Whether the students who walk into your classroom are second-, sixth-, or tenth-graders, it is equally important to have an effective plan and approach to every rehearsal. We asked four music educators who teach elementary, middle, and high school to share their perspectives on the strategies they have found effective. This is the second article in the “Music Matters” series on teaching methods. If you missed the September installment about repertoire selection, you can find it online at www.tmea.org/magazine in the archives or by viewing the interactive version of that issue.

What is your plan for blocking a standard rehearsal or class period?

Rob Myers, Flower Mound HS Band Director (Lewisville ISD): “It’s all about the ears.” This has been drummed into my brain since my first rehearsal in college. The longer I have taught, the more I have used this phrase as the guiding principal for my rehearsals. Fundamentals are an absolute necessity for the growth of the individual musician. We typically spend one-third of the class on fundamentals and the other two-thirds on music.

We start with singing. If you can internalize a pitch, you will be much more successful replicating it on an instrument. I have found that *The Mind’s Ear: Exercises for Improving the Musical Imagination* by Bruce Adolphe has been helpful with this internalization of sound and pitch. The fundamentals on which we focus are based upon a just intonation harmonic structure providing additional ensemble skills benefits. To better facilitate this, we use the Yamaha Harmony Director as our reference for ear training and just intonation guidance. We have found that *Essential Musicianship for Band* by Eddie Green, John Benzer, and David Bertman and *Foundations for Superior Performance* by Jeff King and Richard Williams to be tremendous assets to the growth of the individual and ensemble players in our program. We also use 16 Chorales by J.S. Bach arranged by Mayhew Lake.

Ann Victor, Sartartia MS Orchestra Director (Fort Bend ISD): The high-level view of a typical class period is that it consists of verbal announcements (2 minutes); tuning (8–10 minutes); warm-up focusing on a skill (10–15 minutes); literature (20–25 minutes); putting instruments and music away (2 minutes). We don’t leave the warm-up until a strong characteristic tone is produced and intonation is secure. Intermediate and advanced students use electronic tuners since class sizes are large. Scales are used to establish tone production, intonation, shifting, and bowing patterns. The new activities are announced, pointed to on the board, and started within 15–20 seconds.

Jo Scurlock-Dillard, Retired HS Choir Director (North East ISD): Students love routine. Given that, we cover certain elements in every rehearsal period. We typically have the same daily sequence, but it can be rearranged if necessary. We begin every day with vocal technique (warm-ups), and we approach them as mini voice lessons. Not everyone can afford lessons, so we use this time to teach technique as well. This is followed by physical warm-ups and stretching. One of the musts in a choral classroom is sightreading. If we don’t do anything else, we sightread. In the beginning of the year, we concentrate on single line reading. As students become comfortable reading the melody line, part sightreading is incorporated. During the sightreading portion of the day, rhythmic reading, ear training, and basic theory can be addressed. After all of that is completed, rehearsal of literature can begin. Each portion of the class period varies. Timing is based on the needs of the particular choir.

Barbara Keaton, Ashworth Elementary Music Teacher (Arlington ISD): We begin with posture and physical warm-ups. To gain attention, I use silent movements. Singers notice, stop talking, and imitate my actions. Try bending, stretching, swimming, climbing, or even a movement story narrated by the teacher. Contrast the hip-slung, hanging-out-at-the-mall look with good choir posture. Use a variety of warm-ups (no longer than 10 minutes) with quick transitions. Alternate styles—slow/fast, legato/staccato, silly/serious—and include rounds and tongue twisters. Don’t forget visual props to demonstrate a concept (e.g., pull a ribbon through your hand for a legato sound). A tuning favorite is to sing up the scale and back on solfège with each part entering two notes after the previous part.
For sustained interest and pacing, keep the exercises fresh, and divide the rehearsal into small segments (e.g. 10 minutes, 5 minutes, 10 minutes). Post a rehearsal agenda and check off your accomplishments.

What is your approach to rehearsing a piece of music?

RM: Thorough analysis of the score is an absolute must. Students should have an understanding of the larger aspects of the score and understand their place within the music. Knowing the key of each phrase of the score is very important. I use Yamaha’s Harmony Director as a reference within a given key area to teach the melody of a piece. For example, in the “Chaconne” of Holst’s First Suite in E-flat for Military Band, students play the melody while sustaining an E-Flat triad. It is also beneficial for the students to play fundamental exercises within the key area of the phrase you are teaching. I then teach cadence points within the key area as opposed to trying to tune a phrase chord by chord.

AV: Several different approaches are used depending on the time of year and level of orchestra. As soon as possible, I use a modified UIL sightreading procedure for reading through a new work. The piece is worked in sections with either counting and clapping or shadow bowing and fingering. Once we make it through the piece, we work on tone production, ensemble skills, intonation, style, and dynamic contrast (depending on the specific group’s weaknesses). Tone production, steady rhythm, and inner pulse are high priorities. I try to teach students how to listen to other parts so they can take an active role in musical balance.

JSD: My approach is determined by each piece. I ask students to write in the solfège and the rhythms for their parts. If the piece encompasses difficult, syncopated rhythmic passages, we begin with those passages to make sure everyone understands them. I also ask students to find the repeated passages, difficult melodic passages, and learn how their part works within the piece of music. We almost never start at the beginning and just start singing. It is important for students to be involved in the discovery of a piece of music. Rehearsal pace is based on the success of the students. It is important to have a goal each day and to try and accomplish it before you move on. I do, however, try to touch on several pieces a day. It is important to keep the class moving rather than getting bogged down on a particular problem.

BK: Always analyze the music and let this information guide the rehearsal. Determine form, keys, meters, difficult intervals and phrases, and repetition and contrast. Teaching approaches can include reading the text for understanding and expression; teaching the refrain first; echo- or sight-singing; having singers look and listen for similar sections in the music; starting with the last section and working backward; and teaching a skeletal melody with solfa (quarter notes), then adding the correct rhythms with solfá, and then finally adding text when the notes are secure. When musical problems present themselves, try a vocal exercise to help with the solution.

How do you keep all students engaged while you work with individual sections?

RM: Working with high quality literature is the first component. Fortunately, we have the PML as a guide. Without quality repertoire in which our students can invest, we have no chance of maintaining and providing a significant musical experience for them.

Socratic questioning has also been tremendously beneficial in keeping our students engaged. We often ask students questions, but using the Socratic method forces them to think at a deeper level. I have often found myself providing my opinion instead of questioning and guiding the students toward a more thorough understanding of the music. To engage your students, ask more thought-provoking questions and give fewer answers.

AV: This is always a challenge! I ask sections who aren’t playing to shadow bow and finger their parts. When musically appropriate, I bring in one other section with complementary parts while continuing to center on the problem issues in one section. On the next repetition, I use another instrument section.

I verbally commend those who follow instructions so students know that I am aware of their actions. If a section is not doing what I ask, I stop, look at that section, and repeat my instruction, gesturing in a way that communicates, “Why aren’t you following instructions?”

JSD: While working with one section, all other sections are to hum their parts. This might seem idealistic, but it works. This also allows me to monitor the progress of the other sections. When working with one section, I often hear when another is having difficulty with their part. Each student understands that this is the expectation, and if they aren’t doing it consistently, their weekly participation grade is affected greatly.

BK: Non-singers can listen or watch for certain elements such as dynamics, correct notes or rhythms, posture, or vowels. They can study their lyrics silently, lightly hum their part, or practice reading skills by following the singing group’s part. (This gives practice in reading both parts in a musical score.)

Listeners can become the demonstration singers, or they can discover and share how a phrase should be performed. This self-discovery often makes retention easier for all the singers. Students love competition, so ask them which group sang a phrase correctly. Any subsequent corrections will then have both groups listening intently because another contest may follow.

How do you minimize time on announcements, etc. to have more time for rehearsal?

RM: Wait until the end of a class period to pass out any school documents.
If you provide them at the beginning they will become a distraction. Information distributed by the band is posted on our website, sent out through Charms, and discussed at the end of class. We have found it increasingly beneficial to provide information electronically, either through the previous methods or social media.

**AV:** Using Charms Office Assistant, we email announcements and a list of pieces the groups will perform. Announcements are also written on the board. When class starts, I point to the board and briefly remind students to read them. If you have the technology available, you could project announcements on a screen. When I have done this, I use a PowerPoint file and put an officer in charge of updating it.

For paperwork collection we set out an accordion file alphabetized by last name. Students return their forms as they enter the room. Parent volunteers collect, process the paperwork, and send email reminders. Students who arrive and tune first get to hand out new music.

**JSD:** Announcements are a pain. To lessen that pain, I often simply post announcements on the board and draw the students’ attention to them. I distribute a monthly calendar that includes all rehearsals, deadlines, sectional, and meetings. Students are expected to keep up with it, and it is their responsibility to stay on task. The calendar is also posted on our teacher webpage for parents to view.

**BK:** Elementary students will ask countless questions! Some may not have occurred to you, so while this can be challenging, these questions can be a good thing. Distribute handouts and make announcements at the end of rehearsal, or discuss them at various points during the rehearsal to give breaks. Have a collection area for students to return papers. Choir parents can organize them, or you can do it yourself after rehearsal. Put forms online for those who lose them. Handouts, emails, and websites can disperse information, but no matter how hard you try, there will be questions. Have patience!

Thanks go to our contributors for taking time to offer their ideas and experience. If you have follow-up questions, you can email them at the following addresses:

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