

Diagnosing Problems in Your Band, and How to Help Your Kids Listen for Themselves

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- ✓ Planning your rehearsals carefully can help your band improve rhythmic accuracy, key center recognition, and intonation. Don't just play through things and wait for something to go wrong, plan to 'attack' areas that are giving the band problems.
- ✓ The warm-up period should be directly related to what's coming up in the remainder of the rehearsal.
- ✓ Play scales during your warm-up that are related to the music you are playing. Consider playing scales with no music so students will listen to what is actually coming out of their instrument. [Non-mallet percussion can be given specific patterns to perform during these scales, or can get equipment prepared for the first selection.] Play intervals, simple tunes, telephone numbers, etc. by using numbers of scale degrees. [Twinkle Twinkle = 1, 1, 5, 5, 6, 6, 5, etc.] Construct major chords [1, 3, 5, 8] using scale numbers, and, later, move to minor [1, flat 3, 5, 8], diminished, augmented, and seventh chords. All of these things help students develop listening skills.
- ✓ Most students are much too visually oriented in playing their instrument. They're locked in to reading the music. Unfortunately, they often don't listen to what's coming out of their instrument. Using the listening techniques above may start to develop a better sense of awareness to both what the individual is doing and those around him/her. It helps develop better accuracy, tone quality, and intonation.
- ✓ Consider isolating problematic rhythms and having the entire band play those rhythms during the warm-up. Play the problematic rhythmic pattern as part of one of your scales.
- ✓ Stop as little as possible, but when you do, have a reason. Tell the students what's wrong, where it's happening, and how to fix it. Be specific. Isolate the section or individual offenders. Be specific. Avoid general statements such as "it's just sloppy," or "someone's playing the wrong note," etc. Be specific.
- ✓ Some mistakes, such as missed notes, often will take care of themselves. Problems such as tone, intonation, balance, and phrasing will not correct themselves, and need to be addressed.
- ✓ If there is a specific fingering, sticking, articulation, dynamic change, etc. you want, write it in each part before it is distributed. Or, collect the parts, make the changes, and redistribute.
- ✓ Establish the concept that it is not how many notes you play, but how you play them that is most important. Students must realize correct notes, rhythm, and good intonation are where the music begins, not where it ends.
- ✓ Be sure students understand how their part functions in the music as a whole. Is it melody? Is it a harmonized part of the melody? Is it accompaniment? Is it countermelody?
- ✓ Make sure they understand dynamics often have to be adjusted to fit the band, and just because it's on the printed page doesn't mean you always get play the printed dynamic. The 'pyramid' often needs to be adjusted so the melody can come through.
- ✓ I tell students that I don't stop to pick on them, but to help them correct errors. This is because I know they want to play as well as they can, and I want to do all I can to help them. Positive reinforcement does

wonders. Be sure your students realize you have nothing personal against them when you criticize their playing. Positive reinforcement does wonders for morale.

- ✓ Try not to take the time of the entire group to work on individual problems. However, because of time constraints, this is often necessary.
 - ✓ Consider working from the back of a composition to the front. This helps give students a sense of closure and achievement. Also, how many times have you heard a piece that began well, and gradually became weaker and weaker as it progressed, finally ending poorly? Obviously, it was always rehearsed from beginning, and the middle and end sections received little or no attention.
 - ✓ Point out repeated sections to students. Find and play the 'A' section in various places throughout the piece. This helps give a sense of accomplishment in showing how much of a piece can be covered by that 'A' section---often nearly half the piece.
 - ✓ Teach students at the beginning levels the recognition of simple form, and point out how many tunes are written in A, A, B, A form. Then, add the terms of introduction, coda, and development. Later, in some compositions, you can add augmentation and diminution. Discuss dogfight, break strain, and stingers. Students like terminology, and will help their recognition of what's going on in the music.
 - ✓ Also, use correct musical terminology. For example, fermata is the proper musical term, not 'bird's eye,' 'cat's eye,' or 'hold.' And, ff is not 'double loud.' It is fortissimo, which means 'very loud.' Doctors and lawyers use the terminology associated with their profession, and not ambiguous slang. We should do the same.
 - ✓ Staccato does not mean short. It means detached. Using a 'tongue stop' is rarely necessary.
 - ✓ If your score and the individual parts aren't numbered, have everyone [including yourself] do so. Give the students some reference points before they number their own parts: A is measure 12, T is measure 224, there are 294 measures total. This saves an incredible amount of rehearsal time!
 - ✓ Sometimes a bit of editing of parts will help students perform a difficult passage. This may include leaving out some notes, changing articulations, ranges, etc.
 - ✓ Sometimes, asking a student not to play a particular passage is the best solution for the student and the ensemble.
 - ✓ Stress proper posture, instrument position, and hand position. If you do this from the beginning stages of instruction, it will become ingrained, and not really an issue.
 - ✓ Be sure to teach musical concepts in the pieces you're studying. Discuss style, historical background, performance practices, and information about the composer, form, and harmonic structure. Always stress tone, intonation, and control.
 - ✓ You must realize that anything the students need to know, you must teach. If they're lacking in some area, teach it to them, without complaining. That's why you were hired! If they already knew everything, you wouldn't have a job!
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- ✓ There are no dynamic absolutes. All dynamics are related to one another within a piece.
- ✓ Determine phrase length by breath marks, harmonic cadence, and/or rhythmic cadence.
- ✓ Make sure there is consistency in articulation to achieve clarity in the musical line.