

# Student Leadership in the Concert Ensemble

Frank Troyka

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The need for strong student leadership in the marching band is not only self-evident, but it evolved long ago into an organizational mandate and a cultural norm. For those of us in the band world, student leadership is almost always associated with the marching band. Though it may exist, I have never encountered a marching band without designated student leaders. In middle school, usually before marching band becomes an integral part of the band experience, student leaders often have responsibilities built exclusively around clerical, social, and logistical duties. Strong student leadership in this context can be of tremendous value to the organization and the student. When applied later to the marching band, this value is magnified by the sheer volume of logistical needs of a successful marching band. In the high school band, *musical leadership* emerges in addition to the clerical, social, and logistical domains.

## From Marching Leadership to Concert Leadership

Student leadership training, selection, and ongoing training comprise a much broader and complicated topic than space permits me to discuss here. Suffice it to say that those students of mine who earned named leadership positions in the marching band did so first by developing and demonstrating

their skills as musicians. During the marching season, their responsibilities included many of the same duties we assume as band directors: teach technique, model practice strategies, develop intonation awareness, teach rhythmic precision, phrasing, rehearsal etiquette — the list goes on. The marching band's daily demands provide countless opportunities for these musical leaders to practice and apply their skills, which allows for a relatively smooth transition for them to do the same in the concert ensemble. (If we create those opportunities!) Most of our section leaders and drum majors come from the top of the program as the leaders in the one and only marching band. Once we leave the marching field and return to the concert setting, the middle and bottom of the program are often devoid of musical leadership when split into different ability-based ensembles.

## Leadership and the Chamber Ensemble

Chamber ensembles provide a terrific opportunity to develop musical leaders at all levels of a music program. Unfortunately, in our band world,

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**One of the hidden blessings of our forced separation in a COVID-19 world is the renewed value found in the small ensemble. Major works for the full band have been reimaged and reinvented by some of our most esteemed composers—Frank Ticheli, Steven Bryant, Julie Giroux, Omar Thomas, Brian Balmages, Michael Daugherty, Eric Whitacre, Richard Saucedo, to name just a few—for what essentially is chamber ensemble instrumentation.**

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chamber music preparation is often wedged in between the marching and concert seasons, with the chamber festival itself taking place early in the second semester. The urgency of UIL concert and sight-reading preparation may cause chamber music to take a backseat to the perceived needs of the large ensemble. What a missed opportunity! With chamber music, every performer has a unique, independent, and challenging role, perhaps more so

than in the large ensemble. In many Grade 1, 2, and even Grade 3 band pieces, large instruments are often relegated to the bass line or parts with fewer technical demands than the instruments that typically carry the melody. The result is that we

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don't develop the skills of ALL our students consistently or uniformly. We simply cannot rely on large ensemble literature to substitute for a curriculum that develops the independent musician.

With the appropriate tools and guidance, individual musicians can blossom in the chamber environment. Chamber music inherently invites leadership through collaboration, individual responsibility, and the application of skills that mirror those in the large ensemble. Thus, the individual's focus and attention in this environment lead to a more musically proficient and artistically satisfying large ensemble experience. As I learned from my many mentors over the years, if we teach the individual, the band will take care of itself. That means teaching the individual in the group setting (another discussion for another time).

### A Strategy for Developing Musical Leadership via the Chamber Ensemble

1. Unless a group of students came to me with a compelling reason, I (along with my colleagues) create the chamber ensembles myself rather than letting them create their own. This allowed me to consider the strengths and needs of each individual within the ensemble. I typically limited these to trios, quartets, and quintets to increase opportunities to give input in the rehearsal. If students wished to form duets, they could do this only if they were also in another ensemble. (We hosted our own chamber music festival in Richardson, so duets were permitted. Duets are not included in UIL chamber literature.) When putting these groups together, I avoided having more than one official marching band leader in the same ensemble. Also, marching band leaders were often placed in subordinate roles in their chamber groups to help develop more leaders.

2. Designate an "Ensemble Captain." There were specific responsibilities for the captain, which are enumerated in a document available by following the QR code found at the end of this article.

3. Specify the responsibilities of all ensemble members, also found by following the same QR code.

4. Devote class time to the first or second chamber rehearsal before having the students conduct their separate rehearsals. This allows the director to monitor and guide each ensemble as they find their footing. Dr. Steven Covey, author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, would refer to this as "sharpening the saw" (Habit 7). The time sacrificed to sharpen the saw early on is more than compensated for later by the efficiency gained when sawing!

5. Create a tool to help each ensemble member plan for, and reflect upon, the rehearsal. The Ensemble Questionnaire is a form the students would complete following each rehearsal that allowed them, quickly and easily, to document and evaluate their goals, attendance, means of collaboration, progress, and readiness for performance.

### The "Jackson 5"

Very few of us in Texas are unfamiliar with the name Lynne Jackson. Lynne is currently in her 51st year as a band director, having taught beginning band students during each of those 51 years! She is on the staff at Berkner High School and its feeder schools in Richardson and has been a friend and mentor since I was 20. When she came to Berkner, she elevated our concert leadership model in a way that continues to inspire and excite me to this day. One such project was her creation of a brass quintet in each of the four performing bands, hence the obvious moniker, the "Jackson 5"! As clever as this is in name, creating brass quintets within each band isn't terribly innovative until you consider that she gave each one the same piece of music to prepare and perform. She had to choose this piece very carefully as it had to be an appropriate educational tool for all the students at their current stage of development. For those in the fourth band, this presented a significant challenge concerning technique. For those in the second and third bands, the challenge was somewhat less about the technical difficulty and more about musicianship. For the students in the top band, there was the challenge of being the model for all aspects of ensemble membership—

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technique, musicianship, tonal maturity, perseverance, citizenship (yes, citizenship! After all, they WERE the brass quintet from the top band!) The 1st trumpets in each ensemble would convene on their own to practice their parts, as would each of the others. One ensemble's captain might help coach the rehearsal of another, and not always from the top down. By default, the leaders in the higher bands became the mentors to their often younger, less proficient counterparts. The leaders from the lower bands learned that they had something to offer their more accomplished colleagues. As I learned from Dr. Tim Lautzenheiser as a young teacher, a leader's two most significant responsibilities are 1) Create success for others, and 2) Create more leaders!

### Leadership and the Medium Ensemble

When I came to Westfield High School in the Spring ISD in 1991, I was fortunate to have worked with one of our Texas band icons, Philip Geiger. In addition to the standard chamber ensembles, Phil created instrument-specific medium ensembles, each comprised of students representing all levels of the program. For example, the clarinet choir included every clarinet player in the program, regardless of ability. The same was true of the other sections. The intent was to create a smaller musical community within the full band that was not bound by skill, commitment, experience, or age. If you played the clarinet, you were on the team, and all were valued equally. When I came to Berkner High School, I followed this model and added a student conductor to the medium

ensemble who was often an aspiring music educator. It's hard for me to express adequately the joy and fulfillment of watching one of my high school students conduct an ensemble of their peers in performance.

### The Student-led Section Rehearsal

After the chamber festival preparation is concluded (or maybe while it's still in progress!), student leadership can be developed and applied to the large ensemble section rehearsal. In 2010, I made the first of what became an annual trip to Singapore to work with student leaders specifically in the concert setting. It became clear that what those students (many of them only 14 or 15 years old!) needed were structure and skill. The first challenge was to help develop them further as individual musicians so they could model for their "juniors." The next was to give them structure on how to lead a section rehearsal on their concert literature. With these two objectives in mind, I created a short, two-page document entitled "Students Teaching Students," a guide of sorts to help them be more successful as sectional coaches separate from an adult teacher. This document is also available by following the QR code below.

### Intentionality

Leaders will always emerge. Whether it's by design or by accident, leaders will reveal themselves. If we make this an intentional component of our concert curriculum rather than a byproduct, we will create better leaders, better musicians, and, by default, better citizens.

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*In 2014, Frank was presented the Meritorious Achievement Award by the Texas Bandmasters Association and in 2016 he was inducted into the Bands of America Hall of Fame. A member of Phi Beta Mu, Frank was named 2019 Bandmaster of the Year by the Texas Bandmasters Association.*

