

REHEARSAL REVOLUTION

BY JOEL SCHUT

Have you ever *lost* your group in rehearsal? The blank stares, the shoulder exhale, perhaps even a frustrated eye roll? Despite our best intentions, students know our routines and predict our repeated behaviors. We keep things interesting through creative and strategic variation.

The rehearsal space is your house. You facilitate the climate, weather, energy profile, expectation, and inertia. It is also where the magic happens, allowing for ensemble decisions to be shared later in performance. We must ask whether students are actively thinking, experiencing, connecting, questioning, remembering, and applying in our rehearsal experiences.

While great rehearsals should empower students to become their best, they should also sharpen the teacher. Below are some of my favorite strategies for varying the rehearsal process in middle and high school classrooms with student and teacher in mind. The ideas work for a range of ensemble levels with duration and intensity matched to skill levels. And while the examples I offer are orchestral, the concepts easily extend to all ensemble types.

My hope is these ideas provide courage to start a renaissance—perhaps a revolution—in your rehearsals.

REHEARSAL PRELUDE

Great rehearsals begin before the downbeat, through preparation and expectation. Get students thinking *before* rehearsal! Provide rehearsal orders in creative formats such as formal design, key signature, date of composition, composer dates or nationality, publisher, etc. (see the Rehearsal Order example table on page 28). Provide specific warmup directives such as numbered repetitions, stand partner tasks, or section excerpt play throughs. Give students the tools to become creative and increasingly independent in their rehearsal warmup preparations.

REARRANGING REHEARSAL: MOVEMENT AND SETUP

Have you ever rearranged something in your classroom and found that everyone immediately noticed? Physical space and proxemics matter. It is a geographical communication of something

Rehearsal Order Examples

	Formal Design	Key	Year Composed	Composer Dates	Nationality	Publisher
W.A. Mozart, <i>Divertimento in F</i>	Sonata	F major	1772	1756–1791	Austria	Leopold
Christopher Theofanidis, <i>Rainbow Body</i>	Tone Poem	A minor	2000	b. 1967	Greece	Yale/Eastman
Caroline Shaw, <i>Entr'acte</i>	Minuet and Trio	A–E–D–E–A	2011	b. 1982	United States	Rice/Princeton
Astor Piazzolla, <i>La Muerte del Angel</i>	Rondo	D minor– D major	1965	1921–1992	Argentina	Ginastera/ Boulanger

new. While many directors may have experimented with setup changes, it is important to question whether we are maximizing the experience. Are we implementing changes to direct listening or apply rehearsal intensity?

Reverse-engineer the rehearsal need and determine which shape helps best accomplish the goal. For section unity, consider section circles. For part independence, consider chamber pods. For listening across a full orchestra, consider moving wind players to the podium surrounded by strings. For waning student motivation, provide three minutes to rearrange as a flattering cartoon of the director.

Go to www.tmea.org/setupchanges for details and illustrations of some of my favorite movement and setup examples. It's grouped by section and ensemble, in increasing order of chaos. Choose your adventure!

In all movement and space reconfiguration, remember to include students in the musical why. Share with them, “Here is our musical problem. Which configuration will allow us to best address this?” When students own the goals, movement and altered-space rehearsals avoid the trap of being musical chairs only as an exercise.

REIMAGINING REHEARSAL

Score Projection: As a student, I imagined scores as a conductor’s book of secrets. With ever increasing access to personal devices and image projection, consider sharing scores and welcome students into your score study process. This aids visual learners and can be used to guide student ears and eyes for deeper collaboration. Work to generate questions (who leads?), experiment with alternatives (how does the color change adding bass?), and consider playing sections from the projected score. Share your formal analysis, working to emphasize the “weird,”

including new material, structural irregularities, or moments of unique dissonance.

Tone- and Style-Driven Rehearsals: A world of opportunity exists beyond notes, rhythms, and bowings. For me, tone and style are holy grails of music-making, providing endless experimentation, decisions, and goals. Most importantly, they force communication and listening in multi-dimensional ways.

Pivotal Thing: Find the stylistic crux on which the entire work depends. For me, Britten’s *Four Sea Interludes Mvt. 4* string slurs must begin with no accent to achieve the virulent slosh of sea, while Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 1, Mvt. 3* third beats must be nearly evaporated to place the dance form on its toes.

Speak in Tone Color: Model the desired ensemble tone color vocally. Have students ask and answer questions speaking in a tone color that reflects each section.

Tonal Pillars: Establish crux moments based on tone color. Hold chords to set the ideal sound, voicing, and resonance as listening arrival goals. This could range from a buzzing dissonance in a Beethoven symphony to a levitating “Enchanted Garden” climax in Ravel’s *Mother Goose Suite*.

REPETITION STRATEGIES

Exchange “one more time” and “from the top” with creative repetitions:

Like Spots: Student retention often requires modeling transference. Consider rehearsing all similar themes back to back, emphasizing changes in instrumentation, register, and orchestration. Rehearse similar key centers back to back, especially those with unique harmonic significance.

Transitions: Connective materials are often the weakest links, posing significant harmonic, tempo, and orchestration challenges. Rehearse all transitions back to back.

Horse to the Barn: Compared to beginnings, endings are often under-rehearsed.

Polish the final measure or section and work backward, adding one measure or phrase at a time. The goal is to create a gravitational pull of excellence toward the conclusion.

Interleaved Practice: While repetition is important, mixing practice with other skills helps accelerate learning. Interleave the rehearsal by juxtaposing difficult sections in a round robin fashion. This requires constant information retrieval and, while initially more difficult than single-spot repetition, facilitates faster skill retention and reliability.

Find Opposites: Rehearse extreme ends of dynamic, articulation, or emotive ranges back to back to establish spectrum ends. Hearing the loudest/softest, longest/shortest, most introverted/extroverted helps create a framework for musical decisions.

RE-EMPOWERING STUDENTS

Have you ever taught a student who knew what needed to be fixed or perhaps heard things you did not? Give them more than a voice. Provide responsibility!

Student Agenda: Save 10 minutes at the end of a rehearsal and offer: “My musical agenda for today is done, what is on yours?”

Section Leader Spots Rehearsal: Dedicate a full rehearsal to spots selected by section leaders. Empower them to describe *who*, *where*, and *why*, and rehearse passages either alone or in ensemble context.

Solicit Feedback: Provide students an opportunity for anonymous rehearsal feedback on paper or through an online poll. Benjamin Zander notably calls these “white sheets.”

Section Leader Comments: Create space before, during, or after rehearsal for section leaders to provide section encouragement and constructive recommendations.

Leader Chamber Music: Before the first rehearsal, allow section leadership to hold a separate preparatory rehearsal. This

places pressure on part preparation and can help prime communication solutions (bowings, page turns, errata, etc.).

REGROWING YOU

We ask students to improve with each rehearsal, yet do we ask of ourselves the same? Below are some of my favorite conductor challenges to improve conductor poignancy and rehearsal efficiency:

Play/Talk Ratio: Work for a fast-paced and lean ratio of 80% playing, 20% talking. Record yourself and then track the minutes you spent in each mode. Retool excess verbiage into active modeling and conducting formats whenever possible.

Comment Syntax: Speak using *who-where-what* ordering. This helps deliver content in the manner the brain most easily identifies, locates, and applies information.

Comment Challenge: Set a goal of providing a minimum of three action items for every rehearsal stop, concisely delivered in less than 30 seconds. Avoid redundancy by allowing a single breath to communicate each main instruction.

Sticky Language: Use direct, vivid, and imaginative language that sticks in the memory and allows for future code work development (e.g., “elephantine accents,”

“effervescent arm weight tone”).

Monk Rehearsal: Take a vow of silence, turning the focus on gestural communication. Raise it one level by asking students to communicate via gesture or playing only.

Neanderthal Speak: Speak using only short phrases or established code words such as “from the string,” “shape of line,” “no break,” “subdivide 16ths,” “bow lane 4,” “strong/weak,” “I go to there.”

Teacher-Performer Led Rehearsals: Join the ensemble, playing your instrument. Model expectations for cues, breathing, and connection, demonstrating how to lead!

Conductorless Rehearsals: Step off the podium and stand in a section that is not your primary instrument or where your eyes do not naturally track the score. Coach like a chamber group. Travel with your score. Rehearse from opposite sections. Inspire students to be responsible for cueing, breathing, and leading chamber music skills.

Relay Rehearsal: Split the ensemble into two or more groups, assigning unique musical sections by phrase structure, rehearsal number, or measure groupings. Rehearse the work cleanly, passing the musical baton between groups. Students

must be ready to receive and pass off confidently!

Caffeinated Conductor: Teach ensemble adaptability by intentionally altering variables slightly outside your norm. Flex tempos ± 10 bpm, ± 5 bpm, ± 2 bpm; show new articulations/dynamics; or drop/add a beat. An excellent ensemble is a flexible ensemble!

Special Guests: Invite honored listeners (principal, custodian, community members, etc.) into the rehearsal process. Similarly, take on guest conductor personas for musical purposes. Welcome “Maestro Fussy” or “Maestra Musicality” for a day. Create space for student conductors. You never know when you might inspire the next generation of music educators!

I hope this list sparks new ideas or dusts off old ones. If you find yourself lost for a lesson plan or sense a student *not-again moment* looming, take a risk and try one of these suggestions.

Rehearsal revolutions need only start with a single courageous step. We are limited only by our imaginations. 

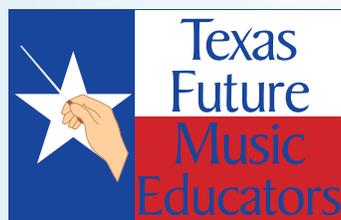


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