

# Hints for the Band Ensemble

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Recently I was given the opportunity to host a workshop with my friend Gary Rosenblatt. The subject was band ensemble sounds. Before the workshop I decided to make a short check list for myself as the presenter and later as a handout for the attendees. Granted, not all these points will apply to everyone; however the list could maybe help the young director to succeed.

## **BAND ENSEMBLE CHECK LIST:**

1. Reminder of methods and points to check before and after rehearsal!
2. Highlight these points during score study!
3. All these points should be discussed with students in band rehearsals!

In order to organize my thoughts, I prefer to adjust my band's sound horizontally and vertically. If an ensemble can take command of each field separately, I believe the combined effort will result in a more refined product.

### **HORIZONTALLY:**

1. Warm-up Chorale: phrasing
2. Length of note values
3. Melodic note volumes: (longer notes played stronger than shorter notes)
4. Like syllable articulations
5. Note direction: < , growth
6. Style, Interpretation
7. Straight 1/8 notes vs. (longer or more strength on down beat and lighter shorter up beat.)
8. Intervals (hear it before you play it)
9. Dynamics: balance and evenness

### **VERTICALLY:**

1. Warm-up Chorale: alignment
2. Attacks and Releases
3. Lengths of notes
4. "Bopping"\*
5. Breath marks
6. Ritardando, Accelerando, Rubato
7. Movement Transitions
8. Beat sub-division

## **BAND ENSEMBLE METHODS:**

1. Chorale: voicing, balance, Pyramid
2. Brass Mouthpiece Buzzing
3. "Hissing"\*\* 4, 8, 16 counts: Breathing 4, 8, 16 counts
4. Diaphragm Air: temperature, support, speed
5. Tuning: Center of pitch, to bass line
6. Crescendos and Diminuendos < >
7. Section: Divided parts, number per part
8. Percussion Section: balance, tuning
9. Band Seating Arrangement

*(continued on next page)*

\*"Bopping" is the act of playing ONLY the beginning of each note in rhythm, much like stop time.

\*\*"Hissing" a particular note from pp to ff back to pp. First hear a strong "hiss" that slowly and quietly pp becomes a pitch then cresc. to ff and back again.  
Hiss pp < ..... 8cts. ff 8cts c. > pp Hiss

## Hints for the Band Ensemble

10. Articulation Syllables Uniformity: Dah, Do, Da, Tu, etc.
11. Section Numerical Volume Levels: assign levels by numbers
12. Tempos: Sub-division

### BEFORE YOU ASK WHY:

1. The Warm-up Chorale is a great vehicle for developing the proper ensemble balance. Utilizing the pyramid concept, volumes for each voice is related to the bass line, with bass line being the loudest. Separating the voices for tuning, intervals, and chord scale step proves to be the remedy for many problems. Articulation and length of notes can also be addressed by each of the four voices.

Don't be afraid to use the "Bopping"\* method for vertical alignment in a chorale.

Phrasing is a must while mastering the chorale.

When possible, find chorale section from UIL music for warm-up session.

2. Brass mouthpiece buzzing—in addition to improving embouchure, tone and tuning—can improve the ensemble by having the brass buzz the note before playing said note. This is mostly beneficial in a melodic line with large interval jumps. Have the brass section buzz, while woodwinds play scales and arpeggios.

3. "Hissing"\*\*\* is my way of assuring enough air is being provided by ensemble. It is possible to develop more support with the following exercise:

Have ensemble breathe 4 counts and then "hiss" for 4 counts. Followed by breathing 4 counts and then "hissing" for 8 counts. Continue process for 16 counts. The best results occur when "hissing" is done with air from diaphragm and the stomach extended out. For reed instruments, have the student start a note with ONLY a "hiss" sound, slowly producing a

(pp) tone, then crescendo to (ff) and back down to (pp) and "hiss" in one breath.

4. Diaphragm air support, constant air speed, and air temperature can help develop the different needs for a better ensemble sound. Air pressure should never change; it must remain constant. This is unlike air speed which does change in order to play softer; for example, fogging the mirror with your breath is slower than blowing out several candles.

5. Work to tune your bass line. The ensemble must rely on its bass line for pitch and tempo. Having a center of pitch in your ensemble is like having your entire band stand on the 50 yard line. Melodies like show designs may leave the 50 yard line, but the field only has one center. It is necessary to listen for the lowest sound at the back of the ensemble. Practice intervals by returning to the root for best center.

6. Crescendos and Diminuendos have two important elements in common: balance and measured duration. Volume increases or decreases must keep the bottom voice strong and dominate for tuning and balance. Ensembles lose proper balance when individuals do not observe the duration of a given dynamic change. Review ensemble balance at the softest and loudest points of dynamic changes.

7. "Divisi" parts should be bottom heavy. They are often doubled in another section.

Use "cued" parts wisely; avoid multiple numbers of players per part.

8. Percussion sections must be balanced from bottom up also. Placement of percussive instruments is vital. All musical styles involve the percussion section. Remember to TUNE your percussion section!

9. Band seating arrangement will depend on music selections, individual strengths and size of ensemble.

## Hints for the Band Ensemble

One arrangement is to have 1<sup>st</sup> parts close or lined up at ensemble center. This allows soprano voices to tune more carefully. Have tenor voices like trombone and baritones close, likewise alto voices such as alto sax and French horns. A bass voice in the back of the ensemble allows everyone to listen back for tuning and balance.

10. There are as many correct syllables for articulation as incorrect, but by all means have the ensemble share the same syllables for common articulations. Please do NOT accent staccatos; distinguish between all marked articulations in selected music. It is good common practice to periodically go down the line in all sections and listen for likeness of tongue, air and embouchure.

11. A quick method to balance the ensemble is to establish section volume level marks (from 1 to 10) during your warm-up scale. In an attempt to save time, sections can be told what volume level mark to play (1 to 10) for a given period of time in the music.

12. Tempo markings are a guide or suggestion, not a rule. Variation to said tempo markings should NOT exceed more than TEN clicks either way. Sub-division of the beat is strongly suggested for alignment, precision, and style. Beat sub-division also allows you to add style emphasis on the down and up beats.

### **These are quotes that we as directors hear and wish them NEVER to apply to us:**

#### **ON TEMPOS:**

**“Don’t prove how fast you CAN’T play it.”**

**“The SLOWER you play it, the longer the mistakes last.”**

**“Quarter note = 120, does not mean you have 2 hours.”**

#### **ON MUSIC:**

**“Why can’t I white out parts?”**

**“Can I play the same piece again? We got 5’s on it last year.”**

**“Why do they call it a warm-up march if it’s played last?”**

**“Don’t leave your lips in the warm-up room.”**

**“We always get the right notes on the repeat.”**

#### **ON SIGHT-READING:**

**“Can we try to play it again?”**

**“Can we skip the stage and go directly to sight-reading?”**

**“Section leaders please, after S/R have all the woodwinds turn in their contest reeds for next year.”**

**“How do you expect us to read notes we’ve never seen before?”**

*Alfred Esquivel is presently employed by the Texas Bandmasters Association, as membership and clinician manager. He retired from band directing in 2001 from Taft High School at Northside ISD in San Antonio. Previously, he was the director at Burbank High School and for eighteen years was the director at Robert E. Lee High School. He also served three years in the 5th Army Band, Ft. Sam Houston and the 8th Army Band, Seoul, Korea. He received his B.S. in Math and Music and M.A. in Music Ed from Southwest Texas State University. Under his direction, the Burbank Band earned the school’s first UIL Sweepstakes. At Robert E. Lee High School he accumulated several UIL Sweepstakes representing Region XII at State Marching Contest and Honor Band Competitions. As a private instructor, he helped over twenty five students make the Texas All State Band. He has also been on staff at the University of Texas Longhorn Summer Band Camps. Mr. Esquivel enjoys serving as a clinician and adjudicator for UIL, TBA and TMEA.*