

Recording Your Band To Better Ensemble Outcomes

Dr. Bradley Genevro

Every day I take the podium, I work towards achieving higher performance outcomes and musicianship for my ensembles. Often, I think the ensemble can attain these outcomes by us simply having more instructional time. With extra time, I can teach them how to play better in tune, how to play more stylistically accurate or even to play with better balance and dynamics. Then, at the end of the day, the ensemble does not elevate their level of performance to what I had expected of them. I, like all of us, sit and try to figure out why it played out the way it did. What did we do, or not do, that created a disconnect between our goals and outcomes? Have you ever considered this happens not because we have failed to provide accurate information but, instead, we failed to provide an opportunity for our students, and ourselves, to access the complete information that is present at each and every rehearsal? With many of us holding rehearsals in a room that is acoustically less than perfect, why should we not take advantage of using recording devices that, in many cases, can hear better than we or our students can?

I was very fortunate to have my mentors instill the importance of recording rehearsals early on in my career as a conductor and teacher. I realized that my recording device could hear better than I could in my rehearsal room. I started recording my rehearsals and, upon listening and analyzing, realized how much more efficient I could be in rehearsal using those recordings as a resource.

Not only from a pedagogical standpoint, but it also assisted me in being more aware of the broader scope of developing the ensemble's musicianship. The way I thought a phrase sounded while conducting and being part of the physical process of music making, was, in many cases, not accurate when sitting and listening to it objectively. On the podium, I was shaping the phrase a certain way but, upon further review by listening to the recording, it was not translating correctly to the listener. It is much like our recorded voice. Most of us do like to listen to our recorded voice, because it does not sound like us to ourselves. Once you start recording rehearsals and listening, you will find that, in many cases, how you thought it sounded is not exactly how it actually sounds. I also became aware that I would get so focused on a specific issue that I was unaware of egregious mistakes happening in other areas. The recording device does not lie. It tells you like it is. If the ensemble is out of tune, it will tell you. If balance is not good, you will hear it. If your ensemble tone is inconsistent, it will be very apparent to you and everyone listening. The first step in fixing a problem is to admit there is one. With the initiation of recording my rehearsals, I realized there was so much I could do to make myself better and, in turn, my ensemble better.

Initially, I exclusively listened to the rehearsal recordings. Each rehearsal recording was a treasure-trove of information that would assist me in

planning the next rehearsal as well as pinpointing deficiencies in our ensemble development pertaining to tone, intonation, balance, blend, rhythmic clarity, articulation, style, and phrasing. All of this information was extremely useful and was paramount in assisting me in achieving our ensemble goals. Excited about getting to work and using this newly discovered resource, I started recording every rehearsal and began using those recordings as a means of rehearsal planning and preparation. There were immediate changes in our ensemble. We began playing with better and more consistent tone, intonation, balance and blend, but it was very slow in developing. It was one where students looked and waited for me to tell them what they needed to do to make it better. Many times, I would ask for the ensemble to alter the way they played a particular passage only to have them, in their minds, do it that way I asked for it only to have me respond, "no, that is not it." I would be met by confused looks from the ensemble. I never quite understood why the confusion and blank looks. I moved from the podium back to where the students were sitting and was amazed at what I heard. It sounded nothing like what I was hearing from the front of the ensemble. How could they achieve what I was asking them to do, if they could not hear the differences I was referring to? It wasn't until I brought principal players up to the front of the room and played a passage for them from the conductor's perspective,

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where they finally heard what I was hearing. Their “light bulb” reaction was telling and needed to be replicated, but how? How could I provide the students access to how it sounded from the front of the ensemble all of the time. In my mind, that was the next critical step in our ensemble development.

Then, I realized the simplicity of the answer to that question. I already have access to pertinent information, I just needed to create a way to disseminate that information to the individual ensemble members. My first goal was to be able to play a recording back to the ensemble in rehearsal as soon as they performed it. In many ways, a musician can make significant changes in their performance if they have the ability to access how it sounded as soon as they finished playing a particular passage. Technology has made this process much easier than it was twenty years ago. We have our recording device synched with our speakers in the rehearsal room and it was as simple as taking the recording device out of record mode and then hitting play. They did not have to listen to me tell them what was wrong, they could actually hear what was not correct for themselves. In the initial rehearsals doing this, I was always directing their listening. I would assist them by focusing their listening on a specific concept that we needed to correct. Through that process of directed listening, the ensemble members were able to enhance their listening skills in a way that allowed them to increase their awareness of our ensemble concepts and, in turn, made them more efficient at correcting ensemble deficiencies. Allowing them access to their rehearsal recordings provided the ability to listen without performing. It gave them a much more objective view of their current performance level and what they needed to do to raise that level.

With everyone’s VERY limited rehearsal time, I needed to create another way for our students to access rehearsal recordings outside of the rehearsal time. If we played their recordings back to them in rehearsal after every run, it would have the students not playing enough in our rehearsal. So, the next step was providing access for them on evenings and weekends. With the use of one of many available programs/apps, I could post all of my rehearsal recordings for the ensemble to access. The availability of these recordings would allow section leaders access to the information needed to plan sectional time from week to week. In addition, I could use those recordings as a way to have each student create a self-assessment plan for themselves and section in ensemble playing. That self-assessment plan could also be part of a larger outcomes/reflection paper. These activities would provide students with enhanced listening and awareness skill sets that would help to refine and focus their musicianship at a much faster pace than using traditional rehearsal methods.

Recording rehearsals/performances and making them available for you and your students will allow you to become more efficient in rehearsals and, in turn, will allow your ensemble to achieve at a higher level of performance. The enhanced awareness and listening skills of your students will continue to improve as they have a heightened sense of individual performance. A better, more informed performer will elevate the ensemble’s outcomes and musicianship. Instead of complaining about limited rehearsal time, it is more important to find ways to assist our students in accessing the information that is available at every rehearsal. That most challenging part will be being willing to listen to that first rehearsal and embracing how your ensemble sounds through that recording device. Press record, share with your students and observe the individual and ensemble growth of exponential proportions.

Dr. Bradley Genevro is Director of Bands at the University of Texas at El Paso. In his duties at UTEP, Dr. Genevro actively oversees all aspects of the Band Program. Prior to his appointment at UTEP, he served on the faculties of Messiah College, Oklahoma State University, and the University of North Texas. Ensembles, under Dr. Genevro’s leadership, have performed multiple times at Texas Music Educators Association and Pennsylvania Music Educators Association Conventions as well as international conventions including the International Trumpet Guild. In addition, his groups have albums released under both the Mark Custom and Klavier Record labels. Dr. Genevro maintains a very active schedule as a clinician, adjudicator, guest conductor and recording producer having worked across the US, Australia, Europe, Hong Kong and mainland China.

Dr. Genevro holds professional memberships in the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences, Texas Bandmasters Association, Texas Music Educators Association, National Association for Music Education, Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia, Pi Kappa Lambda, Kappa Kappa Psi, Tau Beta Sigma, College Band Directors National Association and was elected into the prestigious American Bandmasters Association.