

# The Importance of Teaching Beginners

Ike Nail

Every band director recognizes the importance of giving students a good start, but few turn the concept around to consider the essential role that teaching beginners has in focusing and refining their own abilities as a teacher and director. In fact, teaching beginners is the arena in which the perception and skill to be a master teacher/director is most often and most expertly honed. The most accomplished experts will usually admit that they did not really start to learn how to teach until they began trying to do it on their own; so, “Begin at the beginning.” Bluntly put: if you can’t teach a beginner, who can you teach? It is teaching in its simplest, purest form. You do not have to deal with a raft of erroneous preconceptions and bad habits. Generally, they only know what you taught them, including (from the beginning) how to be musically expressive and communicative. In many ways, the best situation is when a director feeds his/her own advanced program. Seeing the

mistakes and shortcomings as well as the successes of “that beginners teacher” is powerfully informative for anyone dealing with advanced musicians.

Clearly, the best way to learn to play a musical instrument (or master any skill) is frequent private lessons from an expert performer who is also an excellent teacher. Unfortunately, that is seldom the situation in our beginning bands. Students often meet sporadically in large mixed groups taught by directors who have only modest performing skill on most of the instruments they teach. Thousands encounter the most serious musical effort of their lives in just that way every year. How can the seemingly inevitable musical disaster inherent in that situation be avoided? The saving grace is correct fundamental concepts. The essential information that even the rawest rookie director must carry into the class is a clear idea of tone for all instruments, intonation, articulation, facility, rhythm and expression. That



## ***CONSIDER THIS...***

### **Teaching beginners:**

- **is all fundamentals all the time. (They just don't have anything else!)**
- **is by necessity a series of short one-on-one encounters (as any skillful teaching is).**
- **requires the ability to devise ways to get at the same thing in many different ways to reach visual, auditory, reading, or kinesthetic learners.**
- **mandates the defining and maintaining of genuine musical standards; the teacher's own concepts, convictions and standards are constantly in play.**
- **demands constant analysis and revision of methods.**
- **produces results—positive or negative—immediately; if a technique or concept doesn't work RIGHT NOW, better forget it.**
- **is teaching boiled down to its essence, with little or no performance pressure and virtually no distractions. It's just you and that kid who wants to learn how to play that horn.**

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is the mandatory stuff that makes up the core of any good teacher-training school. Most university curriculums provide at least a viable starting point for beginners on the primary instruments, but students are really beginners until they have begun to develop consistent habits. The real teaching and learning for directors begin when they start trying to instill productive playing habits and musicality in a student who has never played before. Teaching beginners is Band Director Finishing School.

Beginners are a blank slate and they will eagerly attempt any instructions. Teachers are usually not ego-driven (as with a concert or contest performance by a more advanced group), so they are much more likely to be interested and supportive rather than uptight and demanding. That is the optimum situation for teachers to learn their craft. Results are typically quick and clear; and, since beginners are unhindered by a backlog of repetition, they often forget and have to be re-taught. Even without expert mentoring, an honest striver will soon observe what works and begin to develop and refine skills and techniques, promoting a view of the work that is more attentive to the task and more objective in assessing the effectiveness of the techniques and instructions used. (Remember, they only know what you taught them.) The crucial bit is that even a neophyte must have musical concepts and standards in mind to measure against and work toward. That's why we went to school and why we still practice. You have to learn how to teach, but you can't teach what you don't know.

There really is no amateur standard in music. We refuse to tolerate it. Horrible sounds coming from beginners is a cliched joke that need not exist. Beginners can and should

make a characteristic sound in the lower middle register at a moderate volume very quickly. Concepts (and standards) of tone quality, tuning and time are essentially the same on the first day as the fiftieth year. We hear professional standards on recordings, television and movies constantly; they probably influenced the students' choice of instrument.

From beginners to professionals, fundamental playing concepts stay consistent; they are just less integrated and effortless in beginners and the music is usually somewhat less demanding. Beginners should immediately strive for the same concepts as the most practiced professionals; they just do not have to play as high, low, loud, soft, fast, or slow. When directors either do not know or will not take the time to teach correct fundamentals and instead fall back on expedient but inferior techniques (flute embouchures like hooting on a pop bottle, too-loose clarinet embouchures, excessive pressure or air pockets in brass), student failure is virtually guaranteed.

The two overriding mandates of effective teaching are establishing productive playing habits and preventing damaging ones.

(Communication with a conductor, musical nuance and dazzling technique must come a bit later.) Those tasks are nowhere plainer or more solvable than with beginners. The lessons learned while teaching correct fundamentals lead to even stronger convictions and better teaching.

So, what are the elements that demand such attention and dedication, the mastery of which so clearly defines good teaching? A fundamental is anything that absolutely has to be right and present in a fine musician. Think of what you would expect from an adult professional player you might hire; that is the curriculum. Everyone will agree

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on some expectations, but others may seem debatable. For instance, certain social skills may not seem specifically musical, but they are essential to success in any field: positive attitude, honesty, punctuality, ability to focus, organization— all contribute. Regarding specific musical attributes, everyone knows valuable players who have one or more obvious deficiency in their approach to the instrument; those players succeed despite, not because of, them and the honest ones are well aware of it.

Without explanation or justification, here are the fundamentals that a successful player needs:

1. Correct posture (the foundation of all good playing, and it encourages a positive attitude);
2. Beautiful and expressive tone concept;
3. Correct (for the individual student) and sustainable embouchure;
4. Correct and adequate breath support;
5. Ability to match and adjust pitch;
6. Solid sense of pulse and subdivision;
7. Clear and efficient repertoire of articulations to initiate tone and express legato, staccato and marcato styles;
8. Efficient and relaxed hand position;
9. Ability to play alone without undue nervousness;
10. Ability to communicate through playing, including expressing a story, scene or mood.

The teacher who masters the ability to instill these traits in his/her students is indeed a master teacher—able to diagnose and deal with the most advanced players' issues whether they involve physical adjustments or the most effective means of musical expression and communication. Players never outgrow the need for efficient fundamentals or the need to constantly re-establish them; problems and issues that arise are almost always related to a fundamental that has somehow gone awry. Beginner or professional, the way a player habitually addresses his or her instrument does not feel good or bad, right or wrong, it simply feels normal. A teacher who has had the experience of establishing correct habits in hundreds of players is uniquely qualified to help advanced players avoid bad habits and ingrain helpful ones. Any beginning teacher who takes a job where they only deal with experienced players should *volunteer* to teach beginners. We got into this racket planning to collaborate with great players in making beautiful music. Teaching beginners is where we develop the chops to do that.

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