

Creating “Instant” Memorized Warm-Up Chords In Band or Wind Ensemble Rehearsals

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An increasing number of instrumental conductors believe that the implementation of warm-up exercises in rehearsal that do not require the use of printed sheet music prove especially beneficial. The printed page, though usually an obvious necessity, can prove to be somewhat of a visual distraction when the conductor is attempting to get young musicians to truly use their ears.

Listening for blend or balance while playing scales in round or canon form is a good way to achieve this, though students can often play these scales somewhat mindlessly. Once his well-known sequence is memorized, the use of Ed Lisk’s *Circle of Fourths* is significantly more effective and very highly recommended. However, in those August or early September rehearsals when the *Circle* may not yet be sufficiently entrenched in the minds of the students, or during festival weekend when a guest conductor first takes the podium in front of a newly assembled honor band, the use of simple dictated chord progressions can prove to be an immediate and productive alternative.

A strategy that I like to use in the above situations is to dictate a simple chord progression utilizing *scale degrees*. In a very short amount of time, the students can be playing a rather simple chord progression without any sheet music, affording them the opportunity to focus exclusively on blend, balance, intonation or some other critical element of music making. Although a proponent of the ultimate incorporation of solfeg syllables in rehearsals, I have found the introduction of *scale degrees* to be more quickly understood and immediately applicable.

It works like this:

During your pre-rehearsal planning, create a simple Major chord progression using 5, 6, or 7 chords. A simple one that I often employ is the following:

I - ii6 - I 6/4 - V7 - I

Break the chords into four parts or voices (i.e. soprano, alto, tenor, bass) so that different instruments can be assigned to each line appropriately. For this particular series of chords, those

progressive scale degrees might be as shown to the right:

Soprano line	1	-	2	-	1	-(low)7-	1
Alto line	3	-	4	-	3	-	4 - 5
Tenor line	5	-	6	-	1	-	2 - 3
Bass line	1	-	4	-	5	-	5 - 1

At the beginning of an early September rehearsal (perhaps the FIRST rehearsal of the year or of the festival weekend), have the students begin by playing a familiar major scale. Bb or F Major are probably the most common and effortless.

The suggested script might go something like this:

“Let’s begin by playing a unison F Major scale ascending and descending in whole notes. If you play a C or concert pitch instrument such as flute, oboe, bassoon, trombone, euphonium or tuba, what scale will you play? (The students answer ‘F’.) If you play a Bb instrument such as clarinet, bass clarinet, tenor saxophone, or trumpet, what scale will you play? (The students should respond with ‘G’.) If you play an Eb instrument such as alto or baritone saxophone, what scale will you play? (D) If you play an F instrument, such as horn, what scale do you get to play? (C).”

Lead the students through the scale making sure to indicate whether or not you wish them to

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repeat the top note or to begin the descending scale immediately.

“Each step of a scale can be identified by its solfeg syllable such as do, re, mi, etc., but today we’re going to address them by their scale degree. The first note of the scale is scale degree #1, the second note is scale degree #2, the third note is scale degree #3, etc. What would the scale degree be for the top note of the scale?” (Answers may be #8 or #1. You can then remind the students that it is actually the same note name as the first so the degree would be a repeat of #1).

After years of experience, I am convinced that further clarification here before embarking on the creation of the chord progression can save confusion, if only for a few students. I suggest that, before proceeding any further, you take a moment to practice this simple concept in the following manner. “Let’s play in the key of F Concert again, but this time I will show you which scale degree to perform by holding up the appropriate number of fingers with my left hand. I’ll then conduct the downbeat with my right hand and you play along with me.”

At this point, hold up one finger with your left hand and give the downbeat with your right. Then move on to two fingers, followed by the downbeat. Since most of us only have five fingers in our left hand(!), you’ll be limited to scale degrees 1 – 5, but jump around a bit to make sure that every student is grasping this simple concept (1, 2, 1, 3, 4, 5, 1 or whatever).

“Excellent! Now, let’s create a series of chords. Listen carefully. Still in the key of F Concert, everyone playing

first parts such as 1st flute, 1st oboe, 1st clarinet, 1st trumpet, etc. play scale degrees 1 – 2 – 1 – low 7 – 1. Again, that’s 1 – 2 – 1 – low 7 – 1. All of you first part players quietly take a minute to figure out what notes those will be on your instrument. Everyone playing second parts including 2nd flute, 2nd oboe, 2nd clarinet, 2nd trumpet, etc. play scale degrees 3 – 4 – 3 – 4 – 5.” (Repeat those scale degrees once again.) “Go ahead and quietly figure out what notes you will play. Third parts and tenor saxophones, play 5 – 6 – 1 – 2 – 3.” (Repeat the scale degrees again.) Bass instruments such as tubas, euphoniums, bass clarinets, contra bass clarinet and bari sax, play 1 – 4 – 5 – 5 – 1.”

“Alright everyone, let’s play our chords slowly in whole notes. This will either be miraculous or an absolute train wreck so everyone please concentrate! Follow me and think carefully.”

If you have not skipped any steps above, have spoken clearly and explained as suggested, you will be amazed at how well this will work, even with very young players. You can now use this simple chord progression to creatively address blend, balance, rhythms, dynamics, etc. Personally, this is where I often introduce Richard Floyd’s trio concept for improving ensemble blend which he eloquently describes in *Teaching Techniques and Insights for Instrumental Music Educators* by Joseph L. Casey (published by GIA). Again, since the student musicians are totally focused on listening and thinking (and NOT visually distracted whatsoever), the instant audible results can be truly astounding!

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