



## **Lessons Learned in 50 Years of Band Directing Session 3**

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# **Texas Bandmasters Association 2014 Convention/Clinic**



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**JULY 27-30, 2014  
HENRY B. GONZALEZ CONVENTION CENTER  
SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS**

# Texas Bandmasters Association, 2014, Session 3

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## Score Preparation

- Check the instrumentation. Is the score in C or transposed?
- Peruse the entire score to get a general idea of the whole piece. Look for: the overall structure, tempos, key scheme, and textures (2-part, 3-part, 4-part, homophonic, polyphonic).
- Go back through taking a closer look at the above as well as: musical terms, rhythm, melodies, harmonies, dynamics, scoring (making special note of doublings).
- Sing the lines, checking pitch as needed with your instrument or piano.
- Get at least a general idea of the harmonies at the keyboard.
- Be sure of all the fingerings, noting them in the score where necessary.
- Find out as much as you can about the composer and the background of the piece.

## Articulation

- No articulation mark is subject to one single interpretation; many variable factors come into play, especially context and personal preference.
- Accents concern only with what happens at the beginning of the note and do not imply separation.
- Compound tonguing is possible on reed instruments. Ideally, it should be taught rather early and practiced regularly.
- Three ways to triple-tongue: 1) TTK (Arban); 2) TKT; and 3) TKT KTK (displaced double-tongue, and the most efficient).
- Three broad categories of articulation: 1) Legato; 2) Marcato; 3) Staccato.
- On reed instruments, tip of the tongue (or close) to tip of the reed.
- On brass and flute, tongue touches at or close to the point where the teeth meet the gums.
- Many young players don't use the tongue at all — a very difficult habit to break
- There are, however, times when a breath attack or, on flute, a lip attack can be very useful.
- The jaw should not move when tonguing, the bassoon being a possible exception.

## Developing reading skills

- Trite but true: 1) You learn to read by reading; and 2) You can only sight-read a piece once.
- Learn to read ahead, taking in "clumps" of notes at a time, just as in reading the printed word. RhythmBee™ is ideally suited for this.
- Ensemble members must know and understand conducting patterns.

## Fundamental to good sight-reading

- Rhythmic skills
- Technical skills, especially mastering scales and arpeggios (the stuff of which most music is made).

## Balance

- Always a degree of subjectivity involved.
- About the only absolute rule: the melody is always the most important (bearing in mind there is often more than one melody — they may or may not be of equal importance).
- In studying the score, the conductor should identify the various textural elements and assign a level of relative importance to each.
- Balance applies not only to each of the textural elements, but to players on the same parts. The ideal: making several instruments sound as one, no single player standing out, and all carrying their fair share of the load.

## **Ensemble Precision**

- Accurate counting (everyone subdividing).
- Clear, well-defined conducting.
- Careful attention to the baton by all ensemble members; players are always aware of the baton, mostly with peripheral vision, but looking directly at the conductor before an entrance.
- Careful listening.
- Unless otherwise instructed, notes before rests receive full value.
- As a general rule, take a half-beat for the breath when breathing between two notes in simple time, third of a beat in compound time (tempo can be a factor).
- Be especially watchful of releases, both with respect to timing and quality.

## **A Few Thoughts about Beginners**

- 6-second daily tryouts have been shown to be highly effective.
- The key signature chant.
- Breath impulse, though controversial, can produce excellent results when properly taught. To achieve the desired result, however, it takes total commitment from the director.
- Capitalizing on early motivation and reducing apprehension (both students and parents).
- The 3-way connection between note name, fingering, and position on the staff is not automatic; it must be taught.
- Have the chairs arranged so the director can move freely about the room, checking posture, hand position, embouchure. Conducting is of little concern at this point.

## **Intonation Basics**

- Sound is vibration; faster-higher, slower-lower.
- Students must be taught to recognize "in tune" (an ongoing process).
- Instruments should be warmed up before tuning.
- Good intonation is entirely dependent on: 1) sound tone production; 2) proper embouchure formation (corners of lips NOT retracting on any wind instrument); 3) correct airflow; 4) good equipment in good condition; and 5) concept of tone.
- There are three concerns: 1) The vertical (all notes need to be in the correct intervallic relationship with all other notes being sounded at the same time) ; 2) The linear (every note needs to be in tune relative to the note the precedes it; and 3) Most importantly, matching unisons and octaves. Often these concerns are in direct conflict, but the third must always take precedence over the other two.
- Beware the common tendency to hold back with the air in response to tuning problems; it only serves to aggravate the problem. On the contrary, air support should be increased, not decreased. The pitch will be more easily manipulated and the tone quality improved.

## **Adjusting Woodwind Pitch**

- Alternate fingerings if a different mechanism is involved (saxophone side Bb vs. bis Bb, for example). A different fingering almost always yields a different pitch to some degree.
- Altered fingerings (usually closing or opening one or more vents - see separate page).
- The ideal: in tune with a centered tone that can be reliably repeated. Lipping up or down in any appreciable amount will generally have a negative effect on the sound and repeating the adjustment precisely every time is unlikely at best.
- Tuners - Great for learning instrument's pitch tendencies and for making comparisons, but not the last word.
- Tuner hookups can be a real time-saver.
- An individual using a tuner should first establish the pitch before looking at the tuner.

## **Tuning for Individual Woodwind Instruments**

- No one note is best for all, but concert F comes closest, alto and bari saxes being notable exceptions.
- When using a tuner, establish the pitch first before looking at the tuner. Fine tuning is best done in sectionals and on an as-needed basis in full rehearsal.

- **Flute:** Be sure the end plug is properly set and the cork is not slipping. The head joint should be pulled no more than 1/8-1/4" and aligned with the embouchure hole or slightly to the left when viewing from the bottom end of the flute; 3) If habitually sharp, it's a virtual certainty the embouchure plate is too high, causing the air to go too far across the hole. The result is not only a sharp pitch, but a thin, airy sound (the lower lip must squash over the edge of the emb. hole; 4) If habitually flat, blow harder, more across the hole, and don't press; 5) Ab on the head joint alone, A with the end covered; 6) Overall, the flute is flat in the first octave, sharp in the third — there are a number of possible fingering alterations for the sharp 3rd-octave notes (see separate handout), but these are special fingerings and it's a grave error to try to get ahead of the game by teaching them as standard fingerings (this holds true for all woodwinds); 7) Louder=sharper, softer=flatter; 8) make adjustments by voicing and/or moving the lip/head, not by manually rolling in or out.
- **Oboe:** 1) The reed should fully inserted into the reed well; 2) The reed alone should produce a pitch of approximately C; 3) Reed strength, embouchure, and breath are all-important; 4) In general, the oboe is flat in the low register, sharp in the upper; 5) Humor the pitch by a change in voicing, embouchure pressure, amount of reed in the mouth (the lip moves with the reed). As with every other wind instrument, beware the smiling embouchure. Lips should seal around the reed like a drawstring (little or no red showing); 6) Louder=flatter, softer=sharper.
- **Clarinet:** 1) Pitch on the mouthpiece alone should be a flat concert C#, F# on mouthpiece and barrel, concert F# on bass clarinet mouthpiece; 2) Tune the open G first and adjust the barrel, then 3rd-space C and make any necessary additional adjustment with the middle joint; 3) The clarinet is the only wind instrument that functions as a closed tube and therefore produces its best tone at the top of the pitch; 4) Recommended angle of the instrument to the body is 30-45 degrees (be sure to keep the head up); 5) Tuning rings are highly recommended for younger players; 6) Louder=flatter, softer=sharper.
- **Bassoon:** 1) The bocal can't be pulled more than permits the whisper key pad to cover the vent in the bocal; 2) String can be wrapped around the bass joint to keep it from going all the way into the boot joint (Hugh Cooper says the bassoon is 1/32nd too short to produce the lowest notes in tune); 3) #2 is the standard bocal length — don't change unless everything else (reed, embouchure, etc.) are all right; 4) Pitch on reed alone should be approximately F#; 4) Overall, sharp in the low register (very) and flat in the upper; 5) Wrong fingerings are common on all the woodwinds, but bassoon is probably the worst of all; 6) Louder=flatter, softer=sharper.
- **Saxophone:** 1) The best tuning notes are C in the staff and top-line F (the middle note of the seven served by the first octave key) — check both and compromise as necessary; 2) Most young players bite too hard (too much cork showing is a pretty sure indication); 3) Alto mouthpiece alone should produce a concert A, G on tenor, D on bari; 4) Overall, flat in low register, sharp in upper. If too much cork is visible, it's a dead giveaway that the player is biting too hard; 5) Louder=flatter, softer=sharper.

**Special Note:** When tuning the upper woodwinds, the responsibility of the clarinets is to match one another. The responsibility of the flute and oboe (which are far more flexible) is to match the clarinets. Likewise, the bassoon and baritone sax should match the bass clarinets.

## Brass Tuning

- The Cumulative Pitch Error (CPE). Approximately 6% needs to be added to a vibrating air column to lower it a half-step, meaning that the greater the tube length created by combining valves, the greater the error. Manufacturers normally increase the length of the individual valve slides, especially the 3rd, to help spread the error.
- Dealing with the CPE: 1) Kick slides; 2) Saddles; 3) Substituting 3 for 1&2, e.g. high A on trumpet, low D on tuba; 4) 4th valve instead of 1&3 on tuba and euphonium (and 4&2 for 1,2,3); 5) Hand-pulling 1st valve on tuba; 6) Compensating system on tuba and euphonium; 7) Two-way trigger on the tuning slide, allowing any note to be raised or lowered (sadly, no longer available, though Besson is making a euphonium with a mechanism on the tuning slide to lower, but not raise, any pitch); 8) Changing harmonics is sometimes helpful — substituting the 6th harmonic for the 5th (playing 4th-space E on trumpet 1&2, for example, or substituting the 7th for the 8th, e.g., 1&2 for F above the staff for euphonium). There are a number of other such possibilities; 9) The compensating system generally allows for a very satisfactory remedy for the sharp 6th harmonic on euphonium by adding the 4th valve to the regular 6th harmonic fingerings — 4th for F above the staff, 4&2 for E, and 4&1 for Eb, all of them 8th harmonics.
- The Disparity between the harmonic series and equal temperament. Only the octaves above the fundamental (2nd, 4th, 8th harmonics, etc.) are in perfect accord with ET. The 3rd harmonic

is slightly sharp, the 5th flat, 6th sharp, 7th extremely flat. The trombone is the only instrument that normally uses the 7th harmonic — F# and G above the staff, which therefore are played in short 3rd and 2nd positions, respectively. Most young players routinely play these notes flat, except for the rare few who, knowing that, overcompensate and play them sharp, and an even smaller number that play them in tune.

- The trombone slide is both a curse and a blessing. Young players tend to play about as badly out of tune as the director permits (and unfortunately, that's often a lot). Positions are farther apart with the F attachment (there are only six).
- The horn is not built for the valve slides to be pushed in all the way, although I see students playing that way with depressing regularity. In tuning the horn, adjust the main tuning slide on the Bb horn first, then adjust the F tuning slide. Then tune the individual valve slides on each side (B for first, Bb for second). Farkas recommends then checking the 1&2 combination on both sides, which will be sharp, and compromising the settings. The third valve slide should be tuned on Ab with the 2&3 combination.
- Mutes generally change the pitch: straight mutes raise the pitch in most cases, cups always lower it, and harmons raise it a lot. It may be necessary to reset the tuning slide for a muted section, being sure to reset it when the mute is withdrawn.

### **The Three-Note Chorale**

- Soprano 8-7-8, alto 6-5-5, tenor, 4-2-3, bass 4-5-1.
- Advantages: 1) Makes it possible to cover the entire range of all instruments; 2) No added distractions, allowing complete attention to matters of sound, balance, and pitch without the need to look at the music; 3) Parts can be arranged as the director wishes; 4) Students easily learn to "hear" the pitch before playing it, no matter the key.

### **Developing Aural Acuity**

- Singing.
- Promoting individual accountability.
- Keep everyone engaged in making judgments about pitch.
- Tuning CD or Tuneup Systems, possibly in combination with a tuner and a hookup.
- Software programs for ear training and the "Play by Ear" exercises in SmartMusic™.

### **Rehearsal Strategies for Intonation**

- Play each line separately and identify problems.
- When encountering a problem note, first make the necessary correction, then go back to the beginning of the phrase and hold the problem note when you come to it. Finally, put it back in context, understanding it will likely need to be revisited multiple times.
- Record the rehearsal; try to pick out each part and make notes on problem areas.
- In tuning two players, exchange short notes and ask them (or other ensemble members) who's higher and who's lower. Also, try having one player hold a steady tone while the other lips the pitch down, then gradually bring it back up until the waves disappear and a unison is achieved.
- Play a problem passage in a series of wind ensembles, one on a part (eliminate anonymity), or every other player (odds and evens).
- Don't know which way to go? Make a change (but in small increments).
- In tuning chords, play the root, then add the 5th, then the 3rd.
- Don't overlook timpani tuning. Out-of-tune timpani can wreak great destruction, even when the winds are perfectly in tune.
- The Yamaha Harmony Director™ is invaluable. A wind controller can also be used to great advantage.

## Just vs. Equal Temperament — Several Points to Consider

- Just is an easy winner on the Harmony Director, but hearing that, any director that simply decides to have the ensemble strictly adhere to JT would be naive in the extreme.
- It's most practical on long notes at major cadence points. It almost always requires some fingering alterations, even re-scoring (good luck getting your clarinets to raise any note 16 cents on a minor 3rd or, worse still, lower a dominant 7th 31 cents).
- There's more than ample evidence to show that the best players don't strictly adhere to any one system of temperament. It seems beyond dispute that they simply listen closely to one another and place the pitch where it sounds best to their ear.

## Miscellaneous Points About Intonation

- No vibrato when tuning — just the facts, m'am.
- And the final word, courtesy of Walter Piston: "Given the relative values of the art of music, it may well be that absolutely perfect intonation is an impossibility. But that a goal is unattainable is no excuse for not giving one's utmost in the attempt to reach it, or at least to approach it as nearly as possible. That is art."

## A Few Random Thoughts and Observations

- The three best pieces of advice given me as a young band director: 1) You can't afford ever to dislike a student — you might hate the behavior, but not the person (yes, it's possible); 2) Never say anything to a student or parent you wouldn't want to hear repeated in the principal's office; and 3) Make friends with the custodian and the school secretary.
- In keeping with #2 above, never post anything online if there's anyone in the world you wouldn't want to see it. This point seems to be violated with alarming frequency.
- Make an effort to know faculty members in other disciplines and show an interest in their work. Avoid at all costs giving the impression you think band is the most important thing in school (although we all know it is!).
- As a professional, be sure you know how to spell, write, and speak standard English. If you're at all insecure in that area, have someone proofread any written materials you send out.
- Be your students' friend, not their buddy.
- Private conferences with students should be conducted in the presence of another staff member or in public view, through a window or an open door.
- Sure, winning is nice, and anytime we enter a competition, we should do our dead-level best to do so, but keep it in perspective. It's not the fundamental purpose of what we're about.
- Don't try to motivate your students by painting your competitors as the enemy. Wish them well. After all, they're helping make you better.
- Do the selfish thing: always tell the truth, no matter how much it hurts. It'll almost surely hurt worse when you don't. Your credibility is one of your most precious possessions and once lost, it's almost impossible to regain (one lie is all it takes).
- Make yourself a hero to your principal. Keep him or her informed on every matter of consequence. Do your paper work in a timely manner. Solve your own problems to the extent you can. By all means, don't be a whiner.
- Understand your students have lives outside band and show an interest in their non-band activities.
- Never take part in or listen to student gossip about other students or teachers. Gently admonish those who do.
- Watcha you mouth. Be circumspect. One swear word or suggestive comment is one too many.
- The relationship between a head and assistant director can be a rather delicate one. To be optimally successful, it requires two people of good will and mutual respect.