

It Doesn't Sound Good Because It Doesn't Sound Good

William W. Gourley

As a supervising teacher, invariably I would have a student teacher ask me, "What's wrong? It doesn't sound good." The students were playing the right notes at the right time but it didn't sound good.

My response was, "It doesn't sound good."

"But why doesn't it sound good?" was their reply.

"Because, it doesn't sound good."

After I felt the Marx Brothers' routine had gone on long enough, I would tell them, "It doesn't sound good because it doesn't sound good."

Tone is the most critical ingredient that separates quality ensembles from the rest. As I work with ensembles; conduct the Dexter Community Band, Ann Arbor Civic Band, and honors groups; or do the two minute clinic in sight reading, I am continually reminded of the impact on the performer and audience that a properly balanced and blended ensemble tone has. In rehearsals, tone needs to be constantly addressed. We need to remind ourselves music is an aural experience, not a visual one. It is easy to become focused on the

visual aspects since we are reading as we perform. Keeping up with rhythms, key signatures, technical passages, repeats, etc. detracts from our aural focus.

More than wrong notes and rhythms, a bad ensemble tone is identifiable by the most novice of listeners. Doesn't a ninth chord

have a dissonant note? Yet, it is a beautiful sound when played by an ensemble with wonderful tone quality.

There are three characteristics of good tone quality: beauty, control and balance. A beautiful tone has resonance and depth of sound. I often ask performers to sound like Dean Martin, not Jerry Lewis. A quality tone is controlled in all registers, dynamics and technical demands, maintaining the same resonant, depth of sound. Finally, a good tone has balance and blend. The performer must blend his/her sound and not stand out

from the rest of the section. Each section must balance their sound into the ensemble, listening down through the ensemble. This needs to become the mantra for ensembles, "beauty, control, balance and blend."

When should you teach blend and balance? Right from the beginning. Have one student play a scale or a few measures of Hot Cross Buns. Then, tell the students on either side of the first student to play along so they hear the first person equal to their own sound.

Continue to add on others until they create a blended sound.

If you have brasses and woodwinds, separate or in homogeneous classes, the first time they meet as a full ensemble create an awareness of tone. If you have full band classes try this as soon as they can play the B-flat major scale. Have the tubas play the B-flat major scale. Then, add the baritones and trombones playing half to two thirds as loud as the tubas. Next, add the French horns playing equal to the trombone sound. Add trumpets half to two thirds as loud as the trombones followed by the saxes blending

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into the trombones. Clarinets come next equal to either the trombones or the trumpets, oboes play half as loud as the clarinets and flutes should play one third as loud as the clarinets. This produces a warm and rich tone quality that is not strained and strident.

Ensemble members need to be constantly reminded to blend and balance their tone to the rest of the section and ensemble. Too often, students are told to listen, but not what to listen to.

Intermediate to advanced performers can “discover” a wonderful tone by simply having the ensemble play a chord or passage so they hear themselves one third as loud as those around them. I know, it sounds impossible, but, generally, a nice mezzo piano sound sets in immediately. Have the ensemble play 40-50% as loud as those around them and you will have a full resonant forte sound. Generally, having the ensemble play so they hear themselves 60% as loud as those around them produces fortissimo. You may need to adjust your percentages for the desired dynamic. You can “tweak” the sound by having a section play a certain percentage louder or softer. For instance, ask the trombones to play 12% more or saxes 22.5% less. The humor (22.5%) helps get the message across. All I know is, it works.

This percentage principal works well when describing crescendos while maintaining proper ensemble tone. When the ensemble crescendos from mezzo piano to forte, tubas should intensify their sound by 80%, while flutes only crescendo 10-15%. The other instruments fall somewhere in between

depending on their tesatura. The lower the tesatura, the more the crescendo, the higher the tesatura, the less the crescendo. Trombones increase the sound by 65%, trumpets 50%, etc. Again, the importance here is giving the performer a tangible concept rather than the precise percentage and reminding them to keep their sound in relation to the lower instruments as they crescendo and decrescendo.

Ensembles benefit from having a “reference sound” in their “mind’s ear.” I spend a great deal of time setting the ensemble tone and balance on a selection. This may be a slow legato selection we will perform in a concert or a chorale. Then, I have the ensemble leave it on their stand. As we rehearse the other selections I often have the ensemble return to a specific place in the tune I have set as the “reference sound” and have them play it to “refresh” their ears. Then, I ask them to transfer that same sound to the piece on which we are working. This allows the group

to have a reference for their tone quality or volume. I have used the F major chord I use in tuning as a “reference sound.” The important thing is to establish a tangible sound that ensemble members can immediately recall and apply the sonority to other music.

While tuning, the ensemble can have this same concept reinforced. I prefer having the bass line sustain a concert F asking the bass reeds to blend into the tuba sound. Then, the ensemble sings, “do, re, do,” followed by playing this against the concert F in the basses. Continue the pattern singing, “do, re, mi, re, do,” etcetera up to “so”. Finally, sing up the

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scale to “so” and descend with a third of the group staying on “so” another third stay on “me” and the remaining third come all the way back down to “do”. Follow this by playing the same thing. The ensemble is constantly reminded to tune the pitches to the sustained bass note. Remind trombones to play into the tuba sound, trumpets to play into the trombone sound, etc. A key phrase is, “Play into the sound.” Too many performers play “on top” of the sound.

Once the F major chord is in tune, the ensemble can play chromatically down or up from their note in the chord working through major chords, or, by flattening the third, play through minor chords. Use your creativity to expand on these tuning exercises using other scales or expanded chords. The important thing is to make sure you have established a quality tone on a scale and chord before moving on.

After a while do variations on this. Sing, “do, re, do, major (on do), second (on re), do,” to incorporate a little theory and ear training. Continue with other intervals throughout the scale. Eventually, call out an interval for the ensemble to sing and play.

An aside consideration to creating a quality ensemble tone is an awareness of attacks and releases. Even though this is more

appropriately an ensemble unity and clarity issue, it impacts the tonal quality of the ensemble. It is important to place emphasis on these as you play through the tuning exercise and needs constant attention throughout all playing. (This is an issue for another article.)

These strategies demand the performer listen to others as he or she plays and improves intonation while producing a resonant sonority commonly referred to as “Pyramid Balance”.

A final consideration regarding tone: it must be a priority throughout the rehearsal from warm up through scales, rhythm exercises, tonguing exercises, etudes, sight reading, everything. Tone, along with unity of movement, must never be compromised in rehearsal. As students play their scales in the ensemble they must be encouraged to play with good ensemble tone and unity of movement. Every

time the ensemble plays the director must monitor, encourage and reinforce tone quality and unity of movement. Whether the students are playing something for the first time or the final rehearsal before the concert, they need to be aware of their tone quality. All the right notes, correct rhythms, flashy technique are ineffective if the tone quality is poor.

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William W. Gourley is a Senior Program Developer Executive in the school service department of Marshall Music in the state of Michigan. Mr. Gourley joined Marshall Music after twenty-five years as a band director and music department chair in Dundee and Chelsea Schools. He has been an active member of the Michigan School Band and Orchestra Association on the district and state level, a member of the American School Band Director's Association, a conductor for the Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp, the founder and conductor of the Southeastern Michigan Honors Band European Tour, and is the conductor of the Dexter Community Band. He is active as a clinician and adjudicator as well.

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