

**Claribel's Clinic**  
*by Guido Six*  
**A Clarinet Choir in Every Band?**  
*Improving the Quality of your Ensemble Through a Real Choir Approach.*

**Introduction**

Any instrumental choir has the disadvantage of being tonally limited to an ensemble of like instruments. Even when one has the entire clarinet family from the very low contra bass to the high E-flat or even A-flat soprano, there are many tonal colors missing when compared to a full band or symphony orchestra. I suggest that directors should try to turn this disadvantage into an advantage. Is a band or orchestra not a collection of several instrumental choirs? Is it possible for a large ensemble to sound great when one or more of the instrumental choirs do not? Can a vocal choir move your heart when a soprano singer is screaming above everybody else? I don't think so. An ensemble can only be truly excellent when every section fulfills its role within the context of the greater whole. So, if there is no cohesion in one section of the band or orchestra, how can a director make that section fit with the entire ensemble in a satisfying way?

I strongly believe that by developing good fundamental performance skills in single instrumental choirs, directors can significantly improve the quality of any larger multi-instrumental ensemble. The great challenge for a conductor in leading an instrumental choir is to accomplish more with less. Directors who can realize this with their instrumental choir will find it much easier to do the same with their larger group!

Let's have a look at Claribel's approach.

**The sound concept**

*You only need one pair of good ears, a real team spirit and a perfect balance*

When Claribel performed at DePaul University in 1994 people in the audience were curious about the equipment we were using. They seemed to be surprised that our musicians did not all play on the same instruments, same mouthpieces, same reeds, and same ligatures.

Although good equipment can do much to improve the quality of the sound, what really makes a difference is students learning to listen. Every player must listen through the same ears, the ears of the conductor who is responsible for developing the concept of sound he wants from the ensemble. Even if your students have the best equipment, if they are not playing correctly (with good embouchure, good breathing, good intonation, etc.) your instrumental choir will not have a good sound. When the priority of good playing fundamentals is coupled with students playing on superior equipment then the ensemble has the best chance of realizing optimal results. Good players who are well trained in good playing fundamentals can sound acceptable playing on inferior equipment, however, players without good fundamentals will not sound good even when playing the best equipment available.

Just as with team sports, all members of an ensemble must commit themselves to making personal sacrifices for the benefit of the ensemble. In ensemble playing, there is no room for individual actions to take precedent. Everybody must know and accept their role in making the ensemble successful. Just as in a choral ensemble, one solo tripper (remember the yelling soprano) can jeopardize the result of the entire ensemble.