

THREE GAME CHANGERS for Achieving a Mature Ensemble Sound

Dr. Scott Watson, drscottwatson@gmail.com and www.scottwatsonmusic.com

Cairn University (Langhorne, PA) and Alfred Music



Alfred Music
LEARN • TEACH • PLAY

MANY FACTORS contribute to achieving a mature ensemble sound, but deliberate focus on three special areas can lead to noticeably better playing, while highlighting important aspects of good musicianship. The first “game changers” – **active listening** – invites students to reflect discerningly to make musical decisions. The second – **phrasing** – is conceptually simple and produces results almost immediately! Improving in the third area – **intonation** – is a lifelong process, but needs to start somewhere!

LISTENING - A *Balancing Act*

- **Q: How do you know when you make mistakes (yours or others) in band?**
 - You _____!
 - Playing is *only half* your job.
- **Listening Helps Balance**
 - Childlike vs. Mature Perspective
 - Practice is for learning _____. Rehearsal is for learning _____.
 - You know your part when you can _____.
 - Breed “active listening”: unpack passage, reflect-discuss, re-combine musically
 - Good balance leads to more rich, varied timbral _____.
 - Balance is about _____. The ensemble is a wonderful place to learn this “life lesson.”
- **Listening Helps Tone**
 - Try to make your sound _____ or melt into the section/ensemble versus “sticking out.”
 - Exercise restraint - save your strongest sound for important “hits.” (Life lesson: Delayed gratification)
 - Listen/evaluate B.P.S. – Rate student tone (scale of 1 - 10)
- **Listening Helps Timing**
 - Most timing issues are _____ issues, not having a bad sense of timing.
 - Instead of urging, “Slow down, you’re rushing!” try “Play _____, listen for the _____.”
 - Create a culture of “active listeners.”

- Ask questions related to ensemble playing (releases, blend, intonation, timing, etc.)
 - Invite students to reflect on what they hear; make artistic decisions.
- **4 X 4 Grid - Listening Analysis, Game, “Rep Prep” (EX)**
-

PHRASING - A Feat of *Endurance*

- **Examples**
 - Greet your band
 - Sign reading
 - Melodic demonstration
 - Ensemble experimentation
 - **Building Skill**
 - Long Tones (emphasize the “long” and the “tone” (BPS), LT contest, breathing exercises
 - Scales, Scale in Canon (blend; less volume = longer breathe mileage)
 - **Early Application**
 - Transfer: slur phrases, then w/loco articulation; Longest phrase contest
 - Chorales: Sound Innovations Ensemble Development (YB, IB, AB), etc.
 - [Sound Innovations Ensemble Development](#) (3 Levels)
 - [36 Chorales for Band, by Aaron Cole](#)
 - **Continuing Application**
 - Longer indicated phrases
 - Student discernment
 - [An Understandable Approach to Musical Expression, by Kenneth Laudermilch](#)
 - Students observe/experience musical “conventions,” then apply
 - Rule of 3’s
-

TUNING/INTONATION: A *Lifelong* Journey!

- **Planting Seeds**
 - Demonstrate with strong student: in-OUT-in tune; pitch bend on long tone
 - Visualize w/Tuner

- “A picture is worth a thousand words.”
 - Word pictures: FLAT (low, sour, weak), SHARP (high, edgy, shrill), and OUT-OF-TUNE (tones “having a musical argument”)
 - [A.P.S. Tuning Trainer](#) app; [InTune](#) app
 - **Start of Rehearsal**
 - Brief Ensemble Tuning - valuable even before student discernment
 - Use singing voice
- Nurturing Growth
 - Encourage students to *make the call...* “What’s the worst that can happen?”
 - Play as much as possible with in-tune reference sound (i.e. in-tune instruments, piano accompaniment, SmartMusic, publisher and YouTube recordings, etc.)
 - Warm ups:
 - scale in canon (tune on final)
 - Routine sing and play intervals to build intervallic vocabulary
 - 1-2, 1-3, 1-4, 1-5, etc.
 - Remingtons, SIED, etc.
 - Older students begin to apply instrument-specific tuning tendencies (for instruments and chords) and compensations
 - Woodwind tendencies ([Bandworld magazine](#))
- Some tuning “methods”:
 - Chaos-to-unison (opening downbeat of rehearsal)
 - Principal Clarinet/Oboe sounds tone for WW, BR, ALL
 - Principal players, then their sections (opt: lowest to highest)
 - **F or Bb Around the Band (or Section) - In pairs (SIED, “Passing the Tonic”)**
 - Tuba or clarinet drone, all hum tone until tuning
 - Harmonic Tuning: Tune your ensemble like you tune a guitar (strings, then chords)
 - Tune chords from warm up scales, etc. (1-3-5 in 4 groups)
 - vertical sonority from a concert selection
- **TUNING AWARENESS MAKES A DIFFERENCE!**