Sustainable Methods for Clearer Style

Dr. Andrew Hunter

As a novice teacher, I attended a concert evaluation and heard a band who…had some challenges with their performance. We have all heard these performances in some setting or another – lack of characteristic tone, inconsistent articulation, problematic intonation, absence of clear style, and – as a result – an overall ineffective musical performance. I remember asking a veteran teacher why some groups sound like that while others thrive. He said, "that is the sound of a band whose director is **putting out fires** every day without having ever considered giving his students **fire extinguishers.**" That is, they try to fix every musical issue without addressing the root cause of these musical issues. This really stuck with me; how could I begin to equip the musicians in front of me to solve their own musical challenges without having to explain every little thing measure by measure, piece by piece?

The most indispensable trait for leaders in any field is *curiosity*. This is particularly true for those of us who teach music to students. There are always new pieces to discover, new challenges that require creative solutions, and new methods to convey concepts to our students in a simple, repeatable way. We must constantly be curious in search of better ways to connect with our students and our audiences. Of course, the best teachers are often the best thieves! They ask questions about how others solve particular issues, find new methods that work, and "steal" them for implementation in their own rehearsal hall. Some of the methods below were "stolen" from wonderful conductors and teachers in our field; others were discovered through "eureka" moments when the 38th thing I used to try to fix an issue finally worked! These appear in no particular order or ranking; some are related while others are isolated to one particular performance issue. They are not universally true – there are almost always exceptions – but they apply far more frequently than not. I hope these "rules" will empower your students to make music at a higher level through understanding the root cause of common musical issues.

Rule #1: the "80/20" Crescendo

The Issue: Most bands get "too loud, too soon." This is a result of seeing a musical symbol (in this case a crescendo) and making a sudden change rather than a gradual adjustment.

The Method: 80/20 means this – 80% of a crescendo's *magnitude* is reserved for the last 20% of its *duration*. Said another way, save 80% of the volume increase for the last 20% of a crescendo's length. This will prevent the "too loud, too soon" issue and give the crescendo more energy and more impact (which is often the composer's intent rather than a mere increase in volume). In my rehearsals, it is common for me to say, "let's 80/20 that crescendo," and the change is immediate and effective. Note: this doesn't apply directly to diminuendo, but it's a good starting point to help those common issues of "too soft, too soon," or "oops…we didn't get softer at all!"

Rule #2: Dots and ties are rests in disguise!

The Issue: Frequently, ensembles sound "muddy" not because of a lack of accuracy, but because of a lack of *strategic space,* which creates clarity.

The Method: When we teach the Star-Spangled Banner each year, it is instinctive to separate the dotted-eighth note from the sixteenth note that follows. This effectively turns the dot into a sixteenth rest, and the principle can be applied quite frequently – particularly in music that is at a relatively fast tempo, or a composition that would benefit from greater stylistic clarity. Furthermore, composers use "shorthand" to show release points by tying a long note to a short note. In this case, the tied note is not meant to increase the value, as we teach our students as beginners, but shows the beat on which the held note is to be released. By having musicians default to treating dots and ties as "rests in disguise," they will be more stylistically correct, and any exceptions to the rule can be quickly amended.

Rule #3: Ties across a barline generally have two basic functions: release or crescendo.

The Issue: The barline is problematic for young musicians; they often compartmentalize each measure without seeing the larger picture. I often say, "measures are organizational tools, not music!" Ties across a barline tend to lose intensity and lack purpose because of this compartmentalized thinking.

The Method: A tie across a barline is a flashing red alarm for me as a conductor. It tends to function as a release point ("rest in disguise," as noted above), or the tied note becomes a non-chord tone in a suspension. In either case, there is intent! While the "rest in disguise" method was stated above, realizing the intent of the tie when it functions as a non-chord tone necessitates turning the barline into a crescendo, therefore building the intensity of the non-chord tone and highlighting its resolution.

Rule #4: Every articulated note in a compound march has a dot – either beside it or above it.

The Issue: Martial music is for movement! When marches lack clear, identifiable style and precision, they have lost their soul. Too often, marches lack clarity because of ill-defined note-length. This is all-too-true in compound time (often 6/8), which has an inherently lilting "sing-song" nature unless defined differently.

The Method: Note lengths in compound marches are either short or longer with weight. This means *every* articulated note "has a dot." Dotted-quarter and dotted-half notes already have their dot from the composer; it is beside the note and means the note has some length *without* touching the note that follows. Shorter notes, such as quarter notes and eighth notes, have a "hidden dot" (also known as a staccato marking) that musicians must add on their own. These notes are shorter and detached! This will quickly change and clarify march performance practice for musicians of all ages.

Rule #5: The last note of a slurred passage is lifted/short if the next note is tongued.

The Issue: When notes are slurred, the tendency is for them to be *over-slurred*, either by slurring too many notes or allowing the slurred rhythm to blend into the next articulated rhythm.

The Method: The last note of (almost) any slurred passage should be lifted (or even short at fast tempi. Students can mark these "slur-stoppers" in their music at first, but it quickly becomes habit. This creates much greater clarity for the articulated rhythm that follows a slur. For example, the "slur two, tongue two" rhythm so prevalent in woodwind playing has the second note "lifted," creating clarity in the two tongued notes to follow.

Rule #6: Time tends to shift in Silence, Sustain, Sudden Change, and Soft/Smooth.

The Issue: Tempo maintenance encounters challenge any time change occurs, particularly when coming into/out of silence, not subdividing through sustained notes, sudden change in texture or orchestration, and soft and smooth (legato) passages.

The Method: Simply raising awareness of *where* time will shift is half of the battle; further informing students that time slows down in the vast majority of these instances will equip them to anticipate unintended shifts in tempi and have better control of pulse as an ensemble.

Rule #7: Quarter note triplets are "momentum rhythms."

The Issue: We have all spent countless hours trying to correct the "dance rhythm," as quarter note triplets are often poorly interpreted.

The Method: When quarter note triplets are played incorrectly, it is almost always a result of the second of the three notes being played too late. Of course, subdividing at the eighth note triplet level is the "check pattern" to ensure accuracy, but *accuracy is rarely the composer's true intent.* Triplets are a displacement of time – they are meant to disrupt. Most of the time, it is to drive the rhythm forward. When musicians understand *why* the triplet is there (to build rhythmic momentum), they place the second note earlier to achieve that effect, going beyond accuracy into artistry.

Rule #8: Half steps are small; whole steps are large.

The Issue: Intonation is not only vertical; it can be linear/melodic as well. When there are linear intonation issues, it is often because whole steps are not far enough apart, and half steps are

not close enough together.

The Method: This can best be taught using scales. The distance between the 3rd and 4th scale degree in a major scale must be smaller than students naturally want to make it, which will require them to *stretch* from the 4th to 5th scale degree. Likewise, the 7th scale must *lead* to the tonic – after all, it is called a *leading tone*! Be aware that this can cause the tonic to be sharp at the top if the half step is not small. This also does not apply to tuning in chords, which we know requires far different attention based on harmonic responsibilities.

Rule #9: Stop tuning – start targeting.

The Issue: Tuning is a *sonic* activity for which we often use *visual* aids. While these aids can be helpful (especially for younger players), they aren't teaching the real-world principle of matching and agreeing. Sometimes tuning is just being a little wrong together!

The Method: Most student -musicians have a hard time explaining sharp and flat unless they see it, and *seeing* it doesn't help them *hear* it. Further, when we ask them to "listen," we don't always say *to whom* they should listen. I talk far less about intonation now in my rehearsals; instead, we talk about timbre, matching, and listening targets. If flute, clarinet, and trumpet have a melodic line together, we decide *who* should be the target, *why* they're the target (usually about sonics of the ensemble and if the range for the target is a good one), and *what kind of sound* we are trying to achieve (bright, mellow, angry, joyful, etc.). This solves all but the most egregious tuning issues; those are still best solved with a check-in on the tuner and an adjustment to the instrument.

Rule #10: Percussion color is solved by asking: What? With What? Where? How?

The Issue: Conductors who are not percussionists tend to forget they exist at times, and when we remember they exist, we aren't sure how to help color other than: "louder/softer," "right/wrong rhythm," or "early/late entrance." Paying attention to the *colors* they are getting is intimidating, so we focus on accuracy and miss an opportunity for better music.

The Method: Simply ask the questions above. *What* instrument are they playing? If it is a snare drum, is it a piccolo snare, concert snare, field drum? Would another instrument work better? Then ask *with what* are they playing it? Is this the right stick, mallet, or beater? Would changing the implement get us closer to a sound we like? *Where* on the instrument are they playing? Is the stick striking the center of the drum or the edge? Is the mallet playing in the sweet spot of the marimba bar? Finally, ask *how* they are playing. Is the velocity too slow or too quick? Are they using too much height to cause the loud dynamic or too much weight? Running through these four questions can help conductors and percussionists better understand how to get a broader variety of colors in their sound. Bonus points – ask the wind players which sound they like better, too!

In summary, these "fire extinguishers" will not only save time in rehearsal but will place the responsibility of making better musical choices on the students, increasing their buy-in and commitment to the music-making process. If you think of more of these, please let me know – there's always something new to steal!

Dr. Andrew Hunter is the Interim Director of Bands at The University of Texas at El Paso. In his duties at UTEP, Dr. Hunter conducts the UTEP Wind Symphony and teaches graduate and undergraduate conducting. He is also the Artistic Director and Conductor of the El Paso Winds. Prior to his appointment at UTEP, Dr. Hunter served on the faculties of the University of Southern Mississippi, where he received the Thomas V. Fraschillo Award for Outstanding Musicianship among faculty, Louisiana College, where he was named Professor of the Year in 2012, and public schools in Louisiana and Georgia. Dr. Hunter holds the Doctor of Musical Arts degree in Conducting from the University of Southern Mississippi, where he studied with Dr. Catherine Rand. His doctoral dissertation focused on the wind band and chamber winds compositions of Pulitzer Prize-winning composers. He also holds the Master of Music degree from Northwestern State University, and the Bachelor of Music Education degree from the University of Tennessee.Dr. Hunter has worked as a clinician, adjudicator, and lecturer in Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Izmir, Turkey, where he presented a seminar on American music and wind band history. His ensembles have performed across the country, most notably in Carnegie Hall in February 2018. He holds professional memberships in the College Band Directors National Association, the National Band Association, the National Association for Music Education, the Texas Bandmasters Association, and Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia Fraternity.Andrew lives in El Paso, Texas with his wife, Victoria Price Hunter, and their four children: Allie, Anna Grace, Mercy, and Stephen.