

Before the Downbeat

Wallace Dierolf

It is important to remember that the educational process is only as good as the individual teacher standing in front of a group of students at any given moment in time. A band director's preparation for rehearsal is essential to the success of any musical ensemble. That preparation includes such basic elements as making sure the room or marching band practice field is set up and ready for rehearsal. Then there are the materials needed for rehearsal. Conductor scores, new music to be handed out, method books, drill sheets, perhaps video and audio equipment. Most importantly though is the director's knowledge, insight and comprehension of the musical elements to be presented during the day's lesson. The teacher, band director, must be prepared. Marching band, concert band, jazz ensemble, beginning band class, it makes no difference. The director needs to be ready to teach the day's lesson.

Where do we start in preparing for a successful class or rehearsal? I think the preparation must start with a careful study of the score, method book and/or marching band drills. The successful director will be covering the essential elements of music everyday during rehearsal. They will study the score and build the lesson

around the music. The music, if studied correctly, will dictate what particular essential elements should be taught during the class.

Many beginning method books do a wonderful job of demonstrating this method of lesson preparation. The conductor's book will point out specific instrumental and musical elements that a particular page or set of exercises requires of the students. They offer little reminders to the band director. Through the years as the students develop the music and exercises become more complex. There are no reminders to the band director in the score of "Aegean Festival." Yet, the basic approach in planning should be the same. It just gets down to the director's ability to study the score and locate all the essential elements of music and instrumental technique necessary to learn the piece.

Successful band directors do not walk into any kind of ensemble rehearsal on any level and use what I call the "seek and destroy method." You know, start the ensemble, wait for a mistake, stop and fix it then go on till another mistake happens. This is a very poor use of rehearsal time. What this brings to the forefront is that the director is not prepared for class. The correct approach

is to have studied the score, know your students' abilities, and anticipate the challenges the music will present to them. The lesson is then built around those specific areas of the music. Warm up the ensemble using the scales or scales that correspond with the tonal center (or centers) of the music. Take several rhythms from the score and use these for unison rhythmic studies. Be sure to have the students begin to think in the key and meter that the musical selection contains. The same can be done with the main melodic patterns. Write out the primary melodic lines for all the instruments. This will accomplish many objectives. It gives all the students the opportunity to play the melody and more importantly they will then be able to recognize this melodic material later on. This is an easy fix to the balance problem within the harmonic, rhythmic and melodic material when the piece is practiced as a whole. The students will listen and adjust to the melodic line much better when they are truly familiar with it. Last but not least by having all the students in the ensemble play the melody in unison provides another wonderful intonation and phrasing study. Going a step further would be to write out a simple four-part

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chorale using the basic harmonic sequence contained in the music to be studied.

A basic theory and music history lesson can also be taught around the piece of music.

Of course, if a band director is truly a music educator the students will already have covered the essential elements of instrumental techniques and musical understanding prior to any selection of music being placed before them. Hopefully when a director begins to really prepare for rehearsals they will discover that perhaps they are doing things backward.

Another important aspect of score study is that the director begins to absorb the music in their mind. Again this is very easy to do in the early stages of teaching instrumental music to young students. How long does it take for a person with a music education degree to memorize simple lines in a beginning band book? I would hope not too long. Yet, often directors find themselves staring at the “ink” that spells out a simple eight to sixteen measure phrase as their students play the melody or exercise. Directors will discover that if they take their eyes off the simple line of music and observe their students they will become much more effective teachers. This same process can and should be practiced by directors teaching any level of ensemble. Notice I used the term “practice.”

I remember during my first year of teaching I caught myself making certain my beginning band conductor’s manual was open to “Mary’s Little Lamb” prior to stepping on the podium to conduct the melody in a sixth grade band concert. I felt foolish. “What am I doing?” I thought to myself. “Do I really need to stare down at a melody I clearly know by memory?” The words of Gary Rosenblatt, whom I had the honor of student teaching with, rang through my head. “Wally, put your score in your head, not your head in your score.” I closed the book as I stepped on the podium. Guess what? The students

and I performed the piece quite well.

I find it amusing that throughout my career I heard (and still do) the constant complaint from band directors “my students don’t look up.” It all starts with the teacher’s preparation. If a band director spends time studying any and all material used in a rehearsal they can spend more time observing their students. As the students notice their teacher looking at them they will begin looking more at the teacher. The same applies to the director’s understanding of the challenges within the ink on the page. When students have a director who comes to class prepared and focuses on the instrumental technique necessary to play the demanding sections of the music the students will do the same. If you want your students to come to class prepared you must set the example. Set this example in rehearsal. It will follow to the stage.

Many behavior problems that can come up in a rehearsal can also be planned for (as strange as that may seem). Allow me to explain. If a director has a plan in place to deal with problem situations that, based on their knowledge of the ensemble and students may happen, it can often be avoided. Assume for a moment there are a couple of students who have a habit of creating a distraction by talking when everyone else is quiet. If the band director knows this challenge is likely to happen and they have a plan in their mind of how to deal with it, the situation can be defused quickly.

I frequently used to ask student teachers in my efforts to help them understand the importance of planning for problems “what is the worse that can happen?” Then I would say, “OK, now while you are calm and in the planning mode let’s discuss some ways you could deal with that problem should it actually arise.” Having a plan in your mind, or perhaps even written down, gives a director a sense of empowerment. This is a great way to reduce stress.

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The educational process is only as good as the individual teacher standing in front of a group of students at any given moment in time. The teacher needs to be prepared. When we are prepared we are better teachers. I hope this article helps you in achieving this objective. I have many ideas about this area of teaching as well as many others. Please contact me if I can be of help to you and your students. May the pitch be with you.

Wallace Dierolf earned his B.A. Degree from St. Mary's University, with honors, and his Masters degree from the University of Texas at San Antonio. While attending St. Mary's University he was inducted into Delta Epsilon Sigma, an international academic honor society for students attending private universities. Mr. Dierolf served the students of North Side ISD (San Antonio) for twenty-nine years as both a Middle School and High School Band Director. Band programs under his leadership received numerous TMEA and UIL awards. In 1998, Mr. Dierolf opened Sandra Day O'Connor High School in Helotes, Texas. The band program at O'Connor earned six consecutive Sweepstakes Awards and rapidly grew to become one of the largest 5A programs in Texas. While at O'Connor he also served as the Fine Arts Department head and was the school's first "Teacher of the Year." Mr. Dierolf has also been blessed with many teaching honors including receiving the outstanding Alumnus award in the field of music from The University of Texas at San Antonio in 2003. Soon after announcing his retirement, the North Side ISD School Board voted unanimously to name the new band hall under construction at O'Connor the Wallace C. Dierolf Band Hall. A very versatile music educator, Mr. Dierolf remains very active as a clinician for marching, concert and jazz bands throughout the state of Texas. Many of his former students are currently professional players and teachers.

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