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Structuring Taped Assignments for Maximum Learning

Cheryl Floyd

So you want them to practice, do you? Just like the old saying, if you want them to watch, give them something to look at. And if you want them to practice, give them an assignment with music of substance!

INGREDIENTS:

Cassette player. Metronome. Method book. Assignment sheet.

SERVES:

Instrumental groups of all ages.

Have you ever noticed how excited students are when you pass out a new piece of music? Motivation is high, questions are asked, and all instruments go home. Do you ever wonder how to sustain that interest? Consider giving them something motivating and pertinent to practice! Try what I call practice tapes.

I have found that students especially enjoy making practice tapes, because it empowers them to give me their best product. There is no limit to the number of times a student can record and rerecord their assignment. They alone make the judgment as to when it represents their best efforts. And, remember every “take” equates to more home practice . . . sneaky, huh?

The grading of these tapes also creates a less stressful situation for me. I can critique the recordings during my planning period, at home at my leisure, or virtually anywhere I have a few minutes and a cassette player at hand. No class or group instructional time is lost. The feedback is instantaneous, as I verbalize my comments, evaluation, and grade on the same tape, and return it to the student. The student can then rehearse their performance and immediately listen to my recorded suggestions for improvement. Students love the instant, personal feedback and their parents welcome the opportunity to listen and be “in the loop” regarding their student’s musical achievement. Progress is accelerated and communication with the parents is ongoing.

To track each student’s development I also keep a log of my comments. I have learned that this documentation helps me monitor each student’s ongoing progress. Yes, it does take a little extra effort but the investment of time is well worth it when I find it necessary to give an overall assessment of a student’s strengths and weaknesses or document an assigned grade.

As I structure each grading period’s assignment I am mindful of several factors. I always strive to identify and clearly articulate performance goals for both individual students and

the class as a whole. Scale, thirds, arpeggios, and technical drills such as the Clark studies are always a part of the assignment. Music being prepared for honor band auditions is sometimes included. Every assignment is intended to develop a specific aspect of the student's skills.

Many times the audition material for honor band or all district band tryouts can be quite intimidating for young players. In order to facilitate learning and encourage participation of less experienced students, assign part of the assignment for one tape and the rest for the next one. More advanced (or motivated) students might receive bonus points for preparing the entire selection.

Duets and small ensembles are also utilized. Some assignments are intended to be prepared, recorded, and performed by two or more students. In so doing, students learn to work together, heighten listening skills, and develop ensemble awareness. Simply working on a task and achieving a common music goal is a beneficial enterprise for all students. Students enjoy pacing one another as they work together to complete the assignment.

For convenience, I prefer to use a class method book and scale sheets for most of the assignments. However, I often use individual method books or musical excerpts as special exercises or bonus assignments.

A metronome is "standard equipment" for all students and must be used during the recording sessions. A tempo range (highest to lowest acceptable tempo) is announced for all assignments. They are referred to as "tempo windows." Within these tempo ranges students can set their own goal, depending on the skill level they hope to attain. This component of the project helps give students "ownership" of the ongoing quest for practice and improvement. Advanced students enjoy the challenge of the more demanding metronome setting, and the young students can still have a sense of accomplishment at the slower tempos.

Students are not left unguided. All material is covered in class and/or in sectionals, and students are encouraged to make a first recording immediately after each assignment is covered in class. Thus they have a reference point as they proceed.

Consider having a few extra credit card-sized metronomes on hand. They are available at a nominal cost. The same might be true regarding inexpensive hand-held cassette recorders, however, you will probably quickly discover that most students have their own.

Many students love bonus opportunities. For example, give a bonus for students who turn in their recording early. If a specified week has been set as a deadline for a particular assignment, consider giving ten bonus points for students who turn in work on Monday. Hearing a recording turned in early affords me the opportunity to make sure that the assignment is clear and that students are on task. Conversely, a penalty can be assessed for students who fail to turn in their tape by the end of the week.

A bonus can also be awarded for students who wish to perform extra assignments, such as playing scales, thirds, or arpeggios for two or more octaves. Thus students are encouraged to become familiar with the entire range of their instruments. The options are limitless.

The utilization of practice tapes is a valuable motivational and diagnostic tool for students of all ages and levels of achievement. They create the prospect for personalized interaction (think: mini-private lesson) with all students. In turn, each individual student is afforded the opportunity to acquire a sense of confidence and self-esteem as they define their performance goals and personal levels of achievement. Who could ask for more?

Involving Teachers in the School Band Program: A Recipe for Success

Eileen Fraedrich

The attitude of the classroom teacher toward band is crucial to the success of the school band program. How can the director ensure that the teacher's attitude is a positive one? Following is a recipe for fostering a cooperative school climate, resulting in increased student participation.

INGREDIENTS:

Enthusiastic classroom teachers. An upcoming performance. Access to instruments.

SERVES:

All school band programs, but especially elementary pull-out band programs.

A necessary component of an excellent band program is student involvement. A strong, vital program attracts and retains students. Many factors influence the participation rate of students—the director's recruitment efforts, the reputation of the band program, economic factors, the presence of other programs in the school which draw from the same student body, and the attitude of the classroom teachers toward the band program, to name a few. This last factor, the attitude of the classroom teacher toward the band program, cannot be overlooked, as this can make or break a band. For that reason, it is incumbent upon the director to ensure that classroom teachers have a positive perception of the band. Involving the teachers in the band program is one way to gain their support. Following is an idea that I have used in three of my schools with much success, and the rewards in terms of the band program have been significant.

Before an upcoming performance, poll the faculty to see how many teachers played band instruments as students. (This is easily done via e-mail. At each of my schools, quite a few teachers had played instruments.) Invite those teachers to join the band for a performance. Most will probably be understandably hesitant at first, as they will not have played in some time, but stress that they will be given folders with fingering charts, that they may play on any or all pieces, that you will try to borrow instruments for them to use, if necessary, and that you will be available to help them. In a school of average size, I would expect at least a handful of teachers to respond. Invite those teachers to attend a student rehearsal, if it can be worked into their schedules, as well as an optional rehearsal or two for teachers only.

Give some thought to the seating of teachers at rehearsals and at the performance—when- ever possible, try to group them together for moral support. At the performance, be sure to publicly recognize those teachers who participate—perhaps have corsages or some other token of thanks for them. (I put a Hershey’s “Symphony Bar” on each teacher’s chair.) The enthusiasm of the students and teachers involved in this joint effort can be contagious, with more teachers likely to come forth to participate on subsequent concerts.

What are the benefits of involving teachers in this way? Firstly, the teachers can be very good players who are a real asset to the band (some of mine played trombone, horn, clarinet, flute, percussion, and even tuba), but more importantly, the students in the band, playing alongside their teachers, see that playing an instrument is an interest that they can pursue throughout their lives—it’s a multigenerational activity that brings joy and fulfillment to people of all ability levels. Teachers and students are equals in this endeavor, working toward a common goal, and this fosters a tremendous feeling of school unity and camaraderie that can be difficult to achieve by other means.

Students respect and want to emulate their teachers—the students in the audience, seeing their own teachers and classmates performing together, are more likely to participate in the following year. A personal benefit for the director is the pleasure of interacting with other teachers—an element often lacking in the daily routine of an elementary itinerant teacher. Finally, the classroom teachers, having been involved, can better appreciate what it takes to make a good band program. When the director needs to pull the students for an extra rehearsal or runs overtime with a class, the classroom teacher who has played in the band can understand why this happens and is apt to be more forgiving.

What about those teachers who don’t play instruments? Is it possible to involve them in the program? Absolutely. There are certain band pieces that call for narration or include a skit. One such piece is *Aunt Rhodie’s Appetite* by Joseph Compello (Carl Fischer). This is a fun piece, suitable for elementary school beginners on a first concert. It is made up of ten easy tunes, many of which appear in beginning band method books, tied together with a humorous skit, which can involve the principal or classroom teachers as actors. Try inviting a teacher to guest-conduct a piece or to help out in the percussion section and the same aforementioned benefits will apply. You might even inspire a teacher to begin learning a band instrument. At one of my schools, I taught a beginning band class for teachers. It met before school, once a week, and had almost twenty participants!

By including faculty and staff members in the band experience, both personal and profes- sional rewards can result. The rewards of friendships forged with colleagues, a stronger band program, and increased student participation are well worth the effort involved. ➤

Serve It Fresh!

Rob Franzblau

All chefs understand the importance of serving their creations at the moment when they're done. A fallen soufflé just can't compare to a perfectly timed one, even though all the ingredients might be the same. As teachers, we also want our rehearsals to sparkle with that same feeling that comes when we connect with our students in an animated, fresh atmosphere. Here are three tips to help any recipe in this cookbook retain its "fresh-out-of-the-oven" feeling when served at your rehearsal table.

INGREDIENTS:

Whatever you have cooked up for your ensemble, sprinkle it liberally with genuine enthusiasm, zoom in/zoom out, and fast pacing before serving.

SERVES:

The entire group. The positive vibes from these freshness tips are contagious!

FRESHNESS TIP 1. Genuine Enthusiasm

When your tone of voice, eye contact, pace, facial expression, and sense of humor all contribute to an impression that there's nothing else you would rather be doing right now—when you're totally "in the moment"—you're showing genuine enthusiasm. Feeling it isn't enough; your students need to see it shining through you! Nobody wants to follow a leader who isn't truly excited about where he or she is going, so let it show! Confusion, anxiety, insecurity, worry, and lack of energy will block all attempts at showing genuine enthusiasm and are often the result of poor planning, so study your scores and plan your rehearsals with care. Then, if you're truly excited by what you're teaching, make an effort to show it in your voice (modulating pitch and volume), eye contact (make it frequently), pace (keep it fast), and facial expression (smile!).

Warning: Another consequence of poor planning is overcompensating with *insincere* enthusiasm—we've all seen examples of the over-the-top conductor/cheerleader on steroids. Teenagers (rightfully) have little tolerance for this poor substitute and will tire of it quickly.

FRESHNESS TIP 2. Zoom In, Zoom Out

By starting to rehearse large "chunks" of music (entire movements, sections, or phrases) and gradually zooming in on specific technical problems in specific instruments, we help our students to see the problem as theirs, to own the problem, and to take responsibility for the solution. However, only by then putting the small pieces gradually back together again, by

zooming back out to play larger sections of music, can technical development be put to a musical purpose.

We all know that correct notes and rhythms are just a means to an end, and that musical expression is all about telling a story to the listener. Music acquires meaning only in how individual notes, phrases, and sections relate to each other, how they repeat, contrast, anticipate, and develop. However, when we disconnect the notes from the story in grueling and “meaningless” drill sessions without putting the notes back in context of larger musical phrases, it becomes almost impossible for our students to reconnect to the story and care about the music. Zoom in and out throughout your rehearsal to keep the message meaningful and fresh!

FRESHNESS TIP 3. Fast Pacing

Think of pacing as the time that elapses between the end of one activity (anything in which the student is actively participating) and the beginning of another. The shorter the average time, the faster the pace is. For the student, the activity may certainly be playing their instrument, but it also may include singing, counting rhythms, marking their parts with a pencil, clapping a steady beat, focused listening while another section plays, answering a question based on their listening, offering an opinion, or taking notes from a brief talk about the composer.

The trick of moving rehearsals at a fast pace is to eliminate the downtime between these activities, and to flow from one to the next *with as little talking by the conductor as possible*. Try the “five-second rule” on yourself: if you can stop the ensemble, give some specific feedback, set a performance goal for the next thing, they play, and start the group playing again all in five seconds, you’re doing pretty well.

Students are no different than you or me—we learn best by doing, rather than being told. If you want to keep it fresh, keep your words to a minimum and keep the activities flowing.



Meet the Composer: The Next Best Thing to Actually Being There

Mitchell Lutch

Music educators must often work within budgetary constraints, which limit the possibility for face-to-face student/composer interaction. With the teacher's thorough rehearsal planning, ensemble members can still reap great benefits from interaction with composers, using a speakerphone.

INGREDIENTS:

Four weeks of conference preparation time, background research from at least three publications on the composer's life and works, contact with the composer, student derived questions, and a speakerphone.

SERVES:

All performing student musicians.

- First, select one work by a living composer that your group will be preparing for an upcoming concert.
- Second, upon contacting the composer, propose the teleconference idea. Composers have good reason to respond enthusiastically to a proposed teleconference as it offers them a direct connection to young musicians who could become their strongest advocates.
- Next, after discussing the question and answer format with the composer, ask if he or she would agree to offer feedback to your ensemble's live performance of the particular work. The increased motivation level, precision, and musicality of your ensemble will amply compensate for any low-fidelity signal through the speakerphone. Once the teleconference date has been set, supply your students with background information about the composer as well as the origin and form of the piece. Have them gather questions for the composer that arise while studying the work.
- Establish a firm deadline with your students one week prior to the teleconference date for submitting questions for your review.

Sample questions:

- How do you decide on the form when writing a particular composition?
- Which comes first, the medium or the musical idea?
- Is there a mindset or approach you would want to communicate to conductors and/or players when they rehearse and perform your music?

- To what extent do you take into account pleasing the players or audience when composing?
- Do you ever conduct your own compositions and, if so, how has it influenced your composing?
- How do you start composing a particular work? What inspires you? Do you start with a melody, and then add the accompaniment?
- How do you go about getting your music published?
- What advice do you have for high school students who would like to start composing?
- What advice do you have for young composers who would like to gain rehearsal and performance opportunities for their works?

Two teleconference examples:

- Don Freund, Professor of Music, Indiana University at Bloomington. *Jug Blues and Flat Pickin'* (MMB Music, rental). This student/composer interaction included discussion of the work's formal structure and raised the students' awareness of the importance of attending to detail when interpreting notation and the potential distortion of the composer's intent that can occur when such details are overlooked.
- Our performance of Samuel Adler's *American Duo* (Boosey & Hawkes) took place in March 2002. In recognition of Music in Our Schools Month an intriguing addition to the usual performances of prepared repertoire was added to the evening's concert. Students and teachers gave brief demonstrations of notable classroom teaching and learning approaches. Our concert band not only performed an engaging rendition of the work, but also presented a prerecorded message to the audience from the composer himself, an outgrowth of our inspiring teleconference. Mr. Alder responded enthusiastically to our original proposal for a live speakerphone address to the audience, but regretfully was unable to, due to a scheduling conflict. The novel idea of a prerecorded message, suggested by a student, proved to be resoundingly successful. It riveted the audience's attention to the words of a passionate creative artist who had made an indelible impression on our young musicians, elevating their awareness of music as a unique art form. Mr. Adler's prerecorded comments for those in attendance at that evening's concert were as follows:

I want to tell you how excited I am that young people such as you are taking up the mantle for this kind of music. After all, a composer can only speak through others and we are so happy that young people are excited about playing our music. I know that my teacher, Aaron Copland, whose influence pervades this piece, was always so anxious to go to young people and converse with them because you are the future. I want to say to the parents and administrators that the only way our culture is going to succeed and grow in our country is by encouraging these young people to play, do their utmost, and to get a new spiritual experience which music can give. Mendelssohn was once asked what music does? He said, "Music can say those things that are too precious to put into words." I feel we can communicate best through music because we can express our deepest selves. I thank you for all of your efforts. Keep on doing it because you will create better lives through music. —Samuel Adler, March 26, 2002

The educational benefits of the teleconference are far reaching and only a phone call away.

Developing a Philosophy for Success

James Swearingen

It is virtually impossible to be successful in the field of education without having formulated a personal teaching philosophy. This philosophy, based on a lifetime of personal experiences and observations, should serve as the foundation for your ability to achieve success. It should be noted that not every teacher selects music as his or her subject matter. What all teachers do share however, is the wonderful opportunity to include “lessons of life” as part of their daily classes. Therefore, what you value as being important, and what you believe in, should certainly be a reflection of your approach to teaching both music and the commonly accepted ideals of citizenship.

INGREDIENTS:

Start by observing others in the profession, and whenever possible, learn from the best role models/master teachers available. Also, be prepared to encounter a few people that may provide you with the wonderful opportunity to learn how *not* to do something. Every experience, good or bad, will be a valuable tool for learning.

Anything of worth takes time. The nurturing of your philosophy may take several years to fully develop. Some teachers find it much easier to settle early on for mediocrity; however, be assured that the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow will be well worth the time invested.

You must have the ability to clearly articulate and communicate your philosophy. Strengthening your verbal and writing skills will help to ensure credibility amongst administrators, pupils, and parents.

You need to be the role model of your own philosophy if you expect others to follow your lead. Enough said!

When necessary, be prepared to make changes in your philosophy. Don't be afraid to try something different. Remove yourself from your comfort zone and embrace the opportunity for change. Remember, every old tradition once started out as a new and fresh idea.

SERVES:

All dedicated music educators. All dedicated music students.

BLEND WELL FOR A SUCCESSFUL PHILOSOPHY.

An outstanding music class starts with an outstanding teacher. Teaching, in and of itself, is an art that affords the wonderful opportunity to engage students. As a result, the educational attitude that is reflected in front of the class will have a tremendous effect on the

success or failure of the teacher's instructional time. Should we then be surprised that when asked to describe their favorite teachers, the majority of people focused on humanistic qualities such as passion, humor, fairness, joy, dedication—and not subject matter?

Your students won't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

An outstanding music class starts with an outstanding musician. A thorough knowledge of music, as it pertains to musical performance and awareness, is an attribute that every music instructor should possess.

An outstanding music class is well organized and planned in advance. Avoid doing your homework in front of the class.

Failing to plan means you are planning to fail.

An outstanding music class can be achieved if your “people” skills will allow you to relate to your students in a highly positive and constructive manner.

I've come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher I possess a tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. —Haim Ginott, noted child psychologist and teacher ➔

The Most Important Hour of the Day

Johnnie Vinson

There are obviously not enough hours in the teaching day to do everything we would like to do in order improve our ensembles. However, in terms of the success of our groups, the rehearsal is *the most important hour of the day*. If the rehearsal is effective, the ensemble has a much better chance of being successful.

INGREDIENTS:

Organization, attention to detail, thorough planning, and the careful carrying out of the rehearsal plan.

SERVES:

All instrumental ensembles.

I've often joked that the surest way to make an ensemble serious is to dress them up and put them in front of an audience! Think how much better our ensembles would be if students would rehearse with the same intensity and care demonstrated at concerts. Although directors often expect or hope that their ensembles will perform better in concert than they do in rehearsal, experience shows that the opposite is probably true. Performance anxiety can cause a variety of problems (rushing tempos, insecure intonation, atypical balance and blend) that do not normally occur in rehearsal. If an ensemble does actually perform better in concert, the probable reason is that the players are more focused and are making a better effort than they do in a normal rehearsal.

If we really want to have successful performances, then we must have successful rehearsals. In terms of our ensemble's success, the rehearsal is the most important hour of the day. We should have a definite plan for every rehearsal and we should implement that plan.

For a rehearsal to be successful, the director must first have the attention of the students. Secondly, the students must be making a genuine effort to improve. These two factors are extremely important!

The director should ask the following questions about his or her rehearsals. Is there an appropriate warm-up and is the director with the ensemble during the warm-up? Is the music worthwhile? Is the music challenging to the strong players, yet accessible to the weaker ones? What musical details are to be rehearsed? Are most the students playing most of the time? Is the group focused on the task at hand? Is the ensemble accomplishing something during the rehearsal?

We should have specific objectives in mind for each rehearsal and should have a plan for attaining these objectives. Effective rehearsals don't happen by chance. Careful planning of rehearsals and carrying out of these plans are essential. Consider the following suggestions:

1. Chairs and music stands should be set up before the students arrive for rehearsal and all music to be rehearsed should be in the folders. Setting up the band or passing out music as the rehearsal begins wastes valuable rehearsal time and creates a chaotic atmosphere in the room.
2. List the order of music to be rehearsed on the chalkboard or whiteboard, and insist that students have their music in order. While the wind players warm up, the percussion section should get organized and ready to rehearse.
3. Start on time. Even five wasted minutes at the beginning of each rehearsal adds up to many wasted hours over the course of the school year.
4. Have a student assistant take attendance by empty chairs. Don't waste rehearsal time calling roll. A student assistant should also handle phone calls, messages, etc., during rehearsal.
5. Place a pencil in every music folder and require students to mark their parts with the conductor's instructions. If something is worth stopping for, it's worth marking.
6. Work the difficult parts of the music early in the rehearsal, after warm-up and tuning, while the students' concentration is best.
7. When preparing for festival or contest, have students number the measures in their parts. This will save a lot of rehearsal time over several weeks. ("Let's start at measure 54," instead of "Let's start 14 measures after letter C.")
8. The conductor must have a mental concept of how the music would sound if played perfectly. The ensemble's playing should be constantly evaluated and compared to this mental image of perfection. Then, the conductor should give the ensemble feedback to gradually mold their performance toward this image of perfection.
9. Each stop during rehearsal should be used for giving specific instructions. Little is achieved with comments such as, "You're out of tune . . . you must play in tune." Even less is accomplished with the philosophy, "Let's play it through again and hope it gets better."
10. Don't spend an excessive amount of rehearsal time talking to the group. This results in the students becoming restless and inattentive. The conductor's comments should be brief, concise, and related to the music. Have as many of the students as possible playing most of the time.
11. Insist on maximum concentration on the part of the students; the better the focus, the better the rehearsal. Little, if anything, can be accomplished in the midst of chaos.
12. End rehearsals playing something the students like. This generates enthusiasm for the next rehearsal.
13. After rehearsal, go through your scores and make written notes concerning what you want to do at the next rehearsal, while it's still fresh on your mind. Also, keep a written record of what you rehearse every day in order to balance the time spent on the various selections in the folder.
14. Once the music begins to sound good to you, record rehearsals about once a week. Evaluate the recording and make notes for the next rehearsal.

There are obviously not enough hours in the teaching day to do everything we would like to improve our ensembles. However, in terms of the success of our groups, the rehearsal is *the most important hour of the day*. If the rehearsal is effective, the ensemble has a much better chance of being successful!