

Starting Beginners— The Tall and the Short of It

Chris Brown and George Little

In 2014 at the TBA convention, my good friend George Little, the Band Director at New Diana High School in East Texas and I were visiting about the start of the school year with beginner band students. I was looking up to George as we visited because I have a great deal of respect for him as a teacher and because he is about a foot and a half taller than I am. As we talked about things, we began to realize that we had many things in common about our approaches to organizing our beginning band programs despite the fact that the schools where we teach are quite different. George teaches in a rural school district with one Class 3A high school, which is fed by one Class C middle school. The band hall is a building that sits between the HS and MS. I teach at a CCC middle school in a large, urban district with five high schools and eight middle schools. It became apparent to us that there are certain things that must take place in order to have a successful beginner band program. These things are true regardless of the size and demographics of the school where you teach, or whether you are a really tall band director like George, or a short one like me.

This article is going to focus on several topics that could all be a complete article in and of

themselves. There have been many great articles written about each one of these topics as well as clinics which have provided great detail at TBA and TMEA conventions and The Midwest Clinic. Our purpose is to provide a “Big Picture” view of some of the most important aspects of starting Beginners.

Recruiting

There are two primary goals of recruiting students into your band program: (1) selecting an instrument that is physically and academically suited for each individual student; and (2) providing the entire program through HS with an instrumentation that will provide the best opportunity for all the students to experience success as they perform in the program’s ensembles for the next several years. It is important to communicate to parents that their students’ success—both individually and as a member of the band—is your focus as a band director. Early in the school year, find out when registration will take place for next year’s beginning students and begin to establish a plan for how to best recruit students for your program. Be sure to communicate with the counselors/administrators/secretaries who coordinate registration and find out what they need from you as far as registration

is concerned. The better your relationship is with them, the smoother your school year will start.

Discipline

From the first day of beginner band, it is important to establish a positive climate that is focused on success. Students who are not in control of their behavior have a hard time controlling their instrument. It is much easier to deal with small discipline issues before they escalate into large ones. We have found that the most effective way of solving discipline problems is communicating with parents, asking for their help first and then letting them know what the problem is. If you are an inexperienced teacher, asking a veteran band director to come watch you teach can be a very effective way to improve your classroom management skills as well as your pedagogy.

Starting the School Year

The first two weeks with beginners can be very time consuming, dealing with both school and band administrative tasks. In both our situations, we are blessed to always have two directors available when we have beginners. This allows one director to provide instruction and begin working on some basic skills such as playing

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position (posture), foot-tap, and basic theory. The other director deals with administrative tasks such as selecting instruments for move-in students, or finding solutions for students who signed up to play an instrument that they can no longer afford to purchase or rent. Providing relative instruction during this time pays huge dividends once you have settled into the school year.

Playing Position (Posture)

We are not sure who to give credit to for coining the phrase, *“If they look right, they will more than likely one day sound right,”* but it is a very true statement. Everything starts with having students get their bodies into the most efficient position to produce a great sound. The non-negotiables of playing position are (1) feet flat on the floor, (2) upper body in a standing position, (3) shoulders sloped and relaxed and (4) head up. The goal is to allow the lungs to be as tall and open to air as they can be. It is important that students understand that tension is the enemy of great sound production and that they learn to sit correctly while keeping their bodies relaxed and in a natural position.

Producing the First Sounds

In the Mesquite ISD, students do not start Band until 7th grade at five of our eight middle schools. At a Staff Development session several years ago, Cindy Lansford asked us, “Do you find yourself going slower to be sure the kids really get it, since you only have the 7th grade to teach them to play?” That was a very profound statement because it is so important that kids “get it” as beginners and great tone quality is our first priority. So as we start working on producing sounds, we move very slowly.

Characteristic tone production is a result of a smooth relaxed air stream, moving through an efficient embouchure into the instrument. The simplest way we have found to achieve this is to get students to take in air to the bottom of their lungs and then move it out

of their bodies through the center of their lips, without the instrument. Once they can do this, the next step is to do the same thing with the mouthpiece or head joint. There are some very strong pedagogical opinions about whether young brass players should vibrate on their mouthpieces at this stage or not and some great teachers on both sides of that issue. Whether you choose to have your brass students vibrate on the mouthpiece or not, the goal is for the students to move air tension free. This is a good time for all teachers to review handouts from clinics, textbooks and articles that detail pedagogy specific to each instrument and talk to veteran, successful teachers so that we are accurate and confident in helping our young students form embouchures and produce their first sounds.

As the students are ready to move to the instruments, hand position should be addressed separately from tone production. Remember, “If they look right, they will more than likely one day sound right.” Students should use their hands and elbows to move their instruments to their embouchures—if they are correct, their elbows will not touch their bodies.

It is very important that, at this time, teachers are reminding students to keep their air smooth and steady as well as keep their bodies relaxed and in a natural position. Our job at this point is to provide the students with the instruction, feedback and encouragement that they need to play with a clear, steady sound. It is important to provide the students with as much individual feedback as possible on a daily basis while they are beginning to make sounds. Taking extra time during these first few weeks to help students produce sounds correctly will save many weeks of remediation later this year, and the next, and the next!

What’s Next

Once the students are making steady sounds, articulation should be introduced. This is another

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area where going slow will pay dividends later on. As the students learn to articulate, it is important to emphasize that the air is always moving and that the tongue only interrupts—but does not stop—the air stream. Individual instruction at this point is critical as well, with detailed instruction provided on where the tongue should touch and that it touches in the same place, with the same energy, every time.

We start our students in their method books after they can produce a steady sound and articulate correctly. The book should be used as a tool and should never dictate the sequence in which concepts are introduced. Collaboration with colleagues is a great way to get ideas and assess where you are with your beginners. Don't try to beat your neighbor's band to the end of the book. The most important thing is that your students sound and look characteristic as they play.

Begin to introduce instrument-specific exercises such as brass lip slurs, clarinet register studies, octave slurs, etc. as soon as possible after the students are making steady sounds and have a wide enough range to begin these. We emphasize to our students that these are the types of things that professional players do to allow them to be at their best.

Be careful when programming for performances—especially the first Christmas concert. More than likely your brass will not be ready to play an entire octave at this point. Be sure the literature that you pick helps the students' development and does not cause them to do things incorrectly just to get the music "right." Talk to colleagues to get suggestions on pieces you can play that will give the students a positive first concert experience that is educational and developmentally appropriate for them at the same time.

Final Thoughts

At a clinic a few years ago, Past TBA President Fred Velez said, "*With Beginners, Focus on the Three Ts: Tone, Tongue, and Take Band next year.*" Participation in Band provides so many lifelong benefits for students. Be sure that they and their parents understand the many great things ahead of them in the MS performing ensembles, HS band, college band, and into adulthood. Remember, the better start young musicians have, the better opportunity they will have for future success.

Chris Brown is beginning his 21st year as the Band Director at Kimbrough Middle School in the Mesquite ISD. At Kimbrough his bands have consistently received Sweepstakes at UIL Concert & Sightreading Contest and First Divisions at other music festivals. Kimbrough is the only feeder school for Poteet HS, the 2008 TMEA Class 4A Honor Band and three-time UIL Class 4A State Marching Champion. Before coming to Kimbrough, Mr. Brown taught for three years in the Bonham ISD where he was the Band Director at L.H. Rather Middle School. While at L.H. Rather, his band earned the first UIL Sweepstakes in the school's history. Originally from Grand Prairie, he graduated from South Grand Prairie High School in 1986. He is a graduate of the University of Texas at Arlington, where he received a Bachelor of Music degree, and of East Texas State University where he received a Master of Music Degree. He holds memberships in TMEA where he served 4 terms as the Region 3 Middle School Band Chair, TBA where he presently serves as the Region 3 Representative, TMAA, Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia, and Phi Beta Mu.

George Little is the Director of Bands at New Diana ISD. He graduated from Stephen F. Austin State University and is currently in his 13th year of teaching in Texas public schools. Mr. Little's bands consistently earn top rankings in UIL and invitational competitions. Under his direction, the New Diana Eagle Band has also consistently placed at the state level in the TMEA Honor Band, ATSSB Outstanding Performance Series, and UIL State Marching Competition. Mr. Little maintains an active schedule as a concert band adjudicator, clinician, and honor band conductor. He has presented workshops at The Midwest Clinic and the TBA convention. Mr. Little currently serves as the President of the National Association of Military Marching Bands and as the Region 4 Representative on the TBA Region Representatives Committee. Mr. Little's professional affiliations include Phi Beta Mu Alpha Chapter, TMEA, ATSSB, TBA, TMAA, and NAMMB.