

Teaching Musicianship in Band: *Finding Music Among the Notes*

Fred J. Allen

Many of the objectives in a band rehearsal are concerned with the “craft” of music: playing the correct note in the correct place at the correct volume with the correct articulation. But isn’t this just musically painting by number? It is possible to integrate musicianship into every level of instrumental music education, from beginning band to university ensembles. Playing in an artistic manner is possible at every level, and we teachers should commit to doing so.

What is musicianship? It is easy to think good musicianship means playing all the right notes with correct rhythm at the right dynamic level. To make something

artistic happen, individual players and ensembles must go beyond merely reproducing the symbols on the page: a true musician brings something more to the performance. I propose that “being musical” means creating something artistically surprising when playing a piece.

Both individual and ensemble musicianship can be taught! Individual musicianship is demonstrated in solo performance, in the standard solo repertoire or etudes or even within ensemble literature. Ensemble skills require sections and groups to unify elements to demonstrate good musicianship.

One of the most basic forms in music and architecture of Western Civilization is the arch, and one of the most basic ways to show musicianship is to apply this to a phrase: a crescendo followed by a diminuendo. This is a fundamental way to show tension and release in music, and can even be taught in beginning band exercises. Why not add some dynamics to lines in the beginner book? It would be more interesting for the players and certainly more interesting for the teacher!

Beginner books are full of lines like the one below. Either version is more musically interesting than the line is as printed. Why not add shaping to teach musicianship?

Beginner Book Line

FJA

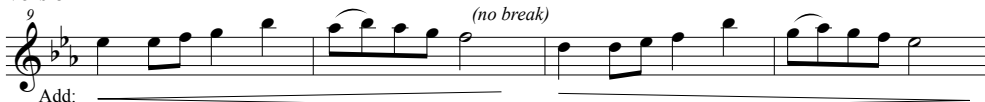
As printed in book



Version 1



Version 2



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One may vary the amount of crescendo and diminuendo. Many players follow the outline of the range of a melody, rising and falling in dynamic with the line. In tonal music, most phrases group easily into 4-bar or 8-bar units, and longer phrases may rise and fall twice in shape.

Chord progressions in tonal music often provide opportunities to emphasize tension and release. When playing a piece with easily identifiable chords, look for chord progressions that can help you provide shaping.

Choose a score to a piece you want to play that has a standard 4-bar or 8-bar melody. Often a phrase like this has no dynamic contour indicated, perhaps just a beginning dynamic. This is a perfect place to teach musicianship in your band! Add shaping to the line and it will be more musically satisfying and interesting to hear. Students can appreciate the role of good musicianship more when they experience it, and it will demonstrate an important principal: it is ALWAYS permissible to add musicianship to pieces.

Composers and publishers EXPECT musical teachers to exercise some judgment: they do not want to legislate every nuance for you. Apply the idea of “shaping” a line to strains in a traditional march for a more musical interpretation.

These items are often emphasized in tonal music for a more expressive performance:

- Moving lines and figures
- Lines with chromatic movement
- Countermelodies
- Sequences usually crescendo, especially if they rise in pitch

Of course, the melody itself must be predominant. As Aaron Copland said, “The melody is generally what the piece is about.”

It is best if these items are not allowed to dominate:

- Accompanimental parts
- Repeated figures

How can you teach musicianship in an instrumental music ensemble? *Unify*. Ensemble is French for “together.” Together, we unify time (tempo, pulse), style, volume and volume contour, phrasing, and every other element encountered in the work. Let’s examine a few of these more closely:

Articulation must be unified. There are four main ways to begin a note: legato, staccato, ^ accents and > accents. Personal note: I once heard a clinician at a TBA convention say “never use the word ‘attack’—do you really want your students to ‘attack’ a note?” Sorry, I don’t remember who changed my life with that statement! I broke a 20-year habit of using a word that did not describe how I want

sound to begin. Avoid using the word “attack!”

This guide works for most music:

Legato: full dynamic, full value. Delicate but defined start to note, note has equal sound through its duration.

Staccato: ½ dynamic and ½ value. Delicate but defined start to note, detached but resonant, “lifted,” usually lighter in character.

^ Accents: 2X dynamic and ½ value. Full energy at front of note, quick decay (lift).

> Accents: 2X dynamic at front of note, longer decay to be determined by conductor/performer. This one can vary a lot, based on usage in the piece.

Choose a score. . . that has a standard 4-bar or 8-bar melody. This is a perfect place to teach musicianship in your band! Add shaping to the line and it will be more musically satisfying and interesting to hear. Composers and publishers EXPECT musical teachers to exercise some judgment: they do not want to legislate every nuance for you.

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It is necessary to go deeper than this simple guide in more complex cases. Most good composers only use staccati in softer dynamics, as there is an implied “lightness” to these notes. Ensembles that play staccati quieter, not just shorter, will hear a really musical difference. I would like to offer a personal observation about staccato markings. If the tempo is at 120 or faster (and sometimes just a little under that) any staccato marks on a quadruple subdivision are beyond the point: those notes are already short! These passages will sound better if the “light” aspect of staccato is used here, and tongue as legato as possible. Try it—you’ll like it!

Transcriptions of certain orchestral pieces show that older composers, editors and publishers seemed to treat the ^ accent as to be played with more force than the > accent, but the majority of modern works are trending as in the guide above.

The standard “sideways” accent looks like a little diminuendo. In marches and fanfares, the overall style dictates that notes with that marking have separation, but in overture-style pieces, it is more musical to expect more length, and therefore the musician should define a specific shape and length of taper.

For instance, in a given case the most musical performance of notes marked this way may be to play them 80% length, with moderate taper (or lift). On a longer note with a sideways, I often ask for the ensemble to have the note taper but touch the next note. For example, in the last movement of Moussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition*, the magnificent *Great Gate of Kiev*, no one would want to hear those big chords with big gaps between them. Not musical.

There are two main ways to end notes, a dramatic release (last note of *1812 Overture* by Tchaikovsky) or tapered (last note of *Irish Tune from the County Derry* by Percy Grainger). In a dramatic (square, block) ending, the sound is equal in energy to the very end. All players release together and remain still for a bit to allow the note to resonate before faces or instruments move. In a tapered, quiet release, energized air is required to keep good sound during the taper. Many fine ensembles use the “low leaves last” concept for added resonance in tonal music. To do this, the higher instruments release a millisecond before and the lowest instruments leave a millisecond after the middle of the sound. This is a high-level concept but a beautiful one to perform, as it allows the fundamental of a chord to have presence during the release.

Of course, all of these ideas are futile if a band performs without unifying intonation, rhythm and balance. The

following statements are simple, but important:

- Good intonation is a matter of getting rid of the waves between two or more people.

- Rhythm is about math.

- Balance is hearing the proper amount of each part.

It is enough to say that these aspects must be present in order to display good musicianship.

Here are some miscellaneous tips I have learned from watching outstanding teachers.

- Lead across the bar. Learning to play across bar lines can make passages more musical, and this can apply to notes other than anacrusis.

- The intake of breath should be like the music that follows, especially in regard to tempo.



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- In lyrical music with slurred running notes, good musicians often hold the first note imperceptibly longer. (Individual musicianship skill.)

- The lower note of an upward leap should be energized so the higher pitch can naturally float out of it. ...*and a related idea*...

- Higher notes in a passage can leap out of the texture: control the volume of these.

- Descending passages can get lost in the texture of the music: crescendo to define and project these lines.

- Grace notes are ornaments and should be noticed, even though the weight must be felt on the principal note. Tongue the start of a grace note, even when edited under a slur.

- Vibrato waves should be faster when the music is either higher (in range) or louder and softer when the

music is lower (in range) or softer. Try 5 per second in mid-range, mezzo forte.

- Wind instruments should not use much (or any) vibrato when playing in ensemble passages (tutti and unison). Double reeds may use a bit, and flutes, even less than that. No one else use it in ensemble unless you have a solo. The finest musicians in the world, members of major symphony orchestras do this.

- Short notes surrounded by longer notes need more air to define and project them.

Hopefully these tips will aid you and your students in creating a more musical performance out of the “blueprint” of notes you see before you. No one will ever accuse you of being “too musical!”

Fred J. Allen is Director of Bands and Professor of Music at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas. In addition to his conducting the Wind Ensemble, he teaches graduate conducting, orchestration and music education classes. He oversees 300 band students involved in the band program, in four concert groups, the athletic bands and several chamber ensembles. He is a past recipient of the College of Fine Arts Teaching Excellence Award and has been a finalist for the SFASU Achievement in Teaching Award.

Fred J. Allen is a product of music education in Texas, playing in the bands of Verna Covington and David Pennington in Austin, and under Don Turner, Paul Stroud and Jimmy Yancey in Longview before becoming a member of the Longview High School Band, under John C. “Pete” Kunkel. His undergraduate studies were at Abilene Christian University under Dr. Charles Trayler, who remains his primary mentor. After receiving a Master of Music Education at Texas A&M at Commerce, he undertook doctoral work at Texas Tech. Though his doctorate was never completed, he feels fortunate to have studied conducting and arranging under James Sudduth.

Allen is proud of his years teaching public school, beginning in Dimmitt, TX, working with Ralph Smith, and continuing with eight years at North Richland Junior High in the Birdville School District.

Under his direction, the Wind Ensemble at SFA has performed at conventions of the Texas Music Educators Association, the College Band Directors National Association, the National Association of Composers/USA, Texas Chapter and the South Central Regional Music Conference in Monroe, LA. Under his leadership the SFA Wind Ensemble continues its long tradition of commissioning new works from composers. Recent commissions have produced works from James Syler, David Maslanka, Samuel Zyman, Frank Ticheli, Jack Stamp, Mike Mower, Dan Welcher and Jonathan Newman.

Allen has conducted All-Region and All-State Bands throughout Texas and the United States, where he is also an active concert clinician and adjudicator. He has often served as guest conductor for bands playing at the Midwest Clinic and the Texas Music Educators Association Convention, and has also conducted in Korea, Taiwan and Australia.

He has published several pieces for band, orchestra and flute choir that draw upon his experience in teaching in the public schools in Texas. These works have been performed frequently at conventions and festivals across the United States and internationally. He has several commissioned works in progress.

He was recently elected to membership in the American Bandmasters Association. He is also a member of Phi Beta Mu International Bandmasters Fraternity, College Band Directors National Association, ASCAP and Texas Bandmasters Association.