

COLLEGE: Empowering Independent Musicianship

BY BRANDON HOUGHTALEN

One of the great joys in life is teaching music, and one of the very best parts of teaching music is delving into what makes musical performances so compelling. I spend a lot of time (though I wish I could spend more) dreaming about how to perform a phrase, how to balance a chord, how to best capture the intent of the composer and bring the music to life with my students. This time spent dreaming leads directly to planning—how can we accomplish these goals? How can we remove distractions such as faulty intonation, imprecision, etc., and really *go for it* when it comes to phrasing, articulation specificity, dynamic nuance, and vibrancy?

In addition to teaching fundamentals such as proper breathing, long tones, and lip slurs, empowering students daily to make independent musical decisions is key to achieving compelling performances. There is a big difference between a group of students working hard to please a director and an ensemble and conductor working together to create compelling performances.

Below I will outline some techniques I've found helpful when explaining how musicians turn printed notation into music. Some work well in conductor-led ensemble settings and others work better in sectionals, conducting class, or leadership development settings.

Match Me: I sing or play a note or phrase and the ensemble plays it back to me. In the beginning, I use short, predictable ideas such as the first three notes of a scale. As the group develops fluency playing by ear, I give them fewer clues for to what to expect. You may lead by singing in solfège or playing your instrument. This is a fantastic game to help develop listening and matching skills. Intonation and articulation specificity rapidly improve. I used to do this daily with beginners with great success.

Definition of Terms: As part of our daily ensemble-building time, I conduct a series of four notes and ensure an accurate performance of each term—staccato, legato, portato, accelerando, rallentando, allargando, cuivre, and semplice, for example. In this way, we teach students that music is an *action*—musical expression is something one *does*. By giving students practical experience performing and playing with the building blocks of expression, they learn how to use them in appropriate contexts. This exercise builds on the *match me* exercise by putting a name to something they have already done.

Dad Jokes: I have students tell dad jokes. This requires much preparation and thought from the students to make their peers laugh. They really have to *own the material*. A punchline works

only when it follows a proper setup with comedic timing. In this way, students begin to understand antecedent and consequent phrases. They no longer drop phrases or clip note endings because they've learned to finish an idea with polish and purpose. Musical form and architecture begin to make more sense.

Children's Books: Reading children's books is a *game-changer*. The assignment is very simple: read me your favorite children's book. Often, students begin nervously, and frankly, boringly. I encourage them to read with more dynamic nuance and read using different voices, tailored to each character. In this way, students learn that printed notation gets them only so far; to achieve a truly compelling performance much more is required than simply reading all the words accurately. *Show me the pictures!* A musician's job is to help the audience go on a musical journey—if a critical component of communication isn't there, we are missing an opportunity. Once students buy in to the concept of telling the story in a compelling way, the transfer to making music from notes on a page is more attainable.

Fix Me: I purposely sing or play a phrase in a boring/plain way and ask the students to fix my performance. This reverses the usual conductor-led model and develops independent interpretation skills. Try many different students' ideas.

Three Possibilities: As students develop interpretive skills, I ask them to offer three possible "playable choices" for each melody. This exercise is often used by actors as they create their roles. Students are forced to consider multiple options before deciding on the best, which develops flexibility. This exercise is especially beneficial for soloists.

As I clinic ensembles, I frequently find myself encouraging students and directors to make independent musical decisions. Directors can be afraid to make decisions that aren't present in reference recordings. Students tend to be afraid of doing anything that isn't what the director has instructed. Once students have the tools, and the permission, they begin to view themselves as empowered to perform musically. The result is a much more satisfying process and more rewarding performances.



Brandon Houghtalen is Director of Athletic Bands and Associate Director of Bands at the University of Texas at El Paso.