versus the vertical tendency of wind playing. A string section generally has greater length and resonance to their overall sound; a large string section is capable of creating a truly sustained, legato sound when appropriate.
- As a result of the construction of string instruments, an entire section resonates fairly easily. Each individual instrument is an entire resonating body, the vibration of the string amplified by the sympathetic vibration of the wooden instrument. There is a considerable amount of sound "left over" after the musician has ceased his/her efforts to make it.

- The same *cannot* be said for woodwind and brass instruments, where the sound stops when the air stops. What this can mean is that the band must actually work even HARDER than a string section to create a truly resonant sound.
- Note length in the band can be dry and short when unnecessary (vertical). Attacks also tend to be too strong with little resonance that follows.²
- The need for breath and consistency of breath often interferes with ensemble resonance.

Possible Solution:

- Use stagger breathing when possible to continue a resonant sound rather than breaking it often for a breath. Phrase does not *necessarily* mean breath.
- Use visual and aural examples to increase awareness of long lines and *connection* of notes to help establish a true legato. Bands often underachieve in establishing a clear legato, especially when a passage is articulated rather than slurred.
- Strive to make attacks/ releases more round, project sound into the performing space, and listen for overall ensemble resonance to improve warmth, balance, and blend of a band.
- *The Art of Wind Playing* by Arthur Weisberg, provides a fantastic resource and visual guide to illustrate these concepts.

Ensemble Distinction - Range of Dynamic Extremes:

- A string section with small numbers of winds has a tremendous capacity to play at extremely *soft* dynamics as well as strong.
- String players, sometimes instinctually and sometimes as a result of training, tend to hide when uncertain (also adds to overall balance and blend). The comfort zone of wind players is much louder than strings.
- Large numbers of wind players are uncomfortable playing at a soft extreme. Instead they tend to settle for *piano* dynamics that are actually much closer to *mezzo forte* or stronger.

Possible Solution:

- Push musicians to develop their soft extreme in order to enhance their *forte* extreme, all while not sacrificing tone quality, intonation, or technique.
- Use visual aids to make this concept tangible such as imagery, simile, metaphor, or an “aural” target.
- Tremendous intensity of breath support.

NB: while we introduced it in passing above, the notion of a section player “hiding”—blending in, fitting in, producing a sound that doesn’t stick out, etc.—is one of the central questions of ensemble playing. It can manifest itself both positively and negatively, depending on the context. Determining the context is key for both conductors and students.

Ensemble Distinction - Individual Part Responsibility for Winds:

- Orchestral wind parts are usually not doubled, forcing the individual musician to be independent. When wind parts are doubled, it is highly strategic and carefully controlled.
- Multiple players per part in bands allows students to hide in a section (especially young bands), developing fewer skills of independence.

Possible Solution:

- Program band repertoire that demands more independence to help develop greater individual musicianship. Rotate parts within a section.
- Approach the large ensemble rehearsal process as a series of chamber interactions to develop greater individual musicianship and engage musicians.
- Add a chamber music component to a program when possible.

Ensemble Distinction - Musical movement:

- String sections move together with unified bowings and often display phrase elements in their body movements.
- Bands are usually still and often rigid in their physical execution.
- String players are instructed to watch principal players carefully for bow placement, bow stroke, and entrance cues. Principal strings also have a great deal of responsibility in terms of making musical decisions and communicating these to their section. The concertmaster, in the most extreme cases, is often like a second conductor, making decisions that impact many aspects of the performance.

Possible Solution:

- Awareness of expressive movement will not only improve individual musicianship, but will also increase individual responsibility. Reading physical movements, especially of principal players, will help to unify the ensemble and increase musical communication.
- Spend more time in rehearsal with the ensemble performing without a conductor. Guide their *eyes* as well as their ears to engage the need and willingness to move!

Ensemble Similarity! - Parallel of Breath and Articulation to Bowings:

- The weight and speed of the bow have a direct correlation to the attack and speed of the air in wind instruments.
- An advantage in string playing is that this technique is visible. With wind players, the technique is internal and therefore can be difficult to identify.

Possible Solution:

- Use visual examples and images of bowings when speaking to winds to influence the players approach to the instrument. For example, a *sfz* requires a faster bow speed. Similarly for a wind player, a *sfz* requires a faster burst of air, NOT a harsh tongue.
- Discuss different bowings (such as arco, pizzicato, spiccato, *detache*, etc.) to provide a broader scope of possibilities for wind players (and a *visual* image).
- Apply a wide variety of syllables, consonants, and air speeds to the attack *and* sustain (or lack thereof) for stylistic results. This is a common technique in jazz rehearsals. Many bands stick with *ta*, which creates more problems than it solves.

Things Orchestras Can Learn From Bands (an orchestra conductor's view):

Ensemble Similarity! - Parallel of Breath and Articulation to Bowings:

- As above, the weight and speed of the bow have a direct correlation to the attack and speed of the air in wind instruments.

Possible Solution:

- Speaking about consonants and the speed of air can be just as useful an analogy to string players.

Ensemble Distinction - Clarity of Ensemble Execution:

- Young bands tend to be more aware of ensemble execution than young strings.
- Because the envelope of a band sound often involves clear attacks, band members become better habituated to precision of ensemble than do string players, for whom truly accurate rhythm can be a challenge.
- Essential in a band is the concept of breathing together. String players need to breathe (because they need to be alive to play), but they do not tend to think of breathing as a systematically useful thing in relation to an ensemble.

Possible Solution:

- In the same way that wind players learn to breathe together, string players can be taught to choreograph their bows at the same time to ensure togetherness of attack.
- In highly rhythmic music, if string players set the bow on the string at the same time before playing their note, the likelihood that the attack will be together increases greatly. This is directly analogous to wind players breathing together.
- Conceptualize rhythm in an anticipatory manner, ready to lead rather than follow.

Ensemble Distinction - Learning to Blend and Balance:

- Wind players in large sections must learn to listen carefully and play *inside* the section, forcing more attention to blend/balance.
- Wind players with band experience are likely to have more natural and intuitive listening skills and blending abilities. Particularly when it comes to conventional Viennese classical scoring (pairs of woodwinds, trumpets, and horns) the orchestral wind section can be difficult to blend.

Possible Solution:

- Guide the listening of string individuals to play *inside* the sound of the section, listening to musicians around them more than to themselves.
- Guide orchestral winds to note the distinction between a solo versus ensemble passage and teach them to change roles rapidly (one moment an exposed solo, the next a blended wind section).

Ensemble Distinction - Tuning and Balance:

- Although bands and orchestras on literally all levels (beginner to high-level professional) struggle constantly with intonation, there are aspects of what bands do that orchestral string players can learn from.
- String players are often taught to use constant vibrato to enhance the overall beauty and uniformity of the section's sound; however, this can be a hindrance when fixing

intonation. Many instruments used in the band habitually use little or no vibrato (clarinets, much of the brass), and other woodwinds get used to using a vibrato that blends well.

- Wind players, especially brass, are more used to "listening down" to bass instruments. Since the bass instruments often play the root of the chord, such habitual listening makes brass players much more likely to play in tune and to adjust their intonation quickly. They tend to develop a better natural sense of balance, especially when playing static, block chords.
- String players tend to focus so intently on the individual quality of their sound that they may not listen carefully for how their pitch fits into the overall balance of a chord. Though this is essentially a balance issue, the perception will often come across as an intonation problem.

Possible Solution:

- When working specifically on matters of intonation within a section, it is best for string players to use no vibrato, to "open their ears" and listen carefully, and, if they are unsure of their tendencies, to play softly to fit into the pitch center of the section.
- Violinists and violists who are not used to listening down often tend to play sharp, as they consciously or unconsciously believe that it increases the tension in the sound (when in fact it simply creates intonation problems). Guide their listening to the cello and bass sections.

Conclusion:

In a world of increasingly specialized performance expectations it can be easy to forget that greater musicianship tends to be achieved by listening to others, not by focusing on oneself. Stepping *outside* of one's disciplinary comfort zone can enhance critical listening for teachers and students alike, as well as encourage collegial discussions, and broaden ideas/rehearsal techniques. The result can only strengthen ALL music-making efforts in BOTH the band and orchestra (and beyond!).

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