

HOW TO LISTEN, WHAT TO SAY: PRACTICAL REHEARSAL SOLUTIONS

THE IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING

No matter what the experience level of the teacher, the process of listening to an ensemble and diagnosing issues can be a challenge and is one of the least discussed and underrated skills. There are two basic types of listening: **Reactive & Proactive**. In rehearsal, we spend most of our time *reacting* when we hear an error and then attempting to solve it. *Proactive* listening takes place when we know exactly what we are listening for at a detailed level. We do this through thorough score preparation, utilizing a defined rehearsal process, and preparing how we are going to listen!

Developing an aural image of a piece is critical and comes through detailed study and preparation. In rehearsal we are constantly comparing this image of the piece to what we hear from the ensemble and diagnosing the differences and then offering solutions or prescriptions to correct the differences.

COMMON MISTAKES AND MISCONCEPTIONS

- We don't think enough about how students listen while they are playing. (Great ensemble playing is built on the ability of the student to listen, compare, and adjust).
- We haven't studied the score with ensemble listening in mind.
- We aren't specific enough in how we ask them to listen in rehearsal.
- We assume they can hear the same things we can from the podium, and we forget that they can't see (or hear) the entire picture (they don't have the score).

LISTENING CATEGORIES

There are **three basic categories for listening**: Items related to Tone, Clarity, and Musicality. While these categories intersect on multiple levels, as a teacher we must isolate the overall sound into these different components.

TONE-RELATED ITEMS

When we listen for items related to tone we are listening on a deeper level for: 1) Tonal Center and Color of individuals, sections, or instrument families (brass/woodwind), 2) Intonation (which is built on great tone), and 3) Blend (The relationship of tonal color between like instruments or different instruments). We must always take care not to over-blend colors to the point that we create a sound devoid of unique characteristic sounds. It is typically much easier to hear these items

in warm-ups and slower music, but we must ensure we are attentive to tone quality, intonation and blend no matter the tempo of the music.

CLARITY-RELATED ITEMS

Clarity exists in both fast and slow music and is derived from correct execution of several primary items which we strive to perfect to produce what is often referred to as a “clean” performance. These can include note and rhythmic accuracy, pulse accuracy, style (our instrumental version of diction) and balance. Of these items, I believe that balance presents the key to providing clarity in the performance and is also the main culprit in preventing us from listening effectively in rehearsal. We often use the term “noisy” to refer to a performance without clarity of musical layers and the more layers there are in the music the more apt this is to happen. A lack of attention to balance and dynamic contour is perhaps the most overlooked rehearsal and listening priority. We must address balance early in the rehearsal process to avoid the “noisy” performance”. The balance of the musical layers has a direct effect on our ability to hear clearly and correcting balance early in the rehearsal process helps us hear more easily inside the ensemble sound. In addition, correcting balance and blend in slower music can allow us to hear line and intonation more easily and offer solutions.

MUSICALITY

As musicians we know that the term musicality is comprised of many components. As musician teachers we should listen for phrasing, direction of line (contour), and the relationship of sound and silence among others. During our advance rehearsal preparation, we should make thoughtful, well-informed decisions about what is most important in the music throughout each phrase and section of each piece.

THE PROCESS OF LISTENING

It is vital to have a specific process for listening to guide and focus our rehearsals. Listening priorities may vary based on the type of music to which we are listening. While we often listen first for notes and rhythms first, it is important to remember that the piece of music determines how we should listen, and the tempo and style can help us determine our priority order. Yes, notes and rhythms are important, but we must integrate other items as we listen. Tone is of paramount importance because it affects everything else and should always be a top priority. However, since balance directly impacts our ability to hear more easily it should also be prioritized early in the rehearsal process.

The following order of listening based on the tempo of music may prove useful:

Slower music:

Tone Quality

Dynamics and Contour of Line (this affects everything else)

Balance and Blend

Intonation (also affected by balance and blend)

Entrances and Releases (affected by rhythm and subdivision)

Faster Music:

Rhythmic Accuracy

Pulse Accuracy

Balance

Style Accuracy (Diction)

Note Accuracy

Notice in faster music that note accuracy, while important, may not necessarily be the first priority. Clarifying pulse, rhythm, balance, and style will help us hear note and pitch issues more easily. By addressing these items in a slightly different order, we can improve what we are able to hear during rehearsal and begin to address errors sooner. We will also be able to hear the errors more easily when everyone is playing rather than having to isolate sections or like parts so often allowing students to play a larger percentage of time in rehearsals.

PREPARING FOR REHEARSAL

As we study scores and prepare for rehearsal, it is imperative that we have a clearly defined and effective study process. Score study is where we make decisions proactively about balance, style, musical line, pacing, etc. and create our aural image that we will utilize in rehearsal for comparison to the ensemble sound. Making these decisions ahead of time also has the added benefit of guiding our listening within the rehearsal (Proactive Listening). When you don't decide ahead of time you simply react.

Understanding the form of the piece is the first step to studying a score and allows us to divide our study into logical portions and plan for rehearsal. As we study with rehearsal and listening in mind, imagine being in the rehearsal and search the score for the following items:

Search the Score for:

- Pulse givers (primary and secondary)
- Pitch givers (vertical and horizontal)
- Layers (How voices are combined vertically within the texture)
- Blend and balance priorities (within the layers)

- The contour of the piece (musical GPS)
- Entrances into sound and silence
- Specifics of style
- The musical concepts to be taught
- Pedagogical challenges
- “Prime suspects”

PULSE GIVERS

“Pulse Givers” can be categorized as primary or secondary. Primary pulse givers are those players who have absolute responsibility for the overall pulse within a particular section of the music. All other members of the ensemble are listening to these players for pulse. Secondary pulse givers are often a part of the pulse but not given the same agogic role within the measure as primary pulse givers. In a march, the tuba, low reeds, and percussion might be primary, and the horns would be considered secondary. All others in the ensemble are listening to these players to maintain pulse. Identifying pulse givers and pulse takers throughout the music and imparting that information to your students can immediately help to direct the listening and maintain pulse control. As pulse changes from one section to another throughout the music students must be taught to listen for the previous pulse giver to accurately enter in time, much like a runner in a relay race taking the hand-off of the baton from the previous runner.

PITCH GIVERS

Correct notes and intonation are dependent on the student’s ability to listen, internalize pitch and adjust. Students can listen for pitch while they are playing and before entering the sound. Thus, the relationship of pitch givers and takers is very much like pulse givers and takers and the students’ understanding of their role as giver or taker is often key to correcting intonation within the ensemble. Students with the 3rd, 5th, etc. can listen *down* to the root during a sustained chord for intonation. Students need to also understand the concepts of harmony, chord structure, intonation tendencies and solutions for pitch manipulation to solve these intonation issues. Just as with pulse, they can listen to an instrument or voice-part that plays a similar or related pitch before they enter. By internalizing this *given* pitch prior to their entrance, they can more successfully match pitch when entering out of silence or shifting from one note to another.

LAYERS

To achieve real clarity in the performance, the audience must be able to hear the layers of the music clearly. Understanding the layers of any section of music is critical in determining balance priorities and has the added benefit of helping us hear more easily. The first step in our study is to identify the musical layers. Study the score phrase by phrase, creating a

blueprint for the orchestration and texture by function or role. Then prioritize these layers by that function (Melody, Counter Melody, Accompaniment, Bass, etc.) The priority order for how we wish to hear them determines, along with the number of players in each layer, the dynamic adjustments we need to make to create clarity and balance in our layers. We can prioritize these layers by thinking of putting them into layers of foreground, middle ground, and background.

Questions to ask when identifying layers:

- Who has the melody?
- How does the dynamic of the melody relate to the overall architecture of the dynamics for the piece?
- Is the melody the most important line in this phrase or is there something new that should be given more importance or equal dynamic value?
- Is the most important line voiced in such a way to be heard clearly?
- Should accompaniment dynamics be lowered to “protect” the melody?

Once you have created your hierarchy of layers for each section of the piece utilize the following **pre-emptive solutions in rehearsal**.

- Place notes sticky-notes (see sample below) within your score identifying the priority for the layers for each section to help remind you during rehearsal. This creates a textural overview to help you move through rehearsal quickly and balance each section.
- Proactively lower dynamics of non-melodic instruments to protect the melody.
- Adjust octaves or number of players on an octave to reduce upper register volume.
- Reduce the number of players on the accompaniment part.
- Focus on the shape of the main musical line to provide space for counter-lines to be heard especially at ends of phrases.

Sample sticky note

Measures 56-63

Melody: Tsax, T-bones, Euph, Chimes

Bass Line: Bclar, Bsn, Bsax, Tuba

Harmony: Asax, Horns

Cntr Melody: Flute, Oboe, Clar, Xylo (Bells)

Fanfares: Picc, Tpts,

BLEND AND BALANCE PRIORITIES

It is important we consider and address both the balance *between* the layers and the balance *within* the layers. Very often when there are multiple layers the composer does not necessarily indicate the dynamics with a balance hierarchy in mind but rather with a dynamic marking that indicates the overall dynamic of the section or phrase. We must prioritize the musical layers based on their role in the music and then define how like parts should be combined within the layer to create the overall sound. We must then consider how we want each individual layer to sound and how we should blend tone colors to achieve that sound.

For each layer we must:

- Determine the primary tone color for each line.
- Adjust balance (dynamics) to highlight that color.
- Adjust tone or blend within the voices of a given line to create the color that we desire. Example: Is it clarinet colored by flute or flute colored by clarinet?



CONTOUR (The Musical GPS):

In addition to the balance of the layers, the contour and shape of the phrase can create musical space in the sound for other parts to be heard clearly. For example, a well-crafted decrescendo at the end of a line can create sonic space for a counter-melody to be heard. In our study, we must consider the architecture of the dynamics for every individual phrase as well as the architecture of the entire piece to teach it clearly and with purpose to our students. We must also remember that the architecture of a piece is comprised of form, dynamics, tempo, harmony, and pacing (stress and arrival/tension and release) and they all must be considered to make phrasing and musical line decisions.

When we talk about musical line, we must remember that all music should have a destination and route (It's our roadmap or musical GPS). We must know the destination as well as all the stops along the way just as if we are driving somewhere in our car. How many moments of repose are there before the biggest arrival moment in the piece? (In Texas terms: How many "Buckees" are there between you and your destination?)

I love this quote by the famous cellist and interpreter Pablo Casals: "All music, in general, is a succession of rainbows". It reminds us that everything in music must have shape and there are small shapes within larger ones throughout a phrase, section of a piece, as well as the entire work. Every note in music is moving TO something, FROM something or is a point of

ARRIVAL. This movement creates both tension and release within the melodic line inherent in providing the musical architecture and realizing the composer's intent within the musical line.

Like balance decisions, our decisions about contour must be made in advance and with thoughtful consideration as they must be taught along with notes and rhythms and not added afterwards. Since students become comfortable through repetition, dynamic contour and tempi alterations can have a large effect on tone, intonation, and balance if added too late in the rehearsal process. In addition, this contour must be easily audible and recognizable to the listener. Record your rehearsals to help you really hear if the contour is exaggerated enough to be noticeable.

ENTRANCES INTO SOUND AND SILENCE

Leopold Stokowski famously said: "A painter paints pictures on canvas. But musicians paint their pictures on silence". There are an infinite number of ways to enter sound and to enter silence. Students must learn to determine how they should enter by considering *Who enters with them?*; *What does the music do before their entrance?*; and *What comes after their entrance?* As teachers we must consider this for all the musical entrances into sound and silence and make specific decisions to guide the students towards these effectively. (Remember it is silence-NOT rests). Just as we consider which articulations to use at the beginning of the sound, we must also listen just as carefully for the end of the phrases.

STYLE

Style, like balance is typically not prioritized early enough in rehearsal. Style is the instrumentalist's version of diction. We must be specific with our vocabulary and our instructions in order to clearly define the style. Unifying the ensemble style early in the rehearsal process will help us hear more clearly what is really taking place in the music. If we have balanced the parts and addressed style, we will hear the hidden errors and inconsistencies that lie beneath more easily. We must consider all the components of style including articulations, note length, note weight, and note shape when arriving at style decisions and be very specific in our choices for all of these.

MUSICAL CONCEPTS

As we study the score, consider what musical concepts the students must understand to be successful. Specific concepts might include understanding of chordal construction, intonation deficiencies on their instrument, intonation alterations for harmonic (just) intonation, technique in certain key centers, musical terms, and many others. The concepts are unlimited but can be determined by the music we have chosen to rehearse and perform. Cataloging these concepts during score study helps us focus our rehearsals on needed

ensemble playing skills as well as cognitive and musical concepts the students must master to perform the music with clarity and artistry.

PEDAGOGICAL CHALLENGES

In addition, we must search the score for any individual or ensemble challenges that the students may encounter on their instruments. Items may include extended range, articulation speed and clarity, technique, intonation, or dynamic range. Noting these challenges in advance will help us create lesson plans for sectionals and large ensemble rehearsals that focus on the needed playing skills and provide sources for daily drills to solve the individual or ensemble challenges that may exist in the music.

“PRIME SUSPECTS”

As we study scores, we are much like detectives on the hunt for “Prime Suspects”. (Think CSI Score Study). Just like a seasoned detective, we learn through our experiences. We learn what to expect from both the individual players and the ensemble and begin to study the score through a new lens, anticipating where problems may occur and planning potential solutions to those problems. Examples may include intonation tendencies on the instruments, entrances after long periods of silence, difficult rhythms, large intervals in the musical line, repeated articulations, and numerous others. The ability to predict errors is invaluable when creating our lesson plans and this method of study informs and directs our listening in rehearsal helping as we listen to these areas where problems will likely occur.

FINAL TAKE-AWAYS

As we improve our rehearsal preparation, focus on intentional listening, study with a clear process, and prepare with the rehearsal in mind, we can listen proactively and are prepared to offer thoughtful, useful corrections from the podium rather than simply reacting to what occurs in the moment. As a result, our rehearsals become more efficient, and retention as well as performance level is dramatically improved.

This resource is in supplement to the article “How to Listen and What to Say: Effective Rehearsal Strategies,” by Phillip Clements published in the January 2023 issue of *Southwestern Musician*.