

## 5 Concepts to Build Ensemble Awareness

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These 5 concepts can be applied to any age-level of student as well as any level of repertoire. We as teachers then find a way to adapt the concepts for our students.

1. *Care* about your sound.
2. *Evaluate* how your sound is *interacting* with others.
3. Be *engaged* with the pulse/momentum of the music.
4. *Search* with your ears.
5. Be *musical*, always.

**Tone** – Air is what makes good tone possible. A great breath leads to great tone and sustained breath support yields sustained quality tone. Never play louder OR softer than you can play with a beautiful tone.

**Intonation** – Playing in tune (and in balance) is scary... because it is more difficult to hear yourself. If you are matching (tone quality, color, pitch) the person on either side of you, then your sound is somewhat lost. It becomes part of the section/ensemble sound.

A large percentage of pitch issues will be solved when you *Care about your sound*. If students play in the center of every note with the best tone that you can produce, then we will have a chance to play exactly in tune. Perhaps you've heard, **"You can't tune a bad tone..."**

Attempt to hear each pitch, as best you can, before you play it...

Intonation exercises:

- Play along with a pitch drone on your phone. Manipulate the pitch (both directions) on any given note so you can hear what it sounds like to play in tune and out of tune. Notice how you are using your air, slides, and embouchure to manipulate – If you can HEAR if you're out of tune and you can alter the pitch, you can PLAY in tune.
- When using a tuner, always play away from the tuner, solidify your pitch, and THEN look at the tuner. Know what your instrument's tendencies are on trouble notes and then transfer those tendencies to your music.

**Pulse/Rhythm** – Students must know what the pulse is and how rhythm is constructed within that pulse.

- Can your students count, clap, sizzle the rhythm? Do they *know* it or are they echoing?
- Then, students need to know where to listen for pulse.
  - It is not always the percussionists (or the director) that are responsible – ALL students are responsible for pulse maintenance. Turn over ownership to the ensemble.
- Remember, the metronome is an *external* reinforcement of pulse... this does not mean that students are developing internal recognition. There should be opportunities for students to demonstrate internal pulse and rhythmic stability without external influences.

**Ask questions of the ensemble** – Ask your students what they are hearing. Are they expanding their listening as they become more comfortable with their part?

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Percussionists – Have your sound in mind... what type of sound do you want to make? Are you accompanying someone in the ensemble? Are you a soloist? Often percussionists are asked to emphasize musical things in the ensemble – FIND THOSE!

- Have a variety of appropriate mallets available for each instrument.
- Practice different techniques to create different sounds.
- If there are instrument options, try them out! Which one best fits the music you are performing? (Cymbals, sticks, shakers, drums, etc.)

**Be musical, always** – There is music-making to be found in every line that we perform (even silences), especially if it's quality literature. The thing that got us into music and keeps us in music are those moments that make us feel good when we are all contributing together. FIND those moments in your music and take a chance!

\*\*\*Most importantly, the **MUSIC** is not what comes *after* the technique, **it is what develops *while* the technique grows.**\*\*\*

Musical exercises:

- LISTEN to great musicians – emulate their sound and phrase shape.
- Record yourself, are you performing with as much shape and dynamic contrast as you think?
- Experiment with many different types of articulation or creating different shades of sound
- Keep your body relaxed and free of tension – don't be afraid to move with the phrase.

**How to practice? (and also how to rehearse)**

- **Remove the difficulty** from the thing you are trying to practice.
- SLOW it down and don't speed up too quickly.
- Air and finger a difficult passage.
- Sing challenging intervals.
- Put the passage into a more comfortable range to work on rhythms/tone.
- Play the rhythm on a repeated note.
- Practice with a metronome to make sure rhythm and pulse stays even/consistent.
- Slowly add the more difficult concepts into the music.
- Practice WITH the musical phrase incorporated.
- When you practice with success in mind, concepts are retained, and you can *continually move forward*.
  - We become frustrated with practice when we don't remove enough of the difficulty. BUILD YOURSELF UP, don't knock yourself down.

**Some self-reflection about your rehearsals:**

- Are you talking about tone/sound production EVERY REHEARSAL?
  - Then, how varied is that instruction/imagery?
  - Are you modeling? Playing sound examples?
- Are you giving feedback to every section every rehearsal?
  - Then, how varied is that feedback?
- Are you getting off the podium every rehearsal?
- Are your students feeling success MULTIPLE times a rehearsal?
  - If not, dial back the difficulty, vary the feedback, have them try it again
- Are you talking about MUSIC every rehearsal?
  - Do students have an idea of how they can be more musical?

- Is the music at a level to where your students can conquer the technique and work on music?
- Are you helping your students understand what they can be doing on each repetition to be better?
- Are you engaging your students with questions about music? Or are we just pointing out what is *wrong* and fixing things?

... imagine an ensemble and year's worth of musicians that are challenged every day to CARE, EVALUATE, INTERACT, ENGAGE, SEARCH, and be MUSICAL.

**Teaching strategies and exercises that you can employ to improve ensemble awareness in your own group:**

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