

A Few Random Thoughts About Band

Dr. Gary Garner

It seems to me that teaching boils down to four essential things: 1) **information** (I'd be a lousy calculus teacher since I don't know the first thing about it); 2) **communication** (we've got to have some effective means to dispense that information to our audience, in this case band students); 3) **motivation** (we have to find a way to make them want to receive and process the information); and 4) **evaluation** (essentially, determining if the process results in a change in behavior; without a change in behavior, no education has taken place).

It took me many years to realize that the most difficult of all these—by far—is to capture and hold the full attention of the students; this is in no way exclusive to young people, incidentally. How many times have you read a paragraph, even an entire page, only to realize your mind was somewhere else the whole time and you have no idea what you just read?

This ties into the next point I'd like to make, namely that it's easy to feel anonymous in a large ensemble. I want to hold each band member accountable and for them to know that they may be called upon at any moment to repeat something I just said or to play their part alone or perhaps to evaluate what someone else has played. Once they understand that,

they're far more likely to tune in. Parenthetically, I should add that this, as well as everything else we do in a rehearsal, absolutely demands excellent classroom control. I see many directors who have it, but, sadly, many that don't.

Next point. There is probably no time in students' playing careers that their excitement runs higher than when they first come into possession of that bright, shiny new instrument. I can't think of any better way to quash that excitement than to spend days, even weeks, playing on the mouthpiece alone. "But," you might say, "I don't want to allow them to establish bad habits from the outset."

I understand the rationale, but I'm quite convinced that's not a problem, provided a poor embouchure or hand position is not allowed to continue for any appreciable amount of time. The late, great James Mursell, one of the premiere music educators of the past century, drew an analogy to teaching a kid to throw a baseball. Would you spend hour after hour explaining the proper grip, just where the laces should go, the aerodynamics of the flight of the ball, and all the rest? Not likely.

You'd hand him the ball and have him throw it to you. Then you'd say something like, "Great. Now, try this." And you'd continue to refine the process over time.

And so it is with playing an instrument, in my opinion. Here's how you open the case, here's how you put it together, here's how you hold it, and how you form your embouchure. Now, let's see if we can make a sound. Then go from there, constantly encouraging and refining at ever higher levels.

When I was teaching beginning band, I'd have 120 beginners every year, all in one class, and no assistant. While the numbers would vary, this was pretty much the pattern everywhere in those days. My goal would be to send them home the very first day able to play "Mary Had a Little Lamb" (three notes). It would sound terrible, of course, but rarely would there be a student that couldn't manage it.

The second day, we'd get down to some serious business, but we'd managed to allay those initial apprehensions they (and their parents) had and to capitalize on the great excitement about being a part of that thing we call "band."

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Next point. Why do so many of our colleagues not have a thorough knowledge of all the instruments? To me, a band director that doesn't know all the fingerings for all the instruments (including alternate fingerings) is as ill-equipped to do the job as the doctor who walks into surgery with a scalpel in one hand and a *Grey's Anatomy* in the other. Hmm, appendix...should be about ...right here. Uh, maybe it's time for a second opinion.

I think there's a fair amount of misunderstanding about just temperament. Does a just tempered chord sound better than an equal tempered chord? No comparison, especially on a Harmony Director keyboard. In the real world, however, anyone thinking they'll have their band play just temperament all the time can only be described as delusional.

To me, the most realistic use of it is on sustained chords, especially at cadences. Even then, it's no small challenge to lower a major third 14 cents or raise a minor third 16 cents, much less lower a dominant 7th 31 cents. Can you imagine raising any note on a clarinet 16 cents with the regular fingering? Ain't gonna happen, at least not with the regular fingering. If they're doing it right, they're already at the top of the pitch.

In my experience, it virtually always requires some kind of fingering adjustment. Just last week I was working with a group on a slow piece that ended on an F major chord. The third was in the 2nd clarinet, horn, alto sax, and euphonium. After a little experimentation, we were able to make it work by having the clarinets add finger 6 to their low B (one player had to add the low F key as well), the horns played their E third valve, and we cut to only one euphonium, who dropped out a couple of measures earlier and pulled his tuning slide. (It might also have worked as a 5th harmonic, first and third.) It also worked for the saxes to add finger 6. To think each of these players could simply lip it down just the right amount, and do it every time would be the height of naiveté. The downside is

that tone quality will almost surely suffer, but I've not found it to be noticeable in ensemble.

This can often be a somewhat painstaking process, but when you're able to make it work, it does indeed produce a beautiful, pure sound.

To be sure, intonation is a wide-ranging, multifaceted problem. I agree with Walter Piston, that there are so many aspects to consider—often working in direct opposition—that playing “in tune” is not really possible. Nonetheless, elite groups do exist that give a surprisingly good imitation of it. Finally, I would add that of all the factors to be taken into account, the one of transcendent importance is matching unisons and octaves.

When I look back at all the advancements that have taken place in the band world since I first stepped on a podium over a half-century ago, it's staggering how far we've come in almost every way. One exception I see, however—a rather widespread one—lies in teaching students to read well, to be independent musicians that need not rely on someone else to show them “how it goes.” I'm sure this is a subject that could be debated endlessly, but it seems obvious to me that we need to place more emphasis on learning to read rhythms, in particular (and yes, Eastman, without a doubt), reading a lot more, and not spending an inordinate amount of time in the preparation of three contest pieces. Many would be quick to add, I'm sure, that, were our students more proficient readers, less time would be required to prepare the contest music. ***There is no greater or more lasting gift that we can give our students than musical literacy.***

One of the advancements I had in mind in the previous paragraph is the computer program, *Rhythm Bee*, which, when used regularly and intelligently, can produce extremely impressive results in increasing reading skills. (Just to be clear, incidentally, I have no financial interest in that product.)

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Oh man, I'm already feeling so much better. Tempting though it is to relieve myself of so many other dearly-held opinions, I'll limit myself to just one more: developing technique.

The chromatic scale is the wellspring of all technique. By the end of the first year in band, every student should be able to play the chromatic for the full practical range of the instrument. The brass players will be limited, of course, to whatever their chops will allow at that point in their development, but it should be at least to a G above the staff for the trumpet, and the equivalent for the other brass. Full range for flutes and saxes, high

G for clarinets, Eb for oboe, and F for bassoon. I'm assuming, by the way, that your beginners are meeting daily, and not on alternate days, as is the unfortunate case too often. As for myself, I'd rather wait until the next year, if necessary, in order to see them every day.

They should also be able to play all twelve major scales and arpeggios by the end of the first year, two octaves where practical. Next would be the remaining building blocks of developing a facile technique: minor, dominant 7th, and diminished 7th arpeggios, though these would probably not come until the next year. I don't worry much about minor scales, since all minor tetrachords, other than the augmented second in the harmonic minor, are present in the major scales.

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Oh, sorry, I can't sign off without mentioning one other thing: my continuing amazement that 1) with the proliferation of recordings and videos of so many great

players, so few students I encounter have the slightest notion of who they are and how they sound; and 2) that so few directors make them aware of that fact. They need to have models. They need to have heroes.

Finally, I feel compelled to exorcise one more curmudgeonly thought that weighs heavily on me. What's wrong with the word "band"? It strikes me as the height of irony that so many highfalutin' professional orchestra conductors routinely refer to their ensembles as "the band," yet a great many of us who actually conduct (gasp!) bands avoid the use of that dreaded word at all costs. Does the use of term "wind ensemble" (the first to leave the reservation) or a "wind orchestra" or "wind symphony" or (insert your own choice from the many others available) really confer more musical respectability than that time-honored word "band"? I think not, and I'm proud to claim the title. I'll shout it from the rooftops: I'm a BAND DIRECTOR! And oh yeah, if you absolutely must use the word, be sure and put "wind" in front of it. That way we eliminate any chance of confusing it with a rock band, a rubber band, or possibly a wedding band. So many possibilities.

Dr. Gary Garner retired in 2002 after 39 years as Director of Bands at West Texas A&M University. He holds a bachelor's degree from Texas Tech and the Master of Music and DMA degrees from the University of Southern California. He began his teaching career in Lubbock. From there he went to USC as marching band director for four years before accepting a position at WTAMU. During his tenure the WTAMU Symphonic Band appeared a record ten times before the TMEA, twice at College Band Directors National Association conventions, and twice in Carnegie Hall. Dr. Garner has recorded an album for Crest Records with his sons Brad and Blair, "The First Family of Flute", and an album of flute trios with son Brad and the eminent flutist Julius Baker. Honors include: WTAMU Faculty Excellence Award, WTAMU Phoenix Club award for teaching excellence, Minnie Piper Stevens Award, Amarillo HS Hall of Fame, Texas Bandmaster of the Year, Bohumil Makovsky Award for outstanding service to college bands, Phi Beta Mu International Outstanding Bandmaster, Gene Hemmle Award as an outstanding music alumnus from Texas Tech, Honorary Lifetime Member of TBA, Percy Grainger Award, and Legendary Bandmaster by the Dallas Wind Symphony. Dr. Garner was the 2014 TBA Featured Clinician at this summer's convention.