



**Texas Bandmasters Association  
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**Part 2: Teaching Ensemble Skills, Daily  
Drill**

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**DEMO GROUP: Mansfield Wind  
Symphony**



## **“Part 2: Teaching Ensemble Skills, Daily Drill”**

**Brian Merrill**  
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**Members of the Mansfield Wind Symphony**

## **Organizing Your Thinking**

### Individual Fundamentals

Tone

Articulation

Technique

Literacy

### Ensemble Skills

Balance

Intonation

Uniformity of articulation and style

Precision

## **Examples of Daily Drills that Develop Fundamentals and Ensemble Skills**

F around the room by individual

F-G-A drill

F around the room by section

Fifths around the room by section

Stack a Concert F

Fifths around the room by individual

F Remington

Articulation exercises

Opposing Remingtons

Chorales

F descending

Concert F is selected because it is in the middle register for a majority of wind instruments. The relative physical ease of playing this note allows the students to be successful and to focus on the listening and mental skills required. Oboe, tenor saxophone and horn are the exception. These sections can use Concert C and/or alternate between Concert F octaves.

There is nothing “sacred” about Concert F. Use other notes to increase awareness and to meet the needs of your literature.

Change the format of any exercise to best meet the needs of your students.

Teach these exercises by rote. Only use music when students need to be introduced to or reinforced on the notation. Play by memory as soon as possible.

**Learn what to listen for.** The quality of your feedback to your students is the single most important factor in their progress.

It is not necessary to play the exact same exercises in the exact same order every day. Develop a weeklong plan.

Vary drills to address student needs. Vary drills to keep students engaged.

Use these drills in full band, splits and sectionals.

Be sure the band hall is free from distractions.

Directors and students should be aware of the difference between “group individual warm up” and ensemble skill exercises.

Constantly give specific, concrete instructions and feedback.

Ask questions.

Ideally, the percussionists are with an instructor in another room as the winds work on ensemble skills. If this is not possible, keep the percussion involved by including them in the drills, however, do whatever is necessary to make it as inaudible as possible. Alternating with the winds is also helpful.

**Name of exercise.** Brief description.

- What teacher and student should listen for.
- *One variant*

**F around the room by individual:** Metronome about 80. Start with tuba or with best tone. Each person holds for four counts. Move through brass then woodwinds. Finish with full band.

- Instant sound, characteristic tone, open throated release
- Follow through
- No gap between players
- Match volume or energy, pitch, and tone quality
- Students intensely listen to all players
- *Add four count rests between each player to focus on starts and releases.*

**F around the room by section:** Metronome about 80. Start with tubas and move section by section through the band. Finish will full band.

- Start together
- “Section sound”
- Match volume section to section
- Follow through
- No gaps between sections
- *Have one section repeatedly play between every other section to increase awareness of that section*

**Stack a Concert F:** Metronome about 80. Start with tubas. Add sections to continuous sustain.

- Breathe as needed. Breath should be relaxed and unhurried
- Balance section to section
- Match unisons and tune octaves
- *Isolate by chairs*

**F Remington:** Metronome 60 – 100. Full band. Two exercises, one descending and one ascending. Start with F, move a half step, then back to F. Keep expanding interval until reaching tritone. Define rhythm and articulation.

- Start together, move together, release together
- Match unisons and tune octaves
- Accurate intonation of melodic intervals
- Move smoothly note to note
- Maintain consistent and characteristic tone color
- *Woodwinds play, brass echo on mouthpiece*

**Opposing Remingtons:** Metronome 60 -100. Full band. Divide band into two group; highs and lows, brass and woodwinds, or A's and B's. Play the descending and ascending Remingtons simultaneously. Define rhythm and articulation.

- Start together, move together, release together
- Match unisons and tune octaves
- Accurate intonation of harmonic intervals
- Students listen to group going the same direction for pitch
- Students listen to the group going the opposite direction for balance
- *Rehearse at different dynamic levels*

**F Descending:** Metronome around 80. Full band. Move down a concert F major scale two notes at a time. Slur. Rest in between pairs of notes. Upon reaching bottom octave, return to top and play down continuously.

- Move smoothly note to note
- Maintain consistent and characteristic tone color
- Start together, move together, release together
- *Start at bottom and move up*

**F-G-A Drill:** Metronome around 80. Full band. Divide into two groups; A's and B's. A's sustain Concert F as a drone. B's ascend the F major scales F-G-A, then F-G-A-Bb, etc. until reaching octave. Repeat with A's on the scale and B's on the drone.

- Balance A's and B's
- Match "tonal energy"
- Maintain consistent and characteristic tone color
- Tune melodic and harmonic intervals
- *Extend beyond octave*

**Fifths Around the Room by Section:** Metronome around 90. Divide each section into two groups. One group sustains Concert F for twelve counts. The other group plays F for four counts, moves up to C for four counts, and back to F for four counts. Start with tubas, and then move section to section through brass and woodwinds. After flutes, finish with full band. Reverse group assignments and repeat.

- Balance root and fifth
- Tune interval
- *Have brass use mutes*

**Fifths Around the Room Individually:** Metronome around 90. Each player will play F for four counts, move up to C for four counts, and back to F for four counts. The second player starts four counts after the first. The third player starts four counts after the second, etc.

- Balance root and fifth
- Tune interval
- Match "tonal energy"
- *Create fifth by moving down to Bb*

**Articulation exercise:** Metronome 60 – 160. On Concert F, play a whole note, followed by a measure each of half notes, quarter notes, eighth notes, triplet eighth notes, and sixteenth notes. End with another whole note. Add in additional measures for different note lengths on quarters, eighths and triplets.

- Instant sound
- Consistent tongue placement
- Consistent tongue motion
- Individual can match articulation and style note to note
- Section has matched articulation and style person to person
- Full ensemble has uniform articulation and style section to section
- *Add multiple tonguing exercise*

**Chorales:** Full band. Memorize as soon as possible. Rehearse by voice, by choir, by sections, and by chairs. Play each voice as other voices sustain a drone on the tonic.

- Balance
- Intonation
- Chord structure
- Phrasing
- Resonance
- Clarity/Transparency

I O A I N  
S L T O

Around the Room

Down the Row

Row by Row

Chair order

Brass – Woodwinds

Conical brass, cylindrical brass, sax family, clarinet family, flutes and double reeds

Mini Bands

Random name selection

For fun – by grade, gender, birthdays, etc.

## ARTICULATION

Articulation is an individual fundamental. The uniformity of articulation and style is an ensemble skill.

In the narrowest sense of the words, articulation is the front of the note and style is the back or length of the note. Students should be aware that both words are used in broader definitions and they must think about context.

First, match note to note. Tah, tah, tah, tah. Not tah, dah, thah, lah. Touch in the same place, with the same strength, everytime.

Next match person to person. 1-tah, tah, tah, tah, 2- tah, tah, tah, tah, 3- tah, tah, tah, tah. Not 1 – tah, tah, tah, tah, 2 – dah, dah, dah, dah, 3 – lah, lah, lah, lah

Then, match section to section. Smaller instruments tend to be more efficient at articulation. Listen up.

Be specific with your choice of words. This may include touching, tenuto, legato, lifted, long lift, staccato. Define these so students can apply articulation drills to music.

Break down articulation drills into smaller segments and with isolation. When going around the room, start with flute or trumpet and work down.

Isolation by chair, creating only one person per color, is a very effective way for both teacher and students to hear and correct differences. This works on both drills and music.

You can improve style with better articulation, however, you will not improve articulation by only addressing style.

Articulation drills are exercises in “sameness” – same front of each note, same volume, same tone; only the length of the notes change as students move from one style to another.

Ultimately, articulation and style are choices made by the performer and director based on composer’s indications and our experience and level of familiarity with music.

Listening, imitation, and modeling are super effective tools in teaching articulation and style.



## **Musical Awareness: What Students Should Know**

### **Balance**

An aware student understands and demonstrates person to person balance to create section sound. Student does not play too strong or too weak. Student listens for trio.

A very aware student understands and demonstrates balancing the musical components of a selection; for example, melody and accompaniment

An extremely aware student understands and demonstrates balancing section to section to create a variety of tutti sounds and colors. They are in the habit of marking music regarding balance; for example, “fit into clarinets” or “listen for trumpets”. They understand that dynamic markings are not absolute and are subject to their role in the entire ensemble.

### **Intonation**

An aware student understands how to adjust their instrument length correctly and can demonstrate matching pitch by the elimination of waves/beats on long tones.

A very aware student knows the tuning problem notes on their instrument and how to adjust for correct tuning. They are able to play melodies in tune with themselves and other players.

An extremely aware student understands that a note may tune differently according to the other notes around it. They are able to play chords in tune. They take responsibility for their intonation.

### **Uniformity of Articulation and Style**

An aware student knows their tongue placement and motion for both the start and end of a note. Their articulation is intentional.

A very aware student understands and demonstrates matching articulation/style note to note.

An extremely aware student matches articulation/style person to person and section to section.

## **Rhythmic Accuracy and Precision**

An aware student can stay with the metronome both alone and with others. They own and practice with a metronome.

A very aware student demonstrates correct subdivision of the pulse.

An extremely aware student understands and demonstrates the role of listening, watching, subdivision and pulse in performing with precision.

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