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**Part 1: Teaching Ensemble Skills,  
Thinking About Basics**

**CLINICIAN:  
Matthew McInturf**



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# Thinking about Basics

Matthew McInturf, DMA

Professor, Director of Bands  
Director of the Center for Music Education  
Sam Houston State University

Basics are specific skills and the appropriate exercises to develop a common musicianship within the ensemble. It is important to place "ensemble skills" in the broader context of "individual skills" and "musicianship." All Ensemble Basics are individual skills, applied in collaboration with others, and their goal developing a shared understanding of musicianship.

Learning to listen critically is the most important skill required to achieve this shared understanding. Teaching students to identify and evaluate the ensemble's quality, uniformity, sensitivity, and skill is a transferable concept between individual and ensemble performance. When students engage in critical listening, learning becomes a shared experience, with their peers and ideally with their teacher.

Sometimes teachers overlook that we should be learning to listen, as well as our students. This means that our listening objectives should include expectations for ourselves as well as our students. A hallmark of musicianship is continued engaged learning. None of us have mastered music making and creating an engaged learning environment allows us to continue to grow. It also minimizes the possibility that we will limit our students by our experience.

Before we define objectives, we need to consider our strategic goal, which is critical listening.

## **Both the objective and subjective components of art are essential**

All art has both objective and subjective components. In the learning process, it is sometimes necessary to separate the two, but neither has artistic value without the other. In music, we often divide objective and subjective into technical and musical. This description has pedagogical value, if we understand that the goal is to create (or recreate) the subjective (musical) through the technical (objective) in performance.

The most important thing to understand is that there is no dichotomy between the objective (technical) and the subjective (musical). We do not have to choose whether we value one or the other more highly and we do not need to choose between being artists or craftsmen. In fact, to create art at an excellent level, it is important that we do not see ourselves as one or the other. Ultimately, the

music, as encountered in performance, is a subjective experience realized through an objective craft.

Why, then, does the division of objective and subjective have pedagogical value? It is because we become musicians by making music, not simply by an intellectual process. The subjective experience of musicianship is larger than any objective understanding and requires a synthesis of knowledge, skill, experience and understanding. Therefore, to make music at any level, we require both knowledge and skill (this is true for either performing or composing). Consequently, in a pedagogical setting, we sometimes prioritize the objective before the subjective. Another way to say this is that we, "learn by doing." Skill is required to "do" before we "learn."

Although I am hesitant to suggest this as a hard and fast rule, it is axiomatic that learning takes place sequentially. This is not a universal constant, but the general pedagogical sequence for our purpose is:

- knowledge leads to skill
- skill leads to experience
- experience leads to understanding
- understanding leads to art

Of course, this is simplistic because most understanding, and certainly artistic experience, is not linear/sequential. Human learning is complex, and the subjective experience often occurs in parallel to the sequential understanding, rather than as a simply logical result.

The point of this discussion is that using critical listening should lead us to, and encompass, both the objective and the subjective components of "common musicianship." Critical listening is the skill that will allow students to evaluate both technical accomplishment and musical communication. As teachers, when we think in terms of developing musicianship in basics, it allows us to approach a wider range of understanding and application.

### **All ensemble skills are an application of individual skills**

The key aspects of ensemble skill are listening and matching. These are applications of skills that students develop as individuals. To match a unison pitch, for example, the student requires the ability to sustain a steady pitch. To do this at a high level, the student requires the skill to produce and identify a clear and resonant sound.

The more proficient the individual, the easier it is to develop ensemble skill. We must think clearly about the most efficient way for our students to acquire the skills we are seeking to develop. Generally, complex technical skills are better taught (and practiced) as individuals. Scales and arpeggios are easier to teach and evaluate individually, for instance, rather than in the ensemble. That does

not mean that we may not use them in a basics program, but it should influence our expectation, evaluation, and priority.

However, a strong basics program will have a positive effect on the individual's skill and musicianship. This is due to the nature of playing an instrument, particularly a wind instrument. The way we perceive our ourselves when playing is acoustically different than listening to others play. Matching another player requires that we listen in a broader context and to adapt flexibly in real time. This is a tremendous learning opportunity, that increases in sophistication as both skill and understanding develop.

It is important to determine the best mode for learning a given skill. The general rule is to develop technical skill as an individual and apply it an ensemble context. Like distinguishing objective and subjective, there is no dichotomy to analyzing individual and ensemble skills. The same qualities that make accomplished individual performance are present in musical ensemble performance.

## **Prioritizing Skills**

The primary skills that must be addressed in a basics program are sound, intonation, and articulation. These three skills will continue to be addressed as other elements are added to the basics program. As teachers, we must learn to analyze and effectively address both the objective and subjective components of these basic skills.

### *Sound*

Analyzing sound provides a significant example of the objective and subjective nature of basics. The objective nature is the acoustic property of resonance, the subjective nature is the way we perceive a resonant sound.

Objectively, a wind instrument makes a resonant sound when the generating pitch matches the resonating pitch of the tube. All tubes (whether or not they are musical instruments) vibrate at a given pitch. This resonating pitch is called the center. Acoustically, a centered pitch is a resonant pitch. Placing the generating pitch in the resonant center of the instrument allows the tube to vibrate with its natural harmonic structure. It is this harmonic structure that determines the "tone color" of the instrument. When the generating pitch is too high or too low, the harmonic structure becomes distorted and does not produce a resonant sound.

Subjectively, we identify an acoustically centered sound with qualities we associate with resonance. Adjectives, such as clear or ringing, describe the quality we ascribe to a centered sound. It is important to distinguish between the acoustic "center" and the subjective quality, which can be called "focus." Notice, again, that critical listening is required to make this distinction.

Fortunately, the way we produce and identify sound is more complex than the description above, because we must have more flexibility to play musically than is provided by the objective nature of resonance. This is necessary to compensate for the intonation deficiencies of the instrument. For instance, to play a note in tune that is flat on the instrument's scale, we must, acoustically, play it above center. Therefore, we must recognize the subjective "focus" to adjust a pitch outside of center, and still make a sound that is recognizably the same. The acoustics of this are much too complex for the player to manipulate in objective terms but identifying the subjective quality (focus) and matching, which often takes some trial and error (the technical musical term for "trial and error" is practice), is an achievable task for even young musicians. This concept is also applied to changing registers, as students acquire more skill and understanding.

The other major variable in sound production is efficiency. Vibration is produced when energy overcomes resistance. To play an instrument well, we need to create vibration with the maximum efficiency. In other words, using the least amount of energy to produce the sound. Most of the pedagogical knowledge we apply to teach sound production (embouchure, air, etc.) is to facilitate efficiency.

### *Intonation*

Intonation and sound are intrinsically related since they are both a product of accurate pitch placement. For most young players, "playing in tune" is the least tangible part of playing an instrument. Consequently, it must be a primary objective of the basics program. Ideally, whenever sound is addressed in an ensemble basics program, intonation will be addressed as well.

Intonation is primarily addressed by eliminating beats. At the simplest level, one player sustains a clear resonant pitch and the other matches it. The objective is to match both sound and pitch. We are fortunate to have excellent technology to measure pitch, which allows us to perform these exercises at a consistently stable pitch. This is important so that students can play as close to center as possible.

The subjective nature of intonation appears in our perception of color. As mentioned earlier, we perceive the harmonic structure of sound as timbre, or tone color. The more accurately we match pitch, the more we reinforce the harmonics that ring above the sounding pitch. Therefore intervals, such as the fifth of the chord, can be heard when matching a unison, or more easily, an octave. When the intonation, and resonant sound, are such that harmonics are being freely reinforced, we identify such subjective qualities as "clarity" and "transparency." When the fifth rings, it is actually a twelfth above the sounding pitch. The wavelength for the twelfth is one third the length of the sounding pitch (this is what is meant by the fifth having a 3:1 ratio to the tonic). To create the ringing fifth, the player must match the sounding pitch three times more accurately than to simply eliminate the beats.

Students who have developed such effective listening skill will be attuned to a much wider range of skills than simply intonation. They will certainly be aware

of the more tangible skills that we seek to develop in a basics program. Almost every other skill will become more obvious and more easily addressed.

One of the most important intonation skills that will be easier to address through hearing harmonics is chordal intonation. Essentially, when the harmonics create the ringing interval (which will be the perfect fifth and then the major third), matching the harmonic will produce a chord without beats. This is the point when the significant changes mentioned earlier become apparent, subjective terms like "clarity" and "transparency" become appropriate. To consistently perform with this kind of control, the students will have considerable skill and will be engaged in a high level of critical listening.

Most importantly, this opens doors into the artistic performance that are closed to students with less objective skill. Shaping phrases with serious musical intent, making musical choices that can be experienced at a much higher level, engaging in thoughtful conversations about the composer's intent and the musical effect may become performance realities. Of course, this presupposes that we have been approaching our basics program with the intent of connecting the technical with the musical from the beginning and are committed to applying this learning in musical context.

### *Articulation*

The traditional musical definition of articulation encompasses the life of the note. For pedagogical purposes, we can identify three parts; start, sustain, and release. Sometimes teachers use the term articulation to simply mean the start of the note, I prefer the larger meaning because it connects to musical styles. Each of the three parts should be approached as a basic skill, but identifying the larger concept also allows us to teach musical style as a basic.

Like sound and intonation, articulation is always addressed whenever we are working on specific basics. If our objective is to improve a student's sound, we are mindful of how they start, sustain, and release the note. The start of the note is critical to controlling sound, if they cannot start a note, there is an embouchure or tongue problem that is going to be detrimental to their sound. Students who cannot play a resonant sound often struggle to sustain a stable pitch. This is true for releases as well. Pedagogically, these three basics support each other and any one of them may be used to make the other better. Individual students may find a connection to one that will lead to another.

The twentieth century has given us a specific way to think about the larger view of articulation. As electronic music developed, practitioners became interested in constructing sounds, and the shape of a sound (whether it was a note or an "object") was described as an "envelope." An envelope consisted of the start, sustain, and end (release) of the sound. This is completely analogous to the way we approach components of articulation, and it works in any style.

As students develop control of the "envelope," they can be introduced to basic styles. Legato, long lift (a long note with a short space), short lift (a short note

with a long space), are good starting points for basic styles. These concepts address the envelope component of style and can be combined in exercises to develop musical skill.

Let us quickly acknowledge that the articulation or envelope is necessary, but only one component of musical style. Weight, or agogic stress, and anacrusis, or pickup note, are examples of crucial elements to convey musical style. As students gain control of the basic envelope styles, the critical musical components of style can be addressed with fluency.

Finally, all basics must be practiced and performed with intention. Practically speaking, this requires internal audiation. Audiation simply means attempting to hear (imagine) the result (sound, pitch, articulation) before we play. To perform with intent, it is necessary to be proactive about playing the instrument, not reactive. For many students, being proactive is a new concept. Sometimes, being reactive is ingrained by our pedagogical approach of play and then analyze the result. We should do this, but then we need to start again with a proactive intention.

## **Foundational Basics**

In summary, I think of sound, intonation, and articulation skills as foundational basics. They must be developed both as individuals and corporately in the ensemble. Successful basics programs must include the individual aspect of skill development. Often, students whose skills are not being addressed individual impede the progress of the ensemble. However, learning to apply the skills in the ensemble can be engaging, enlightening, and motivating.

## **A word about Basic Exercises**

Exercises are the tools we use to develop technical and musical skill. We use exercises in a basics program for many purposes:

- Create an assessment baseline
- Provide structure for learning
- Focus student learning on sequential components
- Engage listening
- Develop measurable consistency
- Expand attention span
- Introduce new musical concepts

This is not an exhaustive list, but it illustrates that simple exercises may be used to isolate and assess basic musical ideas. To use exercises effectively, we must communicate their purpose and intent clearly to our students. They must know why they are doing a particular exercise; they need feedback on the result of

their performance, and they must be engaged in listening and evaluating the result.

Giving students information about why they are doing a particular exercise allows them to focus their listening on a specific goal or outcome. Sometimes we assume they know this, but a quick reminder when an exercise is begun, especially something that is repeated often, is appropriate. As discussed earlier, the same exercise will address at least three basic concepts simultaneously. It is often appropriate to direct or redirect the student's efforts before they perform the exercise.

Feedback should be timely, and usually immediate. It is often helpful to build in silence to offer instant feedback. A rest between iterations allows the teacher to deliver effective feedback, or even change the instruction ("do that one again", for instance). It also builds in a release that is part of the exercise. Feedback can take many forms, including positive reinforcement. It is important, and motivating, for students to know when they accomplished an objective or made progress toward the goal.

Simple repetition is sometimes pedagogically important, but even then, the students need to understand why they are repeating the exercise. Good habits are formed by successful repetition, but simply playing an exercise does not automatically insure progress. All use of an exercise, even a simple repetition, must be done with intent, on the part of both the student and the teacher, to have pedagogical value.

### **A word about using rehearsal techniques**

As students work through exercises, it is important that we find ways to engage them effectively. For the most part, this is capturing their attention, engaging their critical listening, getting them to think critically about their performance, and to clarify the musical and pedagogical intention.

Singing is an excellent way to improve student's understanding and ability to analyze their performance. It is also very helpful for the teacher to understand the student's level of audiation and intention. Singing allows the student to address a musical concept away from the technical concerns of the instrument. To sing a note beginning on pitch, a student must audiate the pitch accurately. This is an essential skill for success as an advanced performer. Singing allow the teacher to engage with the student's inner process in a constructive and reasonably accurate way. For students who do not have experience singing, it is sometimes helpful to begin with humming. We should remember, and try to help our students see, that singing is fun and musically rewarding.

Modeling is a common and useful technique. Examples, such as stacking pitches and call and response, are all excellent techniques. Modeling is exceptionally useful because it addresses multiple concepts without drawing intellectual



distinctions. If a model plays a simple exercise with excellent sound, intonation, and articulation, the respondent ideally will imitate all three concepts. This is an example of engaging subjective criteria to enhance objective skill.

Using a chorale study is an exceptionally important part of a musical basics program. For younger students, this can be a simple chord progression, but I would suggest a cadential formula to add obvious musical content. For more advanced players, there are many chorales, especially Bach chorales, that have excellent musical content and will work to practice chordal tuning, legato style, balance, voice leading, and phrase shape. Chorales are valuable to bridge the gap between technical exercises and musical application.

## **Conclusion**

Thinking clearly about how students apply skills in a musical context allows teachers to adapt a basics program to the needs of their students. The more our students understand the goals, the more they can embrace the process and make it their own. Ultimately, the more skill our students acquire, the more freedom and opportunity they will have to understand significant music making.