

# Five Strategies

## For More Effective Rehearsals

By David W. Montgomery

Most of the time we spend with students is in rehearsal. As a result, most of what students learn about music happens during rehearsals, making this time precious. Rehearsals without focus or efficiency stunt musical growth and can lead to a lack of musical enjoyment for students and teacher. If you are feeling stuck in a rut with your rehearsals or are looking for ways to be more effective, consider the following ideas.

**Focus on fundamentals, especially during the warmup.** The warm-up period is the time to develop individual performance ability in addition to fine tuning ensemble skills. Get creative designing exercises that focus on such aspects of playing as tone quality, technical facility, and listening skills. Few students have a private teacher to guide them in building technical development on their instrument, so it is up to the director to teach them. As students grow in their ability to perform on their instrument, the repertoire available to them as soloists and ensemble members grows with it, including access to the masterworks.

In addition to addressing and developing fundamentals during the warm-up, directors should review these fundamentals during rehearsal. For example, poor tone is never acceptable and students should be reminded about the air support and embouchure required for characteristic sounds as often as necessary. Directors should be relentless on developing proper fundamentals, especially related to tone. Rehearsals should always be about making beautiful sounds. In addition, ensemble sounds that are unblended or out of balance need immediate correction. A primary goal is to create good performance habits, which happens through repetition. If you want your students to have good

habits, you have to address them frequently and consistently.

**Sing.** One of my favorite rehearsal strategies is singing. It is true that students are generally hesitant and insecure about singing at first, but the best ways to move them through this stage are to be committed to singing every day and to be encouraging as they make good sounds and improve. For singing to be effective, it has to become a regular part of the rehearsal culture.

Singing helps students focus on the music without the physical distractions and complications of their instrument. If a difficult technical passage is being rehearsed, students can sing through it while they finger along to establish the muscle memory necessary to perform the passage correctly.

In addition, students often rely exclusively on the mechanics of their instruments to produce the pitch, thinking that if they push the correct buttons, then the right note comes out. However, they must hear the note in their mind ahead of time to perform it with accurate pitch, tone, and tuning. Singing a passage requires students to hear and slot each note accurately in their mind and voice. It also allows the director to assess which students struggle to sing note changes accurately.

Another major benefit of singing is that it helps build tone. To achieve a beautiful sound with the voice, students should stay relaxed and open in the chest and throat and must project a resonant sound forward. Producing a good sound on an instrument requires the same principles, but it might be easier to understand and develop these principles using the voice first.

Singing also helps develop balance and blend, as it requires students to listen to themselves and those around them differently than they might if everyone was playing an instrument. I

frequently use a Bach Chorale as the final part of a warmup. Whenever the ensemble starts to sound too bright or unblended, we sing a phrase of the chorale. This always helps students listen and blend better. The same is true when we are rehearsing the repertoire.

Perhaps the best benefit of singing, however, is the ease with which students can produce beautiful phrasing. Again, without the mechanical complications of playing an instrument, students can focus on the musical direction of a phrase and the pacing to achieve and move away from the high and low points of the phrase. This is true for music of any style at any tempo. One of the best ways to identify the musical direction is to sing it and then transfer what was sung to an instrument.

**Focus on one musical element at a time, and add or change one musical element at a time.** Many times in rehearsal directors are busy trying to cover as much material as possible and work on multiple concepts simultaneously. However, students need focus and repetition to master a concept or musical passage. Playing an instrument, and everything that comes with it, is complex, and teachers need rehearsal strategies that simplify and allow students to narrow their focus.

For example, a musical passage may contain rhythmic, articulation, and dynamic challenges. Instead of rehearsing all of these elements simultaneously, focus on one single element such as rhythm by using neutral dynamics and articulations. Let the students succeed at playing the correct rhythms by using a slower tempo, and focus on rhythmic accuracy with multiple correct repetitions. Following each repetition, focus your feedback on the element (rhythm) being rehearsed and avoid commenting on

other elements, even if they are problematic. Those will be addressed next. This approach provides clarity and focus for the students as they know exactly what the focus and goal is for each repetition along with their progress toward it.

Once the rhythms are accurate add another element, such as articulation, to the focus. Again, use a slow tempo and rehearse with attention to the notated articulations of the example. Once articulations are in place, add the dynamics and rehearse with multiple correct repetitions. Continue resisting the temptation to comment on other elements until improvement is made on the element you are rehearsing. Keep the tempo slow enough to achieve accuracy on all elements before increasing speed. Add in balance, blend, phrasing, and expression. Once the technical aspects are there, the musical nuances are easier to produce. When too many problems are addressed simultaneously, the results come much slower and with more frustration.

#### **Use a fast rehearsal pace that gets them playing sooner and more often.**

Teachers love to talk. It feels good to talk because we think we are helping students learn, but too much talking actually slows down learning. Robert Duke from the University of Texas says, "Students do not learn because of what teachers say; students learn because of what teachers have students do." Develop the habit of getting at least some students playing in fewer than 10 seconds. This requires simple, direct, and concrete feedback or instructions. It makes me cringe to watch directors spend a full minute talking about an articulation problem when all they really needed to say was, "That was too long. Play it shorter." Even better, incorporate modeling into your teaching as a primary means of feedback and instruction. Band is a musical art, and musicians deal in sound. Whenever we can teach using sounds, the results are faster, better, and lasting.

"Say it and play it" is one of my favorite rehearsal maxims. One of the pitfalls of talking too much is the tendency to address too many problems in one stop, even if they are all true, and then go far back to a previous rehearsal letter and play a large section of music trying to catch all of the problems in a single playing. Instead, focus your comments on one problem and then immediately rehearse where it occurs specifically in the music.

For example, consider a section of music that is being rehearsed from letter B-D. At the end of the phrase in the measure before D the trumpets are struggling with a *fp* crescendo. Once you stop the band at letter D, avoid reading a long laundry list of problems and then going back to letter B and playing it again. Instead, model the *fp* crescendo for the trumpets, then immediately rehearse that measure. Once they are getting it, then go back to letter B and put it in a bigger context. Then move on to the next rehearsal problem. In short, whatever you say to the band, they should immediately play.

#### **Avoid mindless repetition and drill shed rehearsals.**

Repetition is a key to learning, but mindless repetition is an enemy to learning. The challenge is to design rehearsals in which every repetition is purposeful and works to develop students' technique or musicianship. Specific and clear feedback should be given before and after each repetition. I often see directors stop and work on a section of music in which it takes several repetitions before they tell the students what the problems are. A better approach is to tell them what needs work as soon as you stop to rehearse it. This focuses attention on a specific musical element and gives students a goal rather than leaving them wondering what you want.

As the section is rehearsed, the director should give specific feedback after each repetition. Too often I see teachers offering minimal or generic feedback, such as, "That was good," which is neither specific nor helpful. It is far more effective to say something like, "Now we are moving more evenly through the measure, but some players are still rushing the eighth notes on beat 3." Thoughtful repetition should be the goal of every rehearsal moment.

Next, avoid drill shed rehearsals. A drill shed rehearsal is when the director spends significant rehearsal time working on nothing but technical problems in one musical passage. Often, this happens with a particular section of the band while everyone else waits and has to endure the time and frustration of the director practicing their part with and for them. There are multiple problems with this approach. First, drill shed rehearsals are anti-musical. When students have parts drilled in to them the focus is almost always on technique and usually comes with a level of frustration

from the director because sufficient practice has not happened. As a result, musical and expressive aspects are lost, and tensions are high. This is discouraging for students and leads to motivation and discipline problems.

In addition, once students learn that the director will practice their parts for them during rehearsal, they will see no need to practice on their own. Rehearsals then become reduced to group practice sessions that never get past technical demands and into musical depth and enjoyment. Moreover, they know that the majority of rehearsal time in a concert cycle will be about learning the notes and rhythms, and musical details only happen immediately before the concert.

The cause of drill shed rehearsals is almost always music that is too difficult for your ensemble. A good rule for programming is that 80% of the music should be sightreadable by the majority of the ensemble. This creates an environment where musical nuance and detail can be addressed almost immediately. It also means that because students are not chasing notes that rehearsals can move faster and



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involve larger sections of music at a time. Rehearsals should move quickly and include playing large sections and whole pieces of music as often as possible. This can only happen when the students have the technique to grasp most of the music on the page.

Imagine having rehearsals in which your feedback centered more on varying the nuance of articulation to create a particular style, or pacing the end of a phrase for greater musical effect, or achieving greater tension and release to maximize a musical moment. These are the factors that motivate and engage students and should be our daily goals. If your rehearsals rarely engage the artistic elements of music consider lowering the technical level of the pieces you are rehearsing. If you want to increase the level of technical demand of the repertoire then let the students know that rehearsal time will not be spent drilling their parts. Our job is to program at an appropriate level for their stage of musical development. Meanwhile you can focus on building their technique during the warmups. Over time their skills will improve, and as they do, the level of music will grow along with them.

## Conclusion

Rehearsals should be times of musical excitement and growth with our students, but it is easy for rehearsals to slide into a rut and become mundane. When this happens it is time to take an honest evaluation of your rehearsal climate and strategies, and then find better ways or new ideas. We all desire to have the most musical experiences possible with our students. The time with them goes by quickly, so it is important for us to work hard to create rehearsals that are efficient, effective, and musical, giving our students the best experience in music we can provide. □

## Young Texas Artists Music Competition Winners Announced

The 2019 Young Texas Artists Music Competition Grand Prize winner was Russian pianist Artem Kuznetsov, a graduate student at Rice University's Shepherd School of Music. He also won the Gold Medal in the competition's Piano Division. The Voice Division Gold Medal was awarded to mezzo-soprano Brennan Blankenship. The Strings Division Gold Medal went to cellist Lukas Goodman, and flutist Won Lee was named the Gold winner in the Winds, Brass, Percussion, Harp and Guitar Division.

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