

# Getting “That Sound”

David Brandon

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It was the week after my very first concert as a band director when my quest for “that sound” began. My middle school second band had performed a piece called “Christmas Collage”. It was a typical one where many of the more famous holiday tunes are wrapped into one enjoyable package. Not too long for the dads, yet just long and varied enough for the distracted siblings to look up from their doodling on the program (Facebook and smartphones were not around at that time.) to crack a smile of recognition before returning to coloring in all of the “Os” in the program and giving the Santa Claus picture on the front a new and improved beard.

But none of this happened at my concert.

It started off fine since the first eight measures or so were what we had played the most in rehearsals. You always start at the beginning, right? As we continued to play, the polite audience began to shift in their seats as they sensed they were about to witness one of those uncomfortable events from which there is no escape. It happened so fast there was no time to excuse themselves from the audience to visit the restroom or step out to get some fresh air. No, what occurred on stage was wrapped up in a single phrase a fellow colleague later provided. A “Christmas Collision”

had taken place on stage. And I was responsible. I went into mourning for having made the very, very bad choice of becoming a band director as well as having wrecked Christmas.

The following week was when the quest started. That was the week our sister school performed their December concert. I sat in the audience trying to make myself as small as possible because I thought everyone knew I was the destroyer of Christmas. As the concert progressed I could not believe what I was hearing. The second and third bands from across the same district were playing the most unbelievable concert I had ever heard! They not only knew their notes and rhythms (I guess they started some rehearsals working on the middle and ends of their music) but the sounds the bands made were unbelievable to me! I had no idea young bands were capable of sounding so great! I decided then and there that I had to figure this thing out...or go sell insurance.

Twenty-four years later, and although I’m still trying to figure it out, I think I’ve been able to

consolidate the things I’ve learned from all the people who have helped me into a package my students and I can quickly understand and guide us in everything we do

in our rehearsals to develop the sounds we want from our band.

**Have sound concepts clear in your own head and the vocabulary to communicate them to your students.**

Can you put your finger on what makes one

person sound better than another? Most of us have a pretty clear idea what constitutes a good tone for each of the instruments, but what are the elements that make one individual or ensemble sound better than another and how can those elements be described so students can easily understand them and know when they are achieving them?

I apply five basic hierarchical concepts, or rules, to everything. The first rule must be achieved before the second, the second before the third, etc. This provides a fundamental and easily understood structure to evaluate our playing. The first three “rules” are the

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individual player’s responsibility, although we must first teach the concepts and continue to reinforce them every day. These, when achieved, create the basic “palette” of section sounds. The fourth and fifth rules are more our responsibility. How we “mix” the colors of the sections establishes our own unique ensemble sound.

• **RULE ONE: make one note sound the same from beginning to end with a mature tone.**

This sounds elemental but if you think about the things that must happen just to get a clear note start on each of the instruments you soon realize it’s no easy task! Then you must figure out how to describe it in the simplest way so your students can achieve it. This is a lifelong quest in itself!

• **RULE TWO: make two or more notes sound the same to produce a mature individual sound.**

Now we’re deep into it. I like to think what Judy Garland would have sounded like singing the octave leap at the beginning of “Somewhere Over The Rainbow” if she had the vocal technique of Roseanne Barr. As directors, we must first learn for ourselves what needs to happen to make higher and lower notes sound the same on each of the instruments and then effectively communicate this to our students. What vowel sound/shape needs to be created in the mouth when you change from one note to another note? What changes happen in air speed/shape from high to low? It’s not as simple as pressing down the octave key! This is another lifelong quest!

• **RULE THREE: match tone, pitch and energy with others in your section to produce a mature section sound.**

I must admit that as a player I didn’t really start to understand this until my senior year in college and then only with the other person playing the same horn part as me. I’m sure I was made aware of this by my teachers but until then it didn’t click. We must keep

reminding our students to be aware of the people in their section and to actively listen side-to-side at all times. This one concept, if properly understood and achieved clears up “noisy” sounding bands almost immediately.

• **RULE FOUR: match section to section to produce a mature ensemble sound.**

Again, a simple sounding concept but what does it sound like when trumpets are really in balance with trombones? Oboes with saxophones? Lower octaves with upper octaves? How we as directors respond to these balance questions determines our band’s ensemble sound. Some directors like a darker, more unified

sound while others may prefer to hear each individual section equally. This can and should change depending on the pieces being played. Finding the right mix for each piece can be yet another quest that can last a lifetime!

• **RULE FIVE: Balance to the most important part.**

Other than Rule Three, this is the most neglected one of all. Who has the melody and can you hear it? When you hear a band that is “noisy” or sounds like a free-for-all is going on onstage, it’s probably because the players have no understanding of their listening and balance responsibilities. Once they are made aware of their role in the music the ensemble sound calms down and becomes clearer to the listener.

**I encourage you to listen to as many different bands as you can, especially bands of the same level as yours, and especially if you are a young director. Find the groups that get “that sound” for you and ask the directors if you can come watch a rehearsal to see the process they use to teach their students.**

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### **Have an established daily drill that allows your students to learn the rules and put them into practice.**

The Daily Drill is not “warm-up” and should never be thought of as such. It is the portion of the rehearsal designed to teach and apply the Rules of Sound to exercises that address the fundamentals of playing the individual instruments as well as playing as an ensemble. The overall goal is to make the tonal concepts second nature while at the same time addressing the physical skills necessary for their achievement.

Below is an outline of the important aspects of a Daily Drill that should be covered everyday... that is the “daily” in Daily Drill! Choose an exercise for each of the main areas to work every day: Long Tone, Flexibility, Articulation/Style and Interval Tuning (including unison). The Chorale at the end is used to apply the Rules of Sound skills to a simple harmonized band arrangement. You can find specific exercises that address your band’s level in many places although I’ve used “Foundations for Superior Performance” by Jeff King and Richard Williams for over sixteen years.

### **Daily drill structure:**

- Long Tones
  - o Single Note Exercises
  - o Multiple Note Exercises: Chromatic, Diatonic and Expanding Intervals
- Flexibility
  - o Brass Lip Slurs
  - o Woodwind Octaves, Harmonics and Register Key Exercises
- Articulation and Style
- Interval Tuning
- Chorale

Every exercise you choose must have an understood purpose and goal. As directors we must first understand what those are and how to achieve them then be able to communicate them to our students. We must keep them engaged at all times through asking questions as simple as: “What are we trying to achieve on this exercise?” “Was that better or worse than yesterday?” “Who knows how to make this better?” Keep them engaged by applying more advanced concepts to an exercise. For example, a simple 8 count note becomes more interesting if you apply Rule 3: Listen to your section. Then apply Rule 4: Balance to another section. Then experiment with Rule 5 by listening for different sections or individuals with the full ensemble playing. It becomes easier to “sell” this process as they begin to hear and recognize differences and improvement in their playing.

It is not necessary to spend 45 minutes on your Daily Drill every day! Find the one exercise that addresses the level of long tone your band should be working on based on their level of understanding of the Rules of Sound as well as their physical skills readiness. Make a little improvement on it from the previous rehearsal then move on to the next fundamental skill or concept. When they are ready for a more advanced long tone add a new one and either keep the previous one or drop it from your regular routine. (Be realistic in your exercise choices. It makes no sense to work on a fast moving lip slur if simpler ones cannot be played with the correct fundamentals.)

Keep the developmental nature of this process in mind. A little improvement each day adds up to quite a bit by the end of the year. If we want real learning, understanding and achievement from our students we must take the time and effort to design appropriate exercises, engage them mentally and give them opportunities to be participants in the rehearsal over the course of the entire year.

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Continue to apply the concepts when developing your band’s technical and rhythmic abilities. The overall goal must be to make these listening skills a natural part of playing the instrument at all times. It is much more fun and rewarding to work on music when all the necessary skills are already in place. This opens the door to developing true musicianship in our students—yet another journey for a lifetime.

Finally, I encourage you to listen to as many different bands as you can, especially bands of the same level as yours, and especially if you are a young director. Find the groups that get “that sound” for you and ask the directors if you can come watch a rehearsal to see the process they use to teach their students, keeping in mind that it’s a one day “snapshot” of a multiple year process.

Make the most out of the lifelong learning opportunities afforded you through the TBA and TMEA conventions.

As mentioned many times already, this is a profession of which any one miniscule aspect could occupy a lifetime to master. I think that’s way more fun than selling insurance.



*David Brandon is currently an assistant director at Duncanville High School where he is responsible for the Honors Band and the DHS Marching Band. Mr. Brandon first taught for seven years as an assistant director at Bammel Middle School in the Spring ISD before moving to Byrd Middle School and subsequently Duncanville High School in the Duncanville ISD. Bands under his direction have been*

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*the Music For All Summer Symposium held annually at Illinois University in Normal, Il. Mr. Brandon is a member of the Texas Bandmasters Association, the Texas Music Educators Association and Phi Beta Mu Bandmaster Fraternity.*