

Elevate Your Level of READINESS: A Method for Effective Score Study

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Introduction

In preparing for the spring semester, most of us probably spent time browsing through the UIL Prescribed Music List (PML), trusty publisher catalogs, or our local print music provider's inventory of band scores, all in preparation for the UIL Concert and Sight-Reading Evaluation or Spring Festival season. This kind of research is a good thing, a much-needed change of pace after the challenges of the first semester of a beginner band year or taxing marching band season.

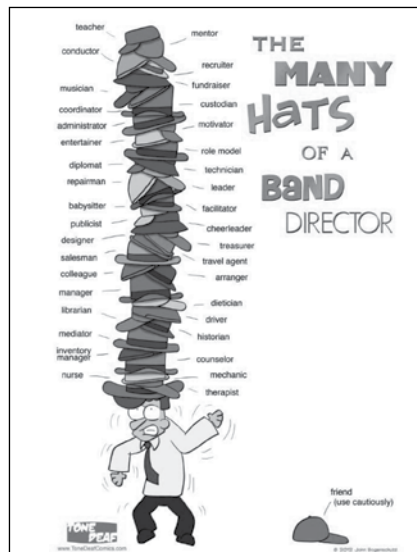
Speaking from experience, the next and necessary step after score selection—score study—seldom receives the attention it deserves, a victim of the myriad responsibilities placed on administrators of a comprehensive music program. These responsibilities include:

- Parent/teacher conferences
- E-mails, phone calls, social media, and networking obligations, etc.
- Fundraising efforts and trip planning
- Collaborative meetings with other staff members
- Marching show planning
- Community performances and pep rallies
- State-mandated testing activities (tutoring or “pullouts”)

In reading this list, I am reminded of one of John Bogenschutz's *Tone Deaf* comics, showing a music teacher, knees buckling from the weight of *umpteen* hats balanced on his head, each hat representing a different role.

The Many Hats of the Band Director by John Bogenschutz (2012) © Tone Deaf Comics. Used with permission. Please check out John's work at www.tonedeaftcomics.com

It is an unfortunate reality that sometimes these tasks preempt score study. While we understand that in our current educational climate, these tasks are not going to disappear, but we must also *insist* on our right as conductors to prepare curriculum adequately for our students. Ultimately, our repertoire is the curriculum, and for our students to achieve success in both rehearsal and performance, we must develop a clear understanding of the repertoire before the students play it. Simply put, learning the score at the same time as the students is a recipe for failure. So, repeat after me: “The more obstacles I let get in the way of adequate score study, the more my students are affected negatively in a rehearsal setting.” Put another way, when we fail to prepare, we prepare to fail. In this article I propose an approach to score study, focused on efficiently digesting the information provided in the score, so that we can maximize the time with our students and get to the *art* sooner.



Scratching the Surface

Countless methods of score study have been described over time and this approach is not intended to supersede ones you deem effective. For undergraduate student conductors, I encourage you to adopt the methods that your teachers advocate, making them your tools of choice as you begin your career. Glean what you can from the method proposed here and incorporate whatever best fits your teaching sensibilities. For more seasoned music educators, you already have methods of score study and score marking that have worked for you for many years. No need to reinvent the wheel! My aim is to articulate the goals of score study and ways of attaining those objectives when time is limited. Furthermore, my hope is that this technique will give conductors at all levels a chance to reflect, try new methods, or refine existing ones. In all honesty, this process, in combination with the prescribed time limits, works best with grade I-III scores because of their relative brevity and accessibility. I have found that using this method provides a good initial understanding of pieces of any grade level. Finally, be mindful of the following as we begin our explanation of the method:

1. Every method of score study and score marking is personal.
2. You must mark your scores in a way that best fits your needs as a conductor and rehearsal technician.
3. Finally, however you mark your scores, each mark must be meaningful, and you must be able to understand it during rehearsal and performance.

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Known Commodities and Needed Materials

When it comes to score study and score marking, there are two known commodities to consider: the time we have to study and the repertoire. Time, as we have already established, is at a premium, which means that we might have to begin our score study in a planning period during the school day. The first order of business, then, is to define the amount of time needed for the proposed method of study. Many music educators operate within two school schedules: either (1) a seven- or eight-period day with 40-50-minute periods or (2) a block schedule comprised of four one-and-a-half-hour periods, which allows for two 45-minute half-periods per block. For the sake of argument, let's define one planning period (in either school schedule) to be 42-45 minutes in length.

Secondly, Texas' governing body for interscholastic competitions and activities (UIL) defines the eligible repertoire for our annual Concert and Sight-Reading Evaluation at both the middle and high school levels. Also, a committee of well-respected music educators, selected by the UIL, determines this repertoire listed on the PML. We owe a debt to these fine educators for identifying some of the best repertoire from the copious literature now available to bands at all levels. Let's first collect some materials to aid us in this journey. The materials needed include:

- Any clean, well-lit, flat surface
- Straightedge or 12" ruler
- Erasable pencils in black, red, yellow, and blue
- Music dictionary
 - Harnsberger, L.C. *Essential Dictionary of Music: Pocket Size Book*. 2nd ed. Los Angeles: Alfred Music, Pub. 1996. (approx. \$7.00)
 - Oxford Dictionary of Music* as a smartphone app (approx. \$10.00)
- Metronome
- Clock or time keeping device
- Scores

A good smartphone will combine many of these functions. Just make sure you put it in "Airplane Mode" to avoid distractions like email and social media. Once you have collected these materials, we can begin the process

of efficiently digesting the scores we have chosen. With all our materials accessible, let's calibrate our mindset for the important work in front of us.

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"It is not often that a man can make opportunities for himself. But he can put himself in such shape that when or if the opportunities come, he is ready." –Theodore Roosevelt

We all hope that the magic of making music happens at some point in every rehearsal, but in reality we never know exactly when those moments will occur. That is why we need to be ready at a moment's notice with a thorough understanding of the repertoire in the event that the performers meet us in the rehearsal room with the appropriate level of preparation. In those moments, we as conductors have the potential to get past the "nuts and bolts" of tone development or rhythmic precision and to share with our student musicians the beauty present in all grade levels of band repertoire. How do we prepare ourselves for those moments? We proceed in this order over a 42-45 minute period:

The R.E.A.D.I.N.E.S.S. Method

1. **Read** every word in the score. (5 min.)
2. **Explore** form and structure. (5 min.)
3. **Analyze** key areas and important cadences. (5-7 min.)
4. **Delineate** important entrances and emotional arrivals. (5 min.)
5. **Indicate** significant changes in dynamics and articulation. (5 min.)
6. **Notate** and translate challenging rhythmic figures. (5 min.)
7. **Evaluate** areas that should be addressed early in the rehearsal process. (5 min.)
8. **Systematically** craft and...
9. ...**Successfully** prepare the rehearsal plan. (5-7min.)

In my experience, tackling the question of "Where do I start?" has been one of the initial obstacles of efficient score study. A conductor could start anywhere, but setting out on our journey with a global view and proceeding to smaller, more specific areas is an effective way of breaking down scores early in the process.

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Digging Deeper

We begin the process by *reading every word in the score*. What do we learn from this? We might discover:

- Title
- Historical information and time period
- Date of composition
- Composer biography
- Instrumentation and orchestration
- Score layout and order of instruments
- Transposed Score or Score in C?
- Key and time signatures
- *Solo/soli* versus *Tutti* markings
- Mutes or extended/special performance techniques
- Is the piece programmatic? Does it tell a story?
- Reason for the commission or creation of the work

Next, we *explore form and structure*. Knowing the form can assist in rehearsal planning by suggesting smaller sections to work on throughout the rehearsal process. Some may refer to this as “chunking.” Marking “chunks” within a piece can make works of any size more approachable and help everyone involved in the rehearsal prepare in a more tactical way. Furthermore, understanding overall architecture can inspire more musical decisions throughout the rehearsal process. For example, if Chunk C is an exact recurrence of Chunk A, there should be implications for a conductor related to tempo, style, and dynamics. In the same vein, understanding form can help us determine if the structure is predictable or innovative, allowing us to share the craft of composition with our students. (Incidentally, remember that more advanced pieces often have more

Example 1: Marking form



A snippet of a musical score for woodwinds and brass. The instruments listed are Flute/Oboe (Fl/Ob), Clarinet (Cl.), Bassoon (B.C.), and Horn (Horn). A blue vertical line marks the beginning of a section, and a blue letter 'A' is written above the staff. The number '9' is written in a box above the Flute/Oboe staff. The score includes dynamic markings like 'p' and 'f', and a '(2x only)' marking.

advanced forms.) To mark form within the score, use a blue pencil and ruler and delineate sections. (Example 1) I recommend using Roman numerals or capital letters. Don't be intimidated by this part of the process; remember what you learned from your undergraduate *Form and Analysis* course to piece this together.

Third, we *analyze key areas and important cadences*, which indicate peaks, valleys, and other emotional arrivals within the work. Understanding key centers, scales, and modes used in the work can also help the conductor with:

- Chordal or vertical intonation
- Linear intonation within the melody
- Student pitch tendencies
- Chromatic alterations, otherwise known as “color notes”

I recommend that conductors, especially less experienced ones, spell chords in concert pitch (in traditional black pencil), which can help to solidify transpositions. You should also consider whether Roman numeral analysis is more beneficial in your preparation than strict chord analysis, similar to jazz notation. (Example 2) If you feel that it is necessary to understand the function and motion of a certain chord sequence, then Roman numeral analysis is the way to go, but no rule says you have to do this. In simpler terms, ask yourself, “Will it help me teach this piece?” If so, do it!

Example 2: Chord analysis



A snippet of a musical score for percussion and brass. The instruments listed are Horn (Hr), Trombone/Euphonium (Tbn/Bar.), Tuba, Bells, Snare Drum/Bass Drum (SD/BD), and Cymbal/Trigon (Cym/Trgl.). The score includes dynamic markings like 'p' and 'f', and a '(2x only)' marking. Handwritten annotations in blue ink include 'CM', 'B.P.', 'dim', 'R.A.', and 'd of aeolium'. At the bottom, there is a Roman numeral analysis: 'D E F G A B^b C D'. The number '3' is written in the bottom right corner.

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Next, we *delineate important entrances (cues) and emotional arrivals* using black and yellow pencil. (Example 3) Perceiving the “peaks and valleys” of the work informs our decisions about pacing and help us grasp what’s important (i.e., the melody, newer material, other balance points, etc.) Knowing what’s important, in turn, helps us ensure that we achieve appropriate dynamic balance at any given moment. Two moments of arrival in a work might both be marked *forte*, but the second peak might be scored differently or more dramatically, leading us as conductors to interpret the first peak as *forte* and the second “*forte plus*,” or even *fortissimo*. I once heard a wise teacher say, “Don’t consider dynamics in terms of volume, but in terms of size: big and bigger vs. small and smaller...” As conductors, the more clearly we mark this in the score, the greater chance we have to convey it through gesture. Finally, plainly marking entrances also helps us provide cues and support to student musicians who are less confident, particularly in the heat of the performance.

After we mark cues and important entrances, we should *indicate significant changes in dynamics and articulations* in red pencil. (Example 4) The bold color makes changes in dynamics, volume, and specific articulations “pop off the score,” which impacts our choice of gesture when conducting (i.e., pattern size, left hand versus right hand emphasis, facial expression, etc.). Clear markings, in combination with a better understanding of overall dynamic shaping, enable better decisions about phrasing and balance. It is easy to think of balance primarily as the “blend of instruments within the tutti band sound,” but we should also consider it in terms of choosing which instruments to listen for at any given moment or balancing a chord based on just intonation practices.

Next, we *notate and translate challenging rhythmic figures* so that when we have an opportunity to model for our students, we can negotiate these rhythms without error. As conductors, we should be the best musicians in the room. The more difficult the rhythmic figure, the more we need to practice it on our own before we teach it, lest our students learn the rhythm inaccurately. Near the difficult rhythm, write out the counts in pencil. In conjunction with this step, make sure you and your students share a

Example 3: Marking cues and important entrances

The image displays a page of a musical score for a band, featuring staves for Clarinet (Cl.), Bassoon (B. C.), Bassoon (Bain), Alto Saxophone (A. Sax), Tenor Saxophone (T. Sax), Baritone Saxophone (B. Sax), Cor Anglais (Cor.), Horn (Hr.), Trumpet/Flugelhorn (Ttu/Flu), Trombone (Tuba), Bell, Snare Drum/Bass Drum (SD/BD), and Cymbal/Triangle (Cym/Tri). The score is annotated with handwritten markings in black and yellow pencil. Black pencil marks include vertical lines indicating cues or entrances, and dynamic markings such as 'f' (forte) and 'ff' (fortissimo). Yellow pencil marks include curved lines highlighting specific phrases or peaks. Other markings include 'TRIS' and 'FA' in the Cor staff, and 'Bells' in the Bell staff. The score is written in a common time signature and includes various rhythmic notations.

counting system (either “1-e-&x-a”, “1-ti-te-ta”, etc.) When dealing with compound (or asymmetric) meters, drawing “lines” and “triangles” before rehearsal will aid overall understanding. Drawing lines *through* the large beats in technical passages will also help keep you grounded in the underlying meter. As well, this procedure may help students decide when to tap their foot in rehearsal in an effort to help them negotiate difficult or syncopated technical passages. After we have marked our score purposefully in terms of form, key, cues and entrances, dynamics, articulation, and translation of rhythmic passages, we start crafting our teaching plan.

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Example 4: Indicating changes in dynamics and phrasing

The image shows a page of a musical score for a concert band, starting at rehearsal mark 9. The score includes staves for Flute/Oboe (Fl/Obo), Clarinet 1 and 2 (Cl. 1, 2), Bassoon (B. C.), Bassoon (Bson), Alto Saxophone (A. Sax), Tenor Saxophone (T. Sax), Baritone Saxophone (B. Sax), and Cor 1 and 2 (Cor. 1, 2). The score is annotated with various markings: a blue 'A' in the top left corner, a yellow bracket on the Fl/Obo staff, red wavy lines indicating phrasing across several staves, and various dynamic markings such as 'p' (piano) and 'p legato' (piano legato) in red and black. Some annotations include '(2x only)' and 'p legato (2x only)'. The score is written in 2/4 time and features a variety of rhythmic patterns and melodic lines.

Plan Your Work and Work Your Plan

A dear mentor often told me, "... sometimes you have to plan a rehearsal based on *musical triage*," and frankly, the less developed the ensemble, the truer that is. Anyone who has been around an emergency room for a while understands that *triage* involves treating patients in an order based on the severity of their condition. Too often we want to discuss shape and nuance before the students understand rhythms or play accurate pitches. This is the musical equivalent of treating a sprained ankle before a compound leg fracture. Once we have marked our scores and developed a better understanding of the work, we have to determine what needs the most attention first in rehearsal.

To determine our priorities, rank the words below in order of importance:

- Tone Quality
- Correct Rhythms
- Correct Notes
- Balance & Blend
- Intonation
- Precision
- Articulation
- Dynamics
- Tempo
- Nuance

This activity always resonated with me because what I value in rehearsal would change over time. And as I get older, some things continue to change. Some directors may have a highly developed varsity band that consistently plays with good tone quality and musicality, so addressing nuance and shaping can occur earlier in the rehearsal process. Many

other directors have the opportunity to work with less developed players, where "pushing the right button" is more of a chronic issue. Either way, we have to determine the order in which we need to tackle the issues that are standing in the way of a superior concert performance. I encourage you to put these words in order in an effort to determine what you "tackle" first.

Finally, after we have determined what musical challenges need to be addressed, we ***systematically craft and successfully execute a rehearsal plan.***

I contend that 80-90% of the success we achieve in rehearsal is based on our rehearsal plan. Although the specific issues we address in rehearsal change from time to time, there are a few "essential truths" that should guide our daily rehearsal planning.

First, all plans should be time-based, where every minute is accounted for in the plan. Class may start at 10:05, but does that mean Concert F starts at that time? Probably not. Even if we account for the five-minute passing period to set up instruments and allot two minutes for personal warm-up before Daily Drill, we might be starting Concert F at 10:07. Have we considered if Announcements, the *Pledge of Allegiance*, or moment of silent reflection occurs during our

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band period? We also have to find an appropriate time to end rehearsal to allow for a calm, efficient breakdown of our instruments and transition to the next class. This all needs to be accounted for when determining the amount of time we need to spend on each piece. Teachers just starting their careers may not have all the rehearsal tools of a veteran teacher with thirty-plus years of experience, but all of us have control of our rehearsal time and can choose what we work on and for how long.

Secondly, include in your plan a time when you peel away each layer in a work. Playing through large chunks with your group has value at the start of a rehearsal, but the nitty-gritty work cannot be completed until we isolate each part. This may be partially “covered” in sectionals or pass-offs, but performing these sections layer by layer in large rehearsal not only exposes the part and places it on a more public stage, but also helps instill ensemble awareness of the parts the student musicians should listen for.

In addition, an effective conductor knows which parts (and which individuals) they are rehearsing *before* the rehearsal. A significant portion of my rehearsal plan is listing the following: MEASURE – INSTRUMENT – ISSUE/ CHALLENGE. After determining the “chunk,” I make my list of what layer to peel away and then, in rehearsal, address the issue using a specific “request structure,” another method inherited from a mentor:

- WHO – Gets the students’ attention.
- WHERE – Directs the student to the area of focus.
- WHAT – What do we need to fix?
- HOW – The solution.

In a rehearsal, this structure may sound like this: “Flutes and Clarinets...measure 4...we aren’t connecting the quarter notes from beats 3 to 4...use a more legato tongue at that spot...again...” We then wash-and-repeat this process throughout the rehearsal and after having isolated the layer, we assemble the parts again to see how they fit together, and proceed to the next item on our list.

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Putting a “Bow” on It

One crucial variable has not received much attention in this article: the students. I often ask myself these kinds of questions when I clinic a school group: Are they getting enough meals at home? Are they compelled to work another job after sectionals to support their family? Is this piece too hard for them? Which of these students are being bullied? The list of questions is endless and the answers are difficult and often far beyond our control as conductors. In an effort to provide at least one worthwhile musical experience every day for my students, I choose to control what I can control. I commit to score study, plan my rehearsals, and try to bring high-level energy to every rehearsal each day. If you mark your scores meticulously and develop intentional, purposeful rehearsal plans, you will elevate your level of readiness and pave the way towards higher-level performances with your student ensembles.

Note from the Author

This article is distilled from several clinics presented at music education conferences and university campuses around the country. I extend my sincere gratitude to Dr. Kevin Salfen, my colleague at the University of the Incarnate Word, for his contributions as an editor. Many thanks to the Texas Bandmasters Association, Mike Brashear, Executive Director; members of the Texas Music Educators Association; and the music education students at Texas State University and the University of the Incarnate Word for allowing me to refine these thoughts before publishing. Finally, I extend heartfelt gratitude to the master teachers whose ideas permeate this article and changed my teaching for the better.