



Creating Balance and Blend

by Greg Countryman

Ensemble balance must begin with individual students producing characteristic tone qualities on their instruments. Once this is accomplished, individuals can learn to match and balance with the other students in their section, then across sections, and finally throughout the entire ensemble. It is through a concrete and sequential approach to teaching balance that this can be achieved.

Characteristic Tone Quality

While it is an obvious prerequisite to producing a characteristic sound, it is still worth mentioning that students must first possess necessary fundamental skills. These include a correct embouchure and a clear understanding of how to get air in and out of their bodies efficiently and effectively to produce the most resonant tone quality possible. Directors must teach students to recognize characteristic and uncharacteristic sounds for their instrument by playing recordings for the students or utilizing the teacher or another student as models. Throughout this instruction, provide examples of the vocabulary you will use to describe tone qualities so that students can begin to incorporate this vocabulary into their own descriptions. Ask students to comment on the tone quality of the ensemble or an individual to help reinforce these concepts. Use descriptors such as *bright, dark, thin, full, focused, unfocused, resonant, and lacking resonance*.

Matching Person to Person

Students must learn to match person to person within their section to create a balanced and unified section sound—comprising one big sound rather than multiple individual sounds. The students should match tone quality, body of sound, tonal energy, volume, and resonance. This should first be taught in section rehearsals using the exercises described below.

Concert F Down the Row: Each student plays a four-count concert F, and it is passed down the row from person to person. In this exercise, each student starts their note as the previous student ends their note, so there is no overlap from student to student. This is an opportune time to discuss how notes should

begin and end, as well as how they are passed seamlessly from one player to another.

Overlapping Concert F Down the Row: Each student plays an eight-count concert F with the next student starting their note on count five of the previous student's note. Each student is always playing with another person, but the partner changes every four counts (see below). This exercise allows students to work on matching the tone characteristics previously mentioned and also makes them more aware of intonation since they are now playing with another student. The ultimate goal is for the concert F to sound the same as it is passed from player to player throughout an entire section.

Player 1: | o | o |
Player 2: | o | o |
Player 3: | o | o |

Trios: Students must learn to match within their trio, which consists of a student and each student on either side of them. If they play louder than the other members of their trio, they are listening only to themselves. If they play softer than the other members of their trio, they are listening only to the other two students. If they play the same as the other members, they are listening to themselves as well as the other two members of their trio. Since these trios overlap, a student on one side of the room could theoretically match a student on the other side of the room through the overlapping trios between the two of them.

Pedals: Using pedal tones is an effective method for introducing matching when students have harmony. Designate each student as a 1 or 2, alternating as you go down the row. It is best to start with an interval of a perfect fifth (concert F and the concert B \flat below the F). All 1s will start on the concert F (the pedal) and serve as a model for the 2s, who will join them playing the concert B \flat . So all students have experience holding the pedal and also matching to the pedal, alternate the assignments for 1s and 2s



daily. After students are comfortable with matching the two notes of the interval, then discuss the tuning tendencies necessary to make the various intervals (perfect fifth, perfect fourth, and major third) sound correct.

Balancing Section to Section

When introducing the concept of balancing section to section, it is best to play unison lines that either descend or ascend in half-steps (e.g., F-E-F, E-E \flat -E) or a scale (concert F descending). Initially, have students listen across the room to another instrument. Next, give specific balance assignments (e.g., balance to the oboe, balance to the trumpet) so that students become accustomed to listening and balancing to a variety of instruments. The last step is to have them match intervals through the use of pedals on their assigned numbers. Basic brass lip slurs are an excellent source of material for teaching interval matching to the full ensemble. When students have learned to play perfect fifths, perfect fourths, major thirds, and octaves balanced and in-tune, the ensemble will have much better clarity and chordal structure.

Specific Balance Guidelines for Various Instrument Combinations

The skills developed while learning to match person to person and balancing section to section will improve the ensemble sound and automatically transfer to the music being learned. In addition to the individual, section, and ensemble skills discussed previously, the following guidelines pertain to balancing various combinations of instruments. Keep in mind that these are only guidelines; there may be situations where it is appropriate to deviate to create a certain color or effect:

- Flutes should balance to the trumpets when they have unison melodies.
- Flutes should balance to the clarinets when the flutes are an octave above the clarinets.
- Clarinets should balance to the flutes when they are in the same octave.
- Alto saxophones should balance to the horn when they have unison lines.
- Low woodwinds should balance to the low brass when they have similar lines.

- Some nice textures and colors can be created by balancing to the color instruments (oboe, bassoon, piccolo), but only when there are strong players on these instruments.
- The power of the brass must come from the trumpet, horn, and trombone. When euphoniums and tubas play with the same aggressiveness as the other brass, they lose the center, focus, and resonance in their sound. Trumpet, horn, and trombone are volume instruments in that they are often directed to crank it up. The

euphonium and tuba are volume instruments that provide a mass or body of sound.

- Battery percussion instruments (snare drum, bass drum, concert toms, etc.) should usually balance to and play inside the sound of the ensemble.
- Effects percussion instruments (triangle, tambourine, cymbals, etc.) are usually above the sound of the ensemble.
- Bass drum should not be louder than the timpani or tuba. Bass drum

SAM HOUSTON STATE UNIVERSITY
MEMBER THE TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM™







SCHOOL OF MUSIC

1751 Avenue I, Suite 225
Huntsville, TX 77340
936-294-1360
f SHSU School of Music

AUDITION DATES

February 8, 2014
February 22, 2014
March 1, 2014

Apply Online at
WWW.SHSU.EDU/MUSIC



is a non-pitched instrument and it will cancel or distort the pitch if it is louder than these pitched instruments.

Layering to Achieve Correct Ensemble Balance

Layering is the best method for teaching students the priority of various lines in the music. To be efficient and effective, the director must study and mark the score, designating the most important to the least important lines. In rehearsal, have the most important line play while the other students listen and finger their parts. Next, add the second most important line and instruct students to ensure they aren't louder than the most important part. Keep adding lines until everyone is playing. As more lines are added, students need to be able to hear each line and achieve balance according to their assigned priority. Layering in this manner helps the ensemble not become noisy—this occurs when various lines compete with each other. A noisy ensemble balance confuses listeners because it isn't obvious which lines are the most important.

Producing a characteristic tone quality should be the main goal from the first day a student makes a sound on their instrument.

It Can Start in Beginning Band

Producing a characteristic tone quality should be the main goal from the first day a student makes a sound on their instrument. It is possible to teach students to match person to person during their first year of playing an instrument. It may not be possible to use the same procedures described in this article, but discussing matching of volume with their neighbors will lay a good foundation for the more advanced matching and listening skills they will learn in the future.

The individual, section, and ensemble skills discussed will never be perfectly mastered; they are skills students will continue to refine for many years. Using a sequential approach to teaching ensemble balance allows the students to focus on developing one skill at a time and then gradually combining the various skills. Students taught in this manner are able to eventually adjust

balance as they perform without continuous input from the director. Keep in mind that balance and blend are directly related to intonation. Adjusting balance within or between sections will automatically improve the section and ensemble intonation. Correct balance creates better clarity and makes it easier for the director and students to hear; however, the intonation also improves because the students are becoming better listeners.

When we work on ensemble balance, we are essentially trying to achieve a variety of tonal colors or textures by changing or adjusting balance assignments. Just as a painter mixes colors to create certain visual effects, musicians combine instrumental tone colors to create a variety of sounds and textures. ■

Greg Countryman is Director of Bands at Fort Settlement MS, Fort Bend ISD.



SMU | MEADOWS
SCHOOL OF THE ARTS

2014 Auditions
November 23, 2013*
January 18, 2014
January 25, 2014
February 1, 2014
February 8, 2014

Voice Prescreening
due by December 1st for
the Jan/Feb Auditions

*November voice auditions may be
scheduled without a prescreening.

music@smu.edu; 214.768.3680

meadows.smu.edu

