

How to Listen & What to Say

Effective Rehearsal Strategies

By Phillip Clements

The ability to hear performance issues and convert the errors you hear into efficient, clear solutions is the basis of effective rehearsal techniques. In rehearsal, we often spend our time *reacting* when we hear an error and spend even more time attempting to solve it. If instead we would listen *proactively*, we could experience more effective and efficient rehearsals. We can accomplish this through focused score preparation, a defined rehearsal process, and advance preparation on how we will listen and what we should say.

Developing an aural image of a piece is critical. We develop that image through detailed study and preparation, ensuring our rehearsal focus is on delivering the musical intent of the composer. For a deeper dive on my thoughts about listening and score study, please read more at www.tmea.org/listen-study. What I offer here starts from the place where a director has completed that focused study and is ready to implement targeted strategies for improving student listening, communication, long-term retention, and understanding of musical concepts.

Direct and target the students' listening: Students must learn to listen the same way you do and for the same things (tone, pulse, intonation, style, balance, etc.). It is important to remember that they can't hear what you hear from podium. Help them listen for and understand the following:

- Pulse givers (voices primarily responsible for pulse)
- Pitch givers (voices with the root of the chord or those playing their same pitch)
- Their role in the music (melody, bass, accompaniment, counter-melody)
- Blend and balance priorities (within the musical layers)
- Phrasing, contour, and direction of line
- Entrances into sound and silence
- Specifics of style

Utilize layering in rehearsals: We must develop a clear understanding of the layers of the music in any given section of a piece to effectively hear errors and to create the musical outcome we desire. Even the most complex music can usually be distilled into 4–5 layers through detailed score study. A productive rehearsal includes a clear plan to combine the layers in the most efficient and effective manner to promote student listening and understanding. We can use the following processes or variations of these to separate and combine the layers within both slow and faster music.

Layering of Slow Music

- Start with the melody and craft the musical line of melody while setting the dynamic contour.
- Combine the melody with the bass voice and adjust dynamics as needed to protect the melodic dynamic (this also allows for students to hear vertical intonation). The bass voice may follow the dynamic contour of the melody but use a less extreme contour.
- Listen to the harmonic layers or counter-lines alone, adjusting the dynamic contour to protect the melody and balance the harmony. Then combine with the bass voice for dynamic adjustment to allow those students to hear vertical intonation.
- Combine harmonic or counter-lines with the melody to ensure dynamic balancing.
- Combine all layers (adjust dynamics, balance, and intonation as needed) and repeat.

Layering of Fast Music

- Start with the melody and craft the musical line of melody while setting the dynamic contour. Utilize a metronome as the pulse giver. Avoid starting with the pulse layer and adding

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layers upward to the melody. This could cause the melody to overplay to be heard, and you will inadvertently lose your lower dynamic spectrum.

- Combine the melody with pulse-givers. This allows for melody players to hear pulse and to maintain overall dynamic.
- Listen to the harmonic layers or counter-lines alone, adjusting the dynamic contour to protect the melody and balance the harmony. Use the metronome for pulse.
- Combine harmonic or counter-lines with pulse-givers to align pulse and allow for dynamic adjustments.
- Combine all (adjust dynamics, balance, and intonation as needed) and repeat.

Pace rehearsals correctly to engage student listening: It is important to monitor the effectiveness of all rehearsals. Ask yourself the following about your rehearsal: *What is really transpiring? Are the students engaged? If not, do you have alternate plans? Is the communication effective? Is the pace of the rehearsal working?* I suggest trying the following strate-

gies to help with rehearsal pacing:

- Engage the students through questioning (especially directed listening).
- Alter ensemble drills or the rehearsal seating to avoid the mundane.
- Find the most efficient, clearest way to say something. Be succinct even when teaching a concept (less talk—more rock!).
- Use nonverbal gestures (conducting) to demonstrate and communicate your point.
- Prepare multiple ways to make your point (analogies are great!).
- Use sectionals rather than full rehearsals to solve isolated issues.
- Keep everyone active in the rehearsal. Engage students who aren't playing with specific listening instructions.

Delivering Solutions

Turn the errors (wrong) into solutions (right): When we hear an error, our first instinct is to tell the students what they did wrong. It's important to remember that the first thing we say is what often has the most

significant impression. We must convert the errors we hear into positive solutions before speaking. It takes practice to do this, but changing this one approach in your rehearsal can make a huge difference in the tone of the rehearsal. For example, rather than saying: "Trumpets, you entered late at measure nine," perhaps we phrase it as: "Trumpets, listen to the snare drum as you prepare for your entrance at measure nine so you enter in time." By giving them the intended goal along with a specific solution we can set a positive image in their minds. Remember, students prefer being told what to do rather than what *not* to do.

Use Who, Where, What, How, and Why as you give instructions: For clarity, utilize the following order when addressing students and imparting information and corrections:

- **Who:** Players or instrument
- **Where:** Rehearsal letter or measure number
- **What:** What you want them to do (positive outcome)
- **How:** How should they accomplish it
- **Why:** Why this is important

Rather than saying "Trombones don't crescendo so much at measure 58," perhaps instead say "Trombones, at measure 56, please delay your crescendo to measure 59 and crescendo only to mezzo forte to protect the melody in the oboe solo." In one sentence, you will have covered all five areas. Practice this outside rehearsal until it becomes automatic.

Focus on the why: The *why* is what gives our instructions meaning. It is equally important that we teach the relevant information about the piece and the composer while we teach the performance aspects of the music. Do background research and share what you find with the students or have them do the research themselves. Explain the *why* early in the process and throughout the rehearsals by continuing to relate the solutions to the musical reasons.

Ask questions of students to promote comprehension. Note that these are the same questions we must ask ourselves when studying the music. You will find that most answers relate to a *feeling* that the composer is trying to elicit. Sample questions include:

- Why did the composer choose that instrument here?



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- Why does the harmony become thicker at letter A?
- Why is it important to release on beat two?
- Why should the trombones be heard above everyone at measure 26?
- Why do we need to take more time with the end of the phrase?
- Why is the horn sound more important than the saxophones in this passage?

Question students clearly: While it is great to ask questions, we often ask them and get no answer or the wrong one. This can happen because we asked the question in an incorrect format or used inefficient timing. A common mistake is asking questions *after* a passage has been played. By prompting students in advance, we can increase student listening and evaluation: “Let’s play from letter A to B; I want you to listen for who has the melody in this section.” Another issue is posing questions that are too vague. Instead of “What do you think is happening in the music here?” ask more targeted questions like “Is the harmony getting more or less dense here?” or “Why do you think the composer is choosing to add a ritardando here?”

By asking thoughtful questions proactively, we can help students understand musical relationships, why the composer crafted something a specific way, and how they should adjust as an ensemble member.

Teach with Specifics (The What and the How)

It is important to be specific in our comments when addressing an error. This is the *what* and the *how* of our process noted above. We must offer clear solutions to remedy the error and be ready to offer an alternate solution if needed. For example, discuss specific articulations such as *T* and *D* rather than saying *harder* or *softer*, and offer specific dynamics such as *forte* or *forte plus* rather than saying *louder* or *softer*. Guide students to listen to specific instruments when directing their listening. For example, say: *Listen to third trumpet to find the pitch of the concert C before you enter* rather than simply saying *listen down*. Finally, be sure they write all the information in their parts to ensure retention.

Explore the use and value of analogies: Analogies can be powerful tools for ensuring deeper understanding and lasting

comprehension as they relate the unknown to the known. This relationship is at the heart of all great teaching. For example, instead of asking for notes to be shorter and lighter, say: “Flutes, please make these staccato eighth notes sound more like small, delicate rain drops.” Of course, the best analogies both explain and inspire: “This decrescendo must be performed so slowly, like a sunset at the end of a day you never want to end.”

I hope that putting some of these strategies into practice will help you communicate more clearly and efficiently, resulting in a more productive and enjoyable experience for both you and your students. ❏



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