

Teaching the Art of Active and Engaged Listening

Dr. Bradley Genevro

As COVID-19 has impacted our students and communities over the past 13 months, many band directors have looked for answers for continuing to develop their young musicians and ensembles in an online or hybrid delivery platform. We were forced, early on, to go into an online delivery format that left many of us wondering, “How do we make this work?” Then, as we were asked to move out of fully online teaching and we found ourselves dealing with hybrid options of teaching students face-to-face while managing online students simultaneously. No one had any preparation or training for how to successfully do this. So, being the creative minds that we are, we learned how to do this through a system of trial and error.

As we continue to deal with our ever-evolving learning environments, we are still not “back to normal.” How can we continue to develop our ensemble skills with so many of us not even in the same room? We need to get back to the basics. We need to explore refining the fundamental musical concepts that every musician strives to improve. For me, the primary concept that will have an immediate and sustainable positive impact on our student musicians and ensembles is “LISTENING.” By working to enhance and develop LISTENING at the individual level, it will allow our ensemble performance levels to far surpass anything we thought possible

given our last 13 months. If we want to be better in ensemble, we first need to be better at listening.

Many students progress through their entire musical lives without fully understanding the depth to which listening can be achieved. We stand on the podium at every rehearsal thinking our students hear the same things we do. Each individual hears and listens in a very different and distinct way. Each of us has a sound we prefer that exists at the individual level (our instrument) and at the ensemble level. If a group of panelists were to sit

down and evaluate five groups that all play with quality tone, intonation and time, each panelist might have the groups placed in a different order based on their listening biases. Who is correct? It is my premise that everyone is. Each of us, due in large part to our environment, education and experience, has developed our preferred sound. It is our mission as teachers to help our students better assess their own performance and be more aware of how their sound impacts the sounds of those around them. How do we accomplish that

transference of concepts from teacher to student? How can we ascertain whether the student comprehends?

In addition, how can we teach our students to listen in more detail to the sounds around them? These

enhanced listening skills, I believe, can be achieved through any learning environment. All we need to do is select the best delivery mechanism possible to disseminate the information to our students.

All students, given the correct information and tools, can become active and engaged listeners. We first need to

communicate to our students what they need to be listening to and for in rehearsal. There are three basic concepts each student should focus their listening on in every rehearsal. Those are **TONE** (the sound the individual and ensemble produces), **TUNE** (the intonation of the individual and ensemble) and **TIME** (the rhythmic clarity and precision of the ensemble). The student, within the ensemble, needs to constantly be aware/evaluating how their performance is impacting the sound of the group as a whole. Once this process

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occurs, each student must have the knowledge and ability to adjust their performance output to meet the expectations of the conductor. The challenge with this process is they are trying to hit a somewhat moving target. The sound of the ensemble is constantly evolving. If any player is given feedback from the conductor during rehearsal, that performer should possess the skills to differentiate how they must adjust their listening to inform their personal instrumental output to improve the ensemble performance.

Ensemble conductors must decide upon an acceptable and characteristic sound for each instrument and then create an ensemble sound rooted in the aforementioned sounds. Words used to describe tone to students include *warm*, *dark*, *brilliant* or *bright*. These words are not helpful to the students unless you are able to provide a sound model for them. Modeling is our most efficient tool in the discussing and teaching of good tone. Always have a model sound available for students to “check-in” to making sure they are achieving the desired characteristic sounds. Most private teachers express, “My students make great progress in lessons/rehearsals and then we regress in the time between.” How much of that can be attributed to the lack of a sound model available to them between those times? To quote Arnold Jacobs, “You have to change the tone in your head before you can change to tone in your hand.” Find a way to model an acceptable sound and then have each student take time fitting their sound into the acceptable one. This can be achieved from school or home. As they focus on that sound, they will be able to evaluate how their sound needs to change to fit and match the desired one.

We, in an attempt to be efficient, will tell our students whether they are sharp or flat but do not require them to ascertain their tuning tendencies themselves. If they wait for us to identify their tuning problems, they are always going to play out of tune until WE fix it. We need to create self-sufficient students who have the tools necessary to fix intonation problems before they occur. Once the student accepts that it is their responsibility, they will assume a different level of ownership regarding intonation.

The next step in the evolution of the engaged listener is increasing each student’s awareness of intonation. As a student listens more closely to the tones around them, their awareness of intonation will also be enhanced. While matching tone, each player will also be more aware of sound waves created by deficient pitch. We, in an attempt

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As we develop and enhance our students’ listening skills in the concepts of TONE and INTONATION, we must also address balance within the ensemble. Creating a greater awareness of tone and intonation in how our students listen, modifying their individual output for balance purposes will also have a positive effect on the overall ensemble performance outcomes. If flutes, oboes and clarinets all have the melody, what timbre leads? Possibly the flute if they are written

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in the staff, or clarinet if they are below the staff. This provides an additional avenue to create more awareness of what sounds are happening around them. All that is necessary is to identify what they are listening to/for and how their sound fit or support the whole.

Actively listening to TIME within the ensemble is another major component in creating the active/engaged listener. Clarity within the ensemble time and rhythm is dictated by a few parameters: Tempo, Articulation, Note Length and the Managing of Silence. If we are able to increase the performers awareness in these concepts, many deficiencies we face in our rehearsals today will be less of an obstacle with just that attention from the listener. Many ensembles do not spend enough time listening to and matching the beginnings of notes. In addition, each ensemble member needs to be matching the length of each note. Note lengths depend on space placed between notes. Ask your ensemble whether or not each note is touching the next. In a rhythmically complex piece, ensemble clarity is created with the silence around the notes not the sound itself. The silence is created by the length of notes and the proximity of those notes to the other. If the engaged listener is always assessing this, they will be able to hear when the ensemble is not playing in time and then possess the ability to correct the deficiencies with a shift in their individual performance.

We, as conductors, can ascertain whether our students understand a concept by assessing their performance. We listen, realize they do or do not and then review the concept again. By spending time focusing their listening to specifics, we are creating INTRINSIC MOTIVATION. We can put the student in a situation making them responsible for assessing their own performance and making the necessary corrections to achieve personal and ensemble goals. There are times when the ensemble cannot hear what we are hearing on the podium. The student thinks they are meeting the conductor's expectations only to be told that it was still not correct. We have all seen the blank looks of confusion from our players in those particular situations. Being able to create better, more focused and engaged listeners in our ensemble, their sensitivity to what they hear will have an exponentially positive impact on performer outcomes both at the individual and ensemble level. This process will require time to instill in our students' skillsets. We currently create musicians that wait for the conductor to tell them what is correct and incorrect. We must create a musician that is an "initiator" of the concepts above. If they are dependent on the conductor to highlight each problem, we are not using time wisely. Developing a musician with the skills above will not only help the ensemble achieve higher quality outcomes but will propel each student towards a more successful and meaningful music making experience.

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. Dr. Genevro holds the Doctor of Musical Arts Degree in Wind Conducting from the University of North Texas, where he studied with Eugene Migliaro Corporon. He earned the Masters of Music Performance and Bachelor of Science in Music Education from Indiana University of Pennsylvania where he studied with composer and conductor Jack Stamp. Ensembles, under Dr. Genevro's leadership, have performed multiple times at state and international conventions. In addition, his groups have albums released under both the Mark Custom and Klavier Record labels. His recordings have been reviewed in Fanfare Magazine with the following comments: "A superb disc," "a magnificent statement of the highest professionalism possible from student ensembles." 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. As a recording producer, he has worked with the University of North Texas Wind Symphony, Keystone Wind Ensemble, the University of Georgia Wind Symphony, the Sydney Conservatorium Wind Symphony, Eastern Winds and a variety of colleges and universities. He 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.