



**Texas Bandmasters Association  
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**Basics of Balance**

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# Basics of Balance:

## From the Individual to the Full Ensemble

Presented by Greg Countryman  
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Ensemble balance must begin with the students being able to produce characteristic tone qualities on their instruments. Then they must learn to match or balance with the other students in their section, from section to section and finally across the entire ensemble.

If you work on ensemble balance during your daily warm-up routine, you will not have to address it as much in your music. Keep in mind that balance and blend are directly related to intonation. Correcting balance within or between sections will automatically improve the section and ensemble intonation. This is due partly to the fact that better balance creates better clarity, which makes it easier for the students to hear. However, the intonation also improves due to the fact that the students are becoming better “LISTENERS”.

1. Matching Person to Person within the section - Students must learn to match tone quality, body of sound, tonal energy, volume and resonance with the other students in their section.
  - 4 count Concert F down the row
  - 8 count overlapping Concert F down the row
  - Trios – Learn to match within your trio
  - Use of pedals to match
2. Balancing Section to Section
  - First work on ensemble balance playing unison lines.
  - Have the students listen for other instruments in the ensemble and try to hear an instrument across the room from them.
  - Give specific balance assignments (balance to oboe, balance to flute, etc.) so the students become accustomed to balancing to a variety of instruments.
  - Introduce matching intervals through the use of pedals.
    - This can be done through the use of the brass lip slur patterns.
    - 5ths, 4ths, 8vas, 3rds
3. Specific guidelines for various combinations of instruments
  - Flute should balance to trumpet in unison melodies.
  - Flute should balance to clarinet when the flutes are an octave above the clarinet.
  - Clarinet should balance to the flute when they are in the same octave.
  - Alto Sax should balance to the French horn when they have unison lines.
  - Low woodwinds should balance to the low brass when they have similar lines.
  - If you have strong players on the color instruments (Oboe, Bassoon, Piccolo), you can create some nice textures and colors by balancing to these instruments.
  - The power of the brass must come from the trumpet, French horn and trombone. If the euphoniums and tubas try to play with the same aggressiveness as the other brass, they will lose the center, focus and resonance in their sound. Trumpet, French horn and

trombone are volume instruments, as in “crank it up”. The euphonium and tuba are volume instruments, as in “mass” or body of sound.

- Battery percussion instruments (SD, BD, Concert Toms) should usually accompany or balance to the sound of the ensemble.
- Effects percussion instruments (triangle, tambourine, cymbals, etc.) are usually above the ensemble sound.
- Bass drum should not be louder than the timpani or tuba. Since it is a non-pitched instrument, it will cancel or distort the pitch if it is louder than the pitched instruments.

#### 4. Layering various lines in a piece of music to achieve correct ensemble balance

- You need to go through the score and designate various lines as most important, second most important, third most important, etc.
- Have the most important line play while other students listen and finger their parts.
- Next, add the second most important part and tell these students to make sure they are not louder than the most important line.
- Keep adding lines until everyone is playing. Tell the students to make sure they can hear all the lines and that they remain layered by order of importance.
- Layering in this manner keeps the ensemble from being “noisy”, which happens when various lines are all competing with each other and don't have any order of importance.
- “Noisy” ensemble balance confuses the listener because they can't tell which lines are the most important.

Ensemble balance is basically trying to achieve a variety of tonal colors by changing or adjusting the balance assignments. Just as a painter mixes colors to create certain visual effects, we combine instrumental tone colors in ways to create a variety of sounds and textures.

I hope you find the material discussed today useful and please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

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