



The Midwest Clinic

International Band and Orchestra Conference

Podium Awareness: inspired strategies to grow conductor listening

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Conductor Listening Challenge Potential Causes:

- Overactive mind, negative self-talk (limits capacity to listen, catalogue, prioritize)
- Lack of preparation (limited score knowledge AND what want out it)
- Anxiety of perception (values image of conductor more than sound)
- Inability to identify and/or strengthen underrepresented awareness areas
- Lack of diagnostic framework for improvement

Grow Conductor Listening: Self-Awareness

1) Recognize and avoid awareness blockers:

- Unhelpful Habits: Singing, snapping, baton tapping, etc. (Ask the ensemble if in doubt!)
- Unprepared Mind: Know your score. A mind focused only on beat direction survival limits listening to anything other than beat direction. (For a calmer mind try: 1) know phrase structures, notice the odd groupings! 2) know stress/release contrasts, phrase arrivals!)
- Untrained Body: Practice navigation challenges, changes, and transitions where the conductor is critical. (Know which part helps ground the navigation difficulty).
- Limited Expectation: Have an aural expectation higher than “error mode traffic cop”. (Have musical expectations for tone, character, style, etc. in the first rehearsal)
- Lack of Interpretation: Have wants and needs. (What is one thing this piece must have?)

2) Know Thyself:

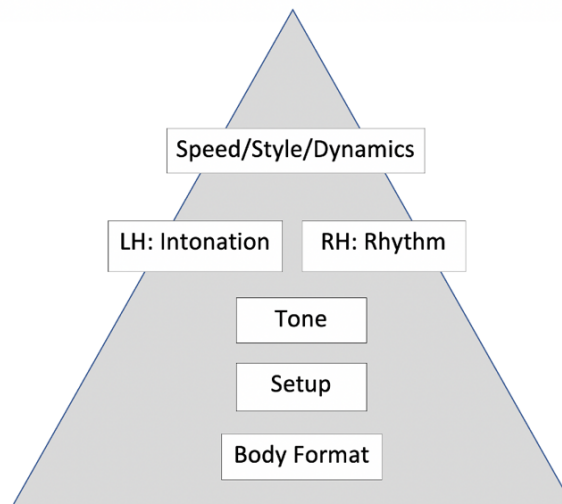
- Know your natural listening strengths and weaknesses. (What do you find “most objectionable” in an early rehearsal? What is your musicianship naturally drawn to?)
- Know how instrument or voice type can skew tendencies? (ie. percussionist rhythmic precision, horn player tone, violinist melody, bassist harmony, etc.).
- What are the first comments you frequently show or speak in rehearsal? (Ask the ensemble if in doubt!)
- What are your tendencies for dominance and avoidance? (ensemble precision, intonation, limited tone, etc.).

Diagnostic Awareness Framework: a prioritized filter for diagnosing sound. Provides a hierarchy for technical and musical rehearsal triage, exposes listening limitations/underrepresented areas, and provides a path to grow musical listening.

Models

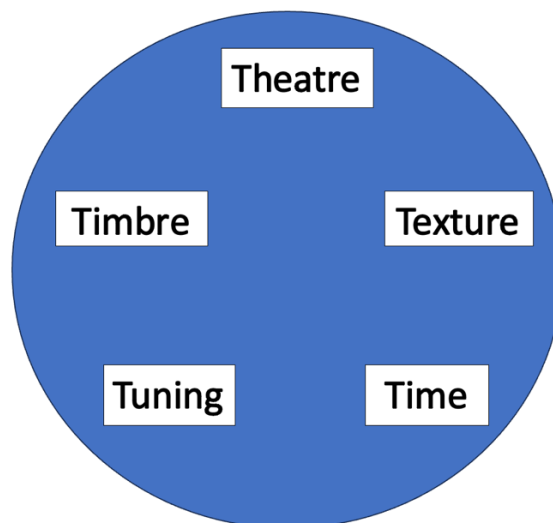
A) **Pedagogy Pyramid aka “Triage Triangle”** (K-12 Setting)

Adapted from research of Bob Culver – *Master Teacher Profile* (1989)



B) **“5 T’s” Conductor Listening Map** (Professional Setting)

Attributed to conductor Christopher James Lees, Charlotte Symphony Orchestra

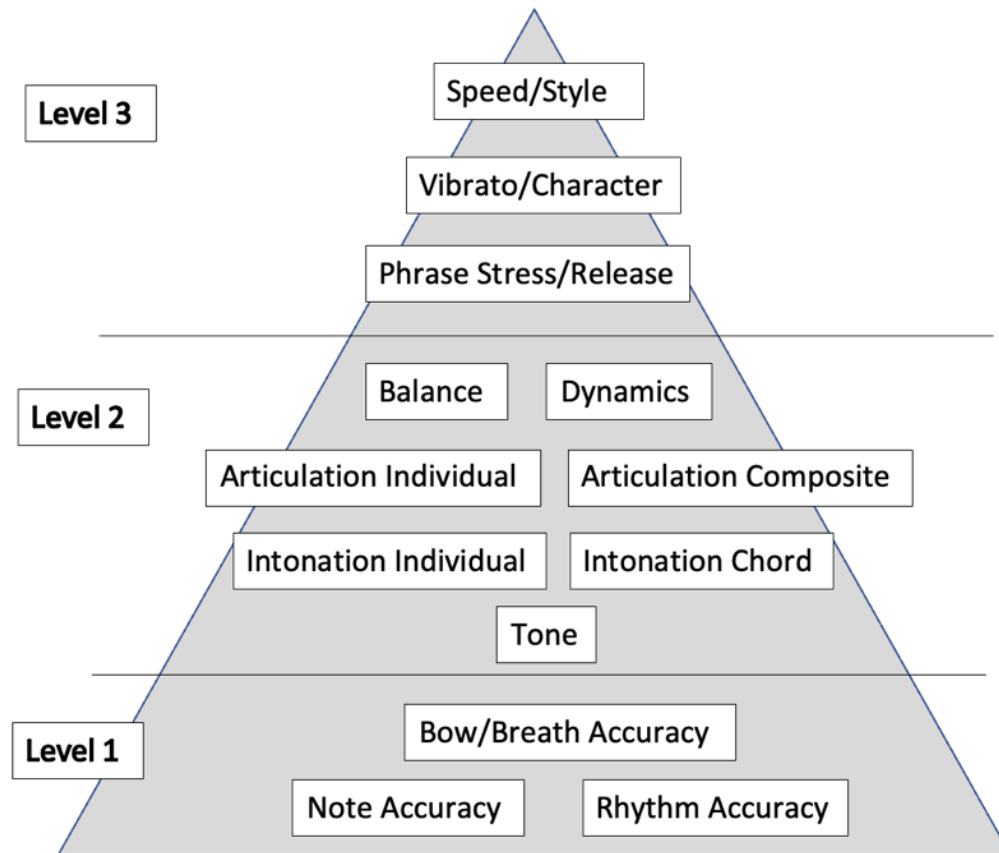


5 T's: Time, Texture, Timbre, Tuning, Theatre

- Time/Rhythm – Connect to motors, front/middle/back beat orientation.
- Timbre/Tone – Quality of sound, tone, body.
- Tuning/Intonation – Direct listening to fundamentals, anticipate tuning tendencies
- Texture/Balance – Relief, contrast, support, juxtaposition.
- Theatre – Personality, character, dimension, communication. Connect to wide range of human emotions and lived experiences.

C) Conductor Rehearsal Triage Triangle: (Student, Pre-Professional Setting)

Attributed to Joel Schut, hybrid model combining Pedagogy Pyramid and 5 T's Listening Map



The fastest way to grow is facing a weaknesses head on. Set goals via listening challenges.

Grow your Musicianship: Awareness Challenges

“Play is the highest form of research” – Albert Einstein

Off Podium Awareness Challenges:

- Get off the podium: place ears in different geographic locations in the rehearsal environment. Explore rehearsing from different locations in the room.
- Break it down: listen in smaller groupings to identify problems and needs.
- Record rehearsals: analyze rehearsal recording. Consider using a grading rubric that represents multiple musical categories (MSBOA, MICCA, Maryland, etc.)
- Peer listening: Play “do you hear what I hear?” and listen with a friend or colleague.
- Collaborative Listening: Play “do you hear what I hear?” and listen with the ensemble.

On Podium Awareness Challenges:

1) **Error Detection Sheets:** Distribute anonymously and randomly

- Come in one measure early/late
- Play opposite dynamics
- Play opposite articulations
- Avoid sustain on long notes
- Play with thin tone
- Skip a beat

2) **Stop Staring at the First Violins! – the style is in the accompaniment**

Tendency for conductors to spend more time on melodic shaping than textural shaping. Yet, texture often has the biggest impact on sound and improvements.

+Try this in rehearsal...

- Allow yourself to comment/rehearse accompaniment only for an entire rehearsal. Start with most “boring” part (ex. timp in classical work, bass in string orchestra work, etc.).
- Melody plays with no sustain (ex. pizzicato strings, “bop” wind/vocal). This drives melody player listen to texture and forces texture players to define the style.

3) **Beyond Black and White – color and voicing over notes and rhythm**

Tendency for conductors to spend time on note/rhythmic accuracy saving color and voicing for final rehearsal steps. Yet, notes/rhythms often improve with character.

+Try this in rehearsal...

- Allow yourself to comment/rehearse on tone color/voicing (no notes or rhythms!) only for an entire rehearsal. (ex. Everyone match the intensity of the snare’s rhythmic energy, Play within in the warmth of the string bass’s pedal tone). Direct musician ears!
- In rehearsal, find definitive sections or chord “pillars” to voice. Voice within a specific instrument (ex. All under the viola sound) or pitch (ex. No louder than C naturals).
- Establish sound color goals for each section. Then, starting with the definitive voice, additively “fold” in other voices without losing the identity of the desired tone color. This set balances and creates listening goals and sonic boundaries.

4) **Reverse Articulation – ending is the new beginning**

Tendency for conductors to listen and rehearse only to articulation onset. Yet, significant musical impact is found in note release articulations. Notes are often cut off early compromising harmony, section unity, and style.

+Try this in rehearsal...

- Allow yourself to comment/rehearse only note ending articulations or “reverse articulations. Move beyond duration to style of release.
- Experiment with a variety of note release styles. Articulation options may include:
 - Sharp/abrupt, Rounded/tapered, Fuzzed, Flared, Resonant, Dry, etc.
- Rehearse the final note of a piece detailing end of note articulation style. Then, rehearse backwards all other critical “reverse articulation” moments (ex. end of phrases, any note preceding rests, etc.).

5) Release and Stress – wait, isn't it the other way around?

Tendency for conductors to overly emphasis adding stress to music. This increases volume and intensity. Yet, removing sound gets to the same contrast goal and can yield a more shapely and subtle result while promoting ensemble listening.

+Try this in rehearsal...

- Allow yourself to comment/rehearse focusing solely on releases and removing sound. No additive comments (ex. “stronger, more, or accented”). Only release comments (ex. “less, release, diminuendo, etc”).
- Identify moments of dissonance (ex. dominant, more extreme harmonies) and surround with intentional release. Similarly, identify moments of consonance (ex. tonic, less extreme harmonies) and confirm release.
- Diversify Stress/Release Vocabulary:
 - strong/weak, lean/lift, goose/ghost, heavy/light, hot/cold, war/peace

6) Listening in Layers – a new kind of hearing

Tendency for conductors to direct listening towards each individual line. Active grouping fosters listening and rehearsing in layers. Focus on the neglected layers for greatest improvements to style and sound!

+Try this in rehearsal...

- Identify and rehearse orchestration layers independently. (ex. bass group, melody, etc.)
- Stacking orchestration layers in ascending order of significance.
- Determine a strategic listening goal based on one layer (ie. rhythm)
- Set ensemble balances to specific listening goals.

Conclusion:

- Goal: advance from passive hearing to active listening
- Think in a diagnostic listening framework
- Know your underrepresented listening areas, grow those areas
- Experiment with targeted conductor listening challenges/restrictions
- Have wishes. Go into rehearsal needing/wanting technical and musical things
- Keep it fresh. Respond to what you hear. Model responsive listening. (ex. “I promise you I will do it slightly differently every time.”)

To grow artistically, a conductor must at minimum have the courage to try new things. Nourish an honest belief in your capacity to grow. Give yourself a license to expand awareness!

Notes: