



Teaching Small Ensemble Concepts Through the Prescribed Music List

CLINICIANS:

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DEMONSTRATION GROUP:

The Minor Fourth Trombone Quartet

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Texas Bandmasters Association 2013 Convention/Clinic



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JULY 21 – 24, 2013

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Clinician group: The Minor 4th Trombone Quartet

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Some of the musical concepts that can be developed through the small ensemble

1. Articulation
2. Dynamics
3. Balance
4. Intonation
5. Phrasing
6. Style
7. Rhythm and Time
8. Sight reading
9. Role of the individual
10. Active listening
11. Use of technology in rehearsals

* All of these concepts are directly applicable to large ensembles. The more a student can target these concepts through participation in small ensemble, the better his or her participation in a large ensemble will develop.

1. Articulation

- Small ensembles allow students to really hear differences in articulation from individual to individual.
- Working to match articulations in a small ensemble setting requires attention to detail at a very high level, which is very demanding on the individuals.
- Teaching students to not only play the correct articulations but to HEAR the differences in articulation is key.

2. Dynamics

- Small ensembles allow teachers to demand a much more dramatic use of dynamics from the individuals in the group. This extreme use of dynamics allow the students to explore the full range of their expressive potential.
- Dynamics are also particularly important in a small ensemble when teaching and reinforcing the concept of balance. For example, a quartet's balance is usually one melodic line verses the other three, which requires the three to play at a much softer dynamic level in order for the melody to be heard. The person playing the melody, therefore, must learn to play comfortably at a higher dynamic level.

3. Balance

- Balance is key in small ensembles, as there are very few differences in timbre to bring out the important lines.
- Balance in small ensembles is one of the hardest and most important concepts that can be taught, as it requires acute awareness from every member.

4. Intonation

- Intonation is key in small ensemble as there are no numbers to hide tuning issues.
- Individuals become vital to every chord and every phrase in the small ensemble.
- The small ensemble is the perfect vehicle to reinforce the idea that intonation is largely dependent on balance, dynamics, and tone quality.

5. Phrasing

- The small ensemble allows us to take phrasing to a higher level by placing the responsibility on the students rather than on the conductor.
- Encouraging phrasing through body language can truly transform the individual musicians as they begin to take ownership of their musical direction.

6. Style

- Being able to match style in a small ensemble gives the students a whole new level of expertise in execution of style. Every note length and every ornament is magnified in a small ensemble, and being able to accomplish that level of detail in their playing is exceptionally beneficial.
- Teaching students to run their own rehearsals as their small ensemble experience evolves is a fantastic way of teaching them to listen and make musical decisions rather than just taking orders from the podium.

7. Rhythm and Time

- One of the most important aspects in any ensemble is playing with correct rhythms and having good time. A good sense of pulse is essential in sounding good. If solid rhythm and time are not achieved, then nothing will line up vertically and horizontally, which will make all the other fundamentals discussed earlier non-existent.

8. Sight Reading

- Sight reading in a small ensemble is a great teaching tool, as it requires a heightened sense of awareness and individual execution.
- In small ensembles where there is no conductor, sight reading is particularly beneficial as the success rests on the hands of the individuals.

9. Role of the Individual

- Individuals are closely attached to the immediate success of a performance in a small ensemble, and therefore need a high level of individual preparation.
- The role of the individual is also extremely important to the musicality of a small ensemble. Knowing who has the melody, who has the counter melody, who has the color tone, or just knowing who has most important line at any given moment is crucial for the success of a small ensemble.
- Individuals in a small ensemble must be taught to REALLY play out when they have the line, and to REALLY back off when they don't. This, again, requires active listening from the individuals at all times.

10. Active Listening

- The three listening responsibilities:

Level 1: Yourself

Level 2: Your section

Level 3: Your ensemble

- 1st Level of listening:

Listening to your individual tone, intonation to yourself, rhythms, and pitches

Knowing your part

- 2nd Level of listening:

Listening to how your tone blends into the section and tuning as a section

In a small ensemble, your section is your ensemble, so you can really pinpoint tuning problems and blend issues while working in small ensemble.

- 3rd Level of listening:

Listening to the whole group

In a small ensemble, this level of listening is much more accessible than in large ensemble, which really helps to develop the individual musicians.

11. Use of technology in rehearsals

- Using a tuner in small ensembles helps us reinforce the concept that tuners are most useful for tuning our instruments to a reference pitch, and then the tuning responsibilities are all in our ears. Tuners will not help us play a chord perfectly in tune, and we must train our ears to do so.
- Using a metronome during small ensemble rehearsals is useful as it takes the responsibility of time away from the individuals. However, as pieces move away from the early learning stages and on to the later performance stages, it is important to start distributing the responsibility for time evenly amongst the members of the group. As the final stages come near, the metronome should no longer be necessary.