

# DETAILS MATTER & DETAIL MATTERS

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The dictionary describes detail as an extended treatment of or attention to a particular item. Doing due diligence to introduce our band students to the concept of detail will elevate their performance standards, both individually and as an ensemble. They will hopefully come to the point where they DESIRE to rehearse and perform at a high level, no matter the age. For this article, we will focus on performing bands, with an unapologetic middle school vibe, but many of the concepts mentioned are beginner class oriented, as this is where we plant the “detail” seed. We’ll delve into 1) Rehearsal Environment, 2) Rehearsal Objectives/Music Preparation, 3) Sectionals, and 4) Score Study.

## 1. REHEARSAL ENVIRONMENT - Gary Williams

One day I was listening to a podcast (life-long learner here) and the hosts were talking about a visit they had with Jeff Jones, who is the Director of Bands at Marcus High School in Flower Mound, TX. In this podcast they quoted Mr. Jones’ simple (yet brilliant) philosophy about the FOUR things that every child needs:

- Structure
- Discipline
- A Place to BELONG
- Someone who BELIEVES in them

So, if this is truly what children need (and I wholeheartedly agree), then as a professional educator, we must do everything in our power to provide our students with this kind of rehearsal environment. I have always felt that the ultimate goal is to create a band culture where students WANT to do the *right thing*, because that’s the *right thing* to do.

Contrary to popular belief, providing a structured rehearsal environment is not *mean*, in fact it’s quite the opposite. Band students would often tell me

how frustrated they were in their non-band classes because so many of the other classmates simply did not care. Students will thrive in an orderly environment because for many of them, that will be the exception to their typical school day.

So how do we get to this place of band hall *Zen*? Well, for starters, we as teachers need to establish a high level of expectation the moment our students enter the band hall doors. Teach them that CALM is everything. A calm entrance will lead to a calm rehearsal environment, which will then lead to calm, controlled breathing and calm, mature sounds.

The next step in establishing a positive band hall culture is that you will need to ask yourself some questions:

- Are the students truly engaged or just compliant?
- Are you (the director) doing all the work for the students? (If so, they are going to let you.)

- Are your students as invested in the rehearsal process as you are?
- Are your students able to “think like a band director” and give informed and thoughtful feedback to one another?

When I was able to honestly answer the questions above, that’s when I was able to create some solutions that worked best for our students:

- Be real with the students.
- Be positive, but don’t be fake.
- Be constructive with your criticism, without being mean.
- Read the room. Teaching is not a *one size fits all* mentality. Every child is different and will require a different approach.
- Make the students count out loud and say the note names in class.
- Teach the students to view each other as inspiration...**and not competition.**

## 2. REHEARSAL OBJECTIVES - Melodianne Mallow

- Have the podium or teaching area set up where you can see all students with your peripheral vision. *Work the room like a waiter/waitress!* Walk around the ensemble or stand back and listen when there's no need to conduct. Eye contact with each student is vital and vice versa.
- Every student has a pencil - non-negotiable, but we must give them a reason to use it.
- Mental focus needed from teacher and students (beginner class skill). We learn with our eyes as well as our ears.
- Default breathing plan (two counts in is optimal - feel the cool spot on the back of the throat)
- Default reps (4x's on a loop is ample) with quick feedback and/or student opinions immediately
  - Reps allow for the student to self-assess - self correct
- Default vibrato for flute and double reeds, saxophone as designated
- Default Horn concert pitch during one note exercises (their G or their C?) or rotate days
- Hear students **individually** around the room early in the year and always after long breaks from school (there's ample time to do this in any performing band and is an extension of beginner class)
- Default equipment for percussion if involved in daily drill/fundamental time (if snare must be used, and I don't advise it, leave in off position for a calmer listening environment)
  - Percussion students need to learn scales and technique as much as wind players
  - Timpani is a pitched instrument - rotate students through Remington type exercises for pitch changes
- Continue to heighten listening skills and awareness (again, can students self-assess - self correct?)
  - Wrong notes in daily drill should not be allowed or ignored
  - Individual Goal: Initial tongue start - follow through - release; no extraneous noise at the start/release and no movement in between

(beginner concept). Make your neighbor sound good!

- Ensemble Goal: Who do they fit their sound into? Students must mark this in their band music.

- Style concepts addressed daily and transferred to band music
- Use the verbiage, "perform" instead of "play"
- Isolation groups (mini bands, model groups, individual models) assigned and in place for breaking down daily drill/fundamentals and problematic sections of music
- Rehearsal = rehear (thank you, Mr. Green)
- Teach students HOW to listen to other section's parts and how they fit with a phrase.

## 2a. MUSIC PREPARATION-Melodianne Mallow

- Smart programming throughout the fall semester
  - *strengthen the weak to feature the strong!*
- Have a sectional assessment system in place all year, not just the spring semester
- Break music down to its skeleton form on problematic sections with reasonable metronome markings that are sequential to achieving performance tempo
  - Wind players air and finger a phrase with percussion playing, then immediately on one note or actual notes
  - Rhythm and style on one note of a phrase then immediately on notes - percussion play
    - This is good as you are starting to increase tempos
  - Tongue before slur and don't give in on 16th note technique! Hear every note big, fat, and full!
    - Literally, leave out slurs for a long time for proper vertical/horizontal alignment and to slow fingers down (region etudes as well). Your ensemble will sound more mature when they add in the slurs due to tempo muscle memory.

## MUSIC PREPARATION - Melodianne Mallow

- Long before short for body of sound - hear chords - especially good for marches
- Short instead of long for alignment of thick scoring - get rid of the “goo” in lyrical lines or slow sections
- Subdivide - especially dotted rhythms for exact “math” and/or style
  - Send students to HS band with this skill
- Odd/even breathing has been assigned for seamless phrases
- Work through transitions (rit., rall., accel.) on one note to hear all moving parts but have percussion play
  - Students must watch the director conduct transitions (have a plan!). Facilitating on one note allows students to visually see what you’re going to do and to line up moving parts
  - Percussion should play their actual parts during this time
  - Transitions should be memorized
- Pass problematic material around the room by individual, section, or isolation groups
  - Playing alone in class or with a small group is an extension of beginner class and sectionals with ever increasing accountability! Priority of sound - who to balance to - who to fit their sound into - students must mark all of these!
- Chordal tuning - tuning tendencies - draw up/down arrow on top of notes or highlight green for green light on tuner, smiley face or whatever your tuning flavor!

## 3. SECTIONALS DETAIL - Darcy Vogt Williams

The details focused on during sectionals should not be a repeat of a full band class. The whole reason we schedule time to work with individual instrument groups is to give us time to focus on instrument specific instruction. Sectionals should be an extension of “How to Play Flute/Clarinet/...” No

student leaves beginner band knowing everything there is to know about playing any instrument, and sectionals is our chance to continue that specific learning.

### Within that focus one of my main goals is matching tone.

In my sectionals this starts with a down the row (DTR) on something really easy like Concert F so we can find the tone we are looking for. It’s quite possible that our Model Tone comes from a different person on different days, especially as they get better.

After our DTR we decide as a section whose sound we like best and then discuss what it was about that tone we liked and what we didn’t like from the others. It’s okay to talk about why we thought Kid #3 didn’t sound as good because we are identifying where they have room to grow. We are specifying what they can change to sound better.

After we choose our Tone Model, we’re going to do another DTR but this time it’s going to go Tone Model Kid 1, Tone Model Kid 2, etc. DTR so that every kid has a chance for direct comparison. Sometimes that’s enough to make it more important for each kid to make a change. And you can’t just do it once. They need the opportunity to do it better. This is an exercise I’ll do throughout the semester until more of the kids are sounding the same.

When we’ve reached that point, our goal shifts. Now we’re working to make 2 kids sound like 1. Our Tone Model plays our Concert F for 4 beats and then Kid 1 joins them for another 4. Can Kid 1 match or adjust until they blend into one sound? If they don’t blend, why not? What was the problem? Was it tone or tuning? I always make sure we articulate the problem and discuss the solution so on their next opportunity they know what to change. We’ll do this again with each kid in the section, giving them an opportunity to match.

If more than one kid is successful, we’ll see if the TWO kids can match the Tone Model. And so on...

## SECTIONALS DETAIL - Darcy Vogt Williams

Eventually this will become our Tone Model and then have the section join without changing the tone. Because of exercises like this, particularly early in the year, I don't necessarily have the kids sit by part during the fundamental block of our sectional.

Our next goal is section balance. You can work balance with a similar approach. I'll send that same Concert F DTR with the goal of every student playing the same volume and same intensity of sound. That sounds easy, but particularly with the brass I find this is a challenge initially. Doing this at different volumes takes it to the next level in terms of awareness but also adds potential tuning and tone changes. Obviously, this is just unison balance, but balancing parts can't be a goal until we can play in balanced unison.

Sectionals is the best time to work on instrument specific tuning exercises and section tuning. A lot of that looks like partner accountability work with tuners. It's amazing how much more kids care if the green light comes on if their friend is standing behind them watching the tuner. :)

This is also the time you want to help the students find their special fingerings for trouble notes. Especially with the clarinet throat tones and flutes above the staff, we take the time to figure out what vented or shaded fingerings each student should use and where. How many fingers does this kid need to put down so that their A is in tune? Should this kid put down their 6th finger on F above the staff to bring the pitch down? We spend enough time on this in sectionals that at any point I should be able to ask a woodwind how they finger a trouble note to bring the pitch to green.

For trumpets we do the same thing for notes that can use kick slides or saddles. For trombones

learning to play Remingtons in tune throughout the range of the instrument is very important, even if it was addressed in 6th grade. For our brass in general tuning lip slurs against a drone is a major part of our fundamental block, as well as tuning all notes of Remingtons.

Finally, I use sectionals to introduce new band pieces before it ever happens in full band so that the very first day, we play it in band it is a workable piece.

**So, what does a sectional look like in the Stiles Band Hall?**

The tone is far more relaxed than a band rehearsal. There is intentional talk time built

into sectionals that would never happen during full band. The kids warm up on their own before we start together, mostly because this is their chance to practice their pass offs since I'm not going to practice it for them once we start.

We start with our instrument specific fundamental block. These are all the supplements that fill their binder, the stuff that we don't do during full band because it would waste everyone else's time. That's going to mean:

- Vibrato work @ different tempos and subdivisions for control
- Octave slur Flexibility + Harmonics for flutes plus lots of angry flutes on low notes
- Low Chalumeau long tone clarinet, Register drills, + articulation up high
- Octave Slur Flexibility + tuning saxes & double reeds + working on more rounded tones
- Lip slurs out the wazoo in a billion ways and range building with brass
- TUNING

Now, sure, some if not all of that is played in full band warmups too, but not with the same scrutiny that I give during sectionals.

“It’s amazing how much more kids care if the green light comes on if their friend is standing behind them watching the tuner. :) “

## **SECTIONALS DETAIL - Darcy Vogt Williams**

**Individual playing is another major component of sectional time.** Especially in the fall, sectionals are a safe place to build independent confidence as they learn to play in a section. While down the rows are used extensively, pass offs/assessments are a necessity as we build accountability. Recorded assignments are great and definitely have their place in our programs but playing in front of others and performing on command are skills we have to grow in our musicians. Additionally, pass offs allow for us to know exactly where the weaknesses lie within our ensemble. How do we know how to best help our students until we know their individual problems?

**Let's also not underestimate the power of supervised reps.** In a perfect world we would not have to practice with our kids, but supervised repetitions of passages or skills teach our students the quality control we need to instill so it has a chance to appear during their at home practice. Sectionals is the perfect time to guide our students to recognize a "good" rep and the practice methods to achieve (and then repeat) one.

**Of all the important things we teach during sectionals, relationship building is as important as the instrumental skills.** Kids at their core want to please, and when a relationship of mutual respect and admiration can be established our students better accept criticism, suggestion, and do their best to achieve at a level that makes both parties proud. That is why I build talk time into our sectionals. It's how we create loyalty, buy in and cohesion, not just between student and teacher but amongst the students themselves. This can be as simplistic as a question of the day. Questions like "Do you prefer hot weather or cold weather?" "Would you be willing to go to the bottom of the Mariana Trench?" or our shockingly controversial hot question "What is your favorite vegetable?" do wonders to open the kids up to creating connections within the sectional. (By the way, onion is the wrong answer...)

Partner work is another hidden way to open up conversation. Pairing up the students to watch the

other's tuner or listen specifically to their neighbor's style and then chat about what they heard heightens focus during sectionals, but it also forces the kids to open up to one another. It can be necessary to consider carefully who we assign as partners to best facilitate not just a meaningful partner work experience but also to forge friendships or mentorship that we know will create a strong section.

The random chit-chat that ensues post sectionals after baring one's soul through down the rows and pass offs is wildly important. I am always very ready to go home, but I also love seeing the cross-grade level friendships build. Making music is more fun with friends, and my best bands have a tight knit group. I never discount the after-sectional's conversations.

## **4. SCORE STUDY - Chris Meredith**

- Having clear musical ideas to share with our students through thoughtful score preparation is key to detailing music in rehearsal
  - Thoughtful score preparation leads to
    - Your most effective and efficient rehearsals
    - Clearer lesson planning
    - The conductor mastering their interpretation of the work
    - Exponential growth in student's awareness of their function in the music
    - Freeing yourself to be more mentally present in the rehearsal
- Studying the score should happen weeks before the first rehearsal
  - Find a reference recording(s) that provides different models of phrasing or ensemble balance. Share this recording with students!
  - Make decisions on divisi parts before rehearsals start
  - Have a clear plan on how to introduce brass mutes or special percussion equipment



## SCORE STUDY - Chris Meredith

- Allow the score study to guide you to where to start in that first rehearsal. The first reading of a piece does not need to start at measure 1! Find the first major tutti phrase that can get students accustomed to the tonality and musical themes of the piece and tackle that spot first.
  - Detailed rehearsals and detailed instruction are products of detailed curriculum preparation
  - Detailed feedback should be delivered every rehearsal, including the first rehearsal! Detail every day, detail every way.
- Mark up the score with colored pencils, highlighters, and mini post-it notes in order to share details with your students:
    - Find reference recordings that you connect with
    - Clearly label your score with measure numbers, rehearsal letters and composition structure
    - Clearly label conducting guidelines to meter changes or cadence points
    - Identify and mark the primary line and voice(s) of each phrase
    - Identify and mark the secondary line and voice(s) of each phrase
    - Identify and mark the role of any tertiary line of each phrase
    - Identify and mark how lines are related vertically and horizontally
    - Relate percussion lines and voices to the wind lines based on function of percussion music
    - Label chords and function of each voice in the chord
    - Breath markings
    - Highlighted style markings
    - Added rehearsal numbers and/or rehearsal letters
    - Modified dynamics that fit ensemble composition & set-up
  - Modified notation to fulfill the composer's intent that fit ensemble composition, like reinforcing musical lines or revoicing chords at cadence points
  - Chisel out every detail in the score so that you can get to the music making in rehearsal!

In closing, productive rehearsals and sectionals are those with a conducive learning environment that have been planned and prepared by both teachers and students. So, HAPPY DETAILING!! Define - demand, plan - implement, assess - address, and isolate to the nth degree!

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