

The “Applause” Approach for Better Musicianship

by Ben P Fritz, The George Washington University

Excellent musician-leaders in any ensemble can sometimes come to the conclusion that their musical work is done when they have mastered their individual line and can perform their individual part with dispatch. In fact, once an ensemble’s “blue-chip” musicians have achieved technical excellence, their job is only 60% complete. In order to keep these strong players focused on the ensemble’s overall growth as well as their individual musical development, the following ideas may help.

Audiate - Know who has your part and internalize the “other” parts that are occurring. This will help define balance and understand the architecture of a musical work. I challenge my principal players to listen for the other musicians who are on “their team” musically as well as which instruments form other units in a composition. For the super-advanced (or overconfident, bored, etc. students) I challenge them to be able to play one of the other parts from ear to increase their awareness of ensemble.

Pitch Rotation of Effort: Use these 7 pitch tools to help you play in tune:

- Knowledge of Compression of the Octave - Avoid sharp bass lines
- Place your sound inside another player
- Know your instrumental tendencies
- Sing the correct pitch and intuitively change
- Know your individual tendencies
- Place the note in “position” of the scale
- Double check the Mechanics of Air Support, Embouchure, Reed, etc.

Phrase - define the phrase, isolate the most important note and build a Mountain (crescendo, decrescendo). Student leaders need to go beyond the written notes and make musical decisions concerning phrasing. Students musical support roles (whole notes, half notes) need to follow the shape of the melodic material and parallel (but not exceed) the phrasing chosen. Again, the focus here is on the sound created not the written page.

Listen or Ears - Musicians must be two-directional listeners. Listen up for style. Listen down for pitch and dynamic level. An enjoyable activity for accomplished players is to virtually match the pitch, articulation or dynamic of another player and determine where they might be consistently sharp/flat, long/short, loud/soft compared to other players. Matching becomes more important than correct/incorrect.

Activate your Imagination -Have a mental picture or feeling of what you are trying to say through the music. In my music appreciation classes I teach university students that any work can be programmatic or absolute depending on how the listener chooses to hear the music. I encourage accomplished musicians to create their own internal story line to fit a given piece of music, while they are rehearsing. I encourage them to try to put their story into the music through artistic decisions.

Understand - The Composer’s intent, history, and cursory inputs. Even advanced students seldom have a clear idea of the background of a particular composition, i.e., its history, composer, story, etc. Holding more accomplished and seasoned musicians to this task can reduce some of the boredom created when ensembles are focused on less accomplished musicians. Advanced students can be tasked with learning the history, terminology, and composer character of each composition.

Stylize - Make articulation/breathing decisions that help define a composition’s innate stylistic characteristics. One of the defining differences between intermediate and advanced wind bands is the placement of breaths in a piece. Are the breaths planned with breath marks written in (using pencil) or are the instrumentalists breathing randomly at the intermediate level while attempting to play more advanced music? Again, accomplished more mature musicians can be tasked with this responsibility once the technical demands of a piece are met.

Everything Musical -Make every decision (Tone, Articulation, Dynamic, etc.) and every note played a musical event. Any time musicians “go through the motions” it slows down the ability of lesser players to learn by hearing model playing. Keep the most accomplished musicians interested in their role as peer-tutors via their exemplary playing.

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