



The Path to Excellence

A Conversation with Alex Kaminsky

By John Thomson

Alex Kaminsky has taken a collaborative approach to working with ensembles during his career, and that has only deepened with his appointment as Director of Bands at VanderCook College of Music in the Summer of 2019. His ensembles now include many future educators, including some just learning to play secondary instruments. He spends time in rehearsals not only teaching music but offering guidance that his musicians will use on the podium in future years. Kaminsky's distinguished 30-year career as a high school director included four performances at the Midwest Clinic and an unprecedented 23 straight years of Superior ratings at the Florida Bandmasters Association Concert Band Assessment. Prior to his appointment at VanderCook, Kaminsky taught at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. He earned degrees from the University of Florida and Indiana University and was named the 2019 FMEA Secondary Educator of the Year. Kaminsky has also been awarded the National Band Association's Citation of Excellence numerous times, and he is a member of the American Bandmasters Association.

What type of warm-up strategies do you employ with your ensembles?

We begin every rehearsal with breathing. Very young musicians are not used to inhaling the capacity of air required to produce a rich, robust tone on their instrument. I used to think that they weren't putting enough air into the horn, and then I realized that they weren't putting enough air into their lungs. We begin with a two-count breath. I have them put a hand in front of their mouths with the large knuckle centered between their lips, and they inhale for two counts with the metronome. We do it generally between 96-104 beats per minute.

We get a full tank of air during those two counts and then exhale, blowing air on the palm of the hand for 12 counts. After another two-count inhale, students will cup their hand and sing an F on the syllable *dah* for 12 counts. To insure that they focus on taking a two-count breath, I say, "out two, in two." The reason I say "out two" is so they expel what I call stale air in two counts. They exhale so that they can really take a nice, deep breath, then exhale for 12 counts.

After we sing, I have the woodwinds do the same thing, in for two, out for 12, playing a concert F on their instruments, while the brass players buzz a concert F on their mouthpieces. I am a big believer in buzzing. There are different schools of thought, but I have found that when a student can buzz with a clear quality, the instrument's tone becomes clearer and there is a better response at the beginning of the note. Lips vibrating is equivalent to the reeds vibrating. If the reed is too stiff, you will not get that vibration right away.

I teach breathing with half-inch coupling PVC pipe. I have them put the PVC pipe between their teeth, inhale for four counts, and exhale for four counts, then inhale for three counts, and exhale for four counts, and so on. This is also done at 96-104 bpm. The pipe helps them feel that deep breath. To be honest, I'm not sure why it works, but it definitely opens them up and gets more air into their lungs.

After the PVC pipe exercise, I use 12" diameter balloons. Before we inflate them, I tell the students to give them a little stretch because they are usually stiff at first. We once again inhale for two, exhale for 12, filling the balloon up over those 12 counts. I have students put their right hand on their stomach just over the belly button, holding

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communicating effectively.”***

the balloon with their left hand so that they can feel with their right hand the expansion below the lungs. As the lungs expand and the lungs push the diaphragm, they feel that sensation. The most difficult part of blowing up the balloon is the beginning. I tell the students to add a little burst of air right at the start, so the balloon inflates evenly for 12 counts. We use the breathing tubes and balloons for about a month.

Because sound is our raw material, what strategies do you use to develop characteristic tone?

I always tell ensembles that tone is how we communicate with listeners. If the tone isn’t great, then we aren’t communicating effectively with our audience and the listener. The first step in producing a characteristic tone is the breathing. When we sing, we audiate the tone that we’re going to play. You have to hear the tone and pitch before you play it. To play in the center of the pitch, I always liken finding the center of the pitch to archery. You aim the arrow and try to hit the bullseye. Sometimes we hit above or below the bullseye, but you always know where the target is. There’s a place for brass and woodwind players where the embouchure is set appropriately and correctly that you find the premium tone that you are seeking.

When we sing, it opens our oral cavity. I talk about using very warm air on the exhale when they produce a tone. We want the air to be free-flowing and shoulders to stay relaxed because tension hurts the tone. I always talk about playing full instead of saying “play forte.” Often, tension comes from not using enough air. In fact, at Stoneman Douglas the year after the tragedy took place, there was an optional session for teachers to learn how to help students cope with trauma. I was a little bit skeptical because I have my own way of dealing with things.

The first thing that those physicians said was take a deep breath and teach students how to do the same. This is something I was already teaching

every day in rehearsal. I learned that a deep breath activates the vagus nerve, which signals the entire body to relax and also reduces anxiety. That deep breath is essential when there is tension in the sound. When there is not enough air, the embouchure attempts to meet the demand, so there is going to be tension that creeps into the embouchure. For brass players, lack of air leads to pinching rather than using the air in high ranges. When woodwind players run out of air, they start tightening up, and for reed players, the pitch rises.

What is your approach to tuning?

We never try to tune before the instrument temperatures have warmed up. Once we are warmed up, we play the concert F around the band. Every section plays a whole note and releases on count five, and that note is passed off to the next section. We start off with tubas and then euphoniums, trombones, horns, and trumpets, then the low reeds, alto saxophones, clarinets, oboes, and flutes. Then I have the woodwinds join the flutes on a sustained note, and the brass join the woodwinds. We’re all sustaining that F at the end. This method allows sections to hear themselves and how their tone and pitch relates to everyone else. Not everybody needs to be tuned. I only tune when there is a discrepancy in the intonation with an individual or section.

The most important aspect of playing a tone is putting enough air into the horn. I don’t even talk about tone quality initially; I talk about volume. I use the acronym BBI – Balance, Blend, Intonation. Balance refers to volume. I tell them that balance is merely playing louder or softer, like an equalizer. Blend reflects the quality of the tone. A warm, resonant tone will blend. We talk about the volume and tone, and then intonation should be pretty close if the instrument is set correctly.

I remind the students not to have a tuner in sight during rehearsal. If they want to warm up a bit and check pitch using a phone app, that’s fine, but once rehearsal starts, the tuner goes away. I’m tun-



ing their ears, not their eyes. It's all about listening to and matching each other. I tell students that the key to intonation is eliminating the waves. If you don't hear waves you're probably in tune.

The human ear can hear beyond three cents in either direction, but when you get within three cents flat or sharp, it becomes a bit more difficult to discern those slow waves. Just because you don't hear waves doesn't mean you have found the perfect match. That tells you that you're really close. Your ears help you lock in and find the best match. If the clarinets have a tuning discrepancy, I'll have the principal player play the problem note, and then I'll play the same note on the Harmony Director to get them to find the perfect match. I always have the student play first, rather than play the note for them first, so they have greater pitch awareness before they try to adjust.

How do you decide how much time to spend on various aspects of a rehearsal? How do you balance development versus concert preparation?

At the beginning of the year, I will take nearly the entire rehearsal to establish these concepts. We will work on lips slurs and the chromatic scale. When I taught high school, all my bands ran through their twelve major scales in the Florida All-State pattern, which is the scale followed by an arpeggio, then up the circle of fourths to the next

key. I frequently use the three sections of *Tonality Shifting Warm-Up* by Chris Sharp and culminate with a chorale from Mayhew Lake's *16 Chorales* by J.S. Bach.

At the start of my new job at VanderCook, I have focused on establishing that warm-up routine to prepare for rehearsals. I tried not to go too quickly at the beginning because many students are playing secondary instruments. For example, I have violin players on horn and vocal majors playing clarinet. Once the routine was established, we moved into the music. I have found that by focusing on basics at the start of the process, you move much more quickly through the music. Students approach new music with concepts we worked playing the Bach chorales. They include everything we work on: breathing, intonation, tone quality, blend, balance, and phrasing. Few people want to take that kind of time at the beginning. I have learned over my career that it is a mistake to move into the music before students are ready.

What type of rehearsal atmosphere do you try to establish?

It is collaborative. I teach in rehearsal as if it was a masterclass. Whether I'm working with a clarinet player, a trumpet player, or a flute player, every student in the ensemble is to be dialed in because concepts used with individual students usually

apply to all the other instruments. As part of the collaboration, I ask students: What did you hear? What is something you would like to improve? If someone raises a hand and suggests taking a deeper breath to produce a deeper clarinet tone, we try it. This approach lets students feel like a part of the process instead of me telling them what to do every minute.

What are your objectives when you step on the podium with a new ensemble?

I try to keep the ensemble engaged the entire time, so I rarely address classroom management. I tell them that there is only one person who has the floor at any given time. If someone asks a question, I listen. We respect each other, and we all listen to what each person has to contribute. When somebody's playing, you give them respect by listening.

In addition, I tell them everyone must have a pencil because when we rehearse, we mark the music often. I always tell them the pencil is the eraser of mistakes. If you missed that E natural, the pencil keeps the mistake from repeating.

What is your approach to score study?

When I open the score, I scan it through just to see the activity taking place throughout the composition. Then I go through again with highlighters. I highlight melodic or primary lines in yellow, and countermelodies or secondary lines in blue. You can do this pretty quickly at sight. If

there is a rhythmic accompaniment, I highlight that in green. Then, I mark the bass line and perhaps a more involved unison in orange. I primarily use yellow, blue, and orange, saving the green for anything harmonically notable I need to address. Dynamics and effects get marked in pink to grab my attention. This colorful approach expedites the rehearsal process because the colors draw my eyes to the instrument groups playing specific lines. I don't have to scan the entire score to find out where the melody appears. If I want to work on the countermelody by itself, I just look at the lines in blue. That's more or less how I prepare a score.

I also complete a broad harmonic analysis, noting cadence points or other helpful information. With Percy Grainger or something more harmonically advanced, I will identify the chords so I can get them tuned and balanced. You can always go deeper on score study, but time is usually limited for school directors.

How did you get your students to practice?

Because of the pride students took in their band program, they felt it was important to show up prepared for rehearsal. If there was something that needed more work, such as learning all 12 major scales, I would have students record a scale or play a scale test in class. I used playing tests more often

continued on page 47



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Kaminsky, *cont. from page 10*

with younger students. Sometimes the tests occurred in class, and others were recorded at home and emailed to me. This approach showed students that when we tell them to learn something in two weeks, we mean it. In the second band, I didn't have to test as much because they understood the expectations. As they progressed



through the program and became juniors and seniors, it wasn't a problem at all because preparation was just part of the culture.

How have you balanced family life with the many demands of our professional life?

Not as well as I wish I had. Quite frankly, to have a successful band program, there are just too many things that pull you from your family. I was fortunate that band was a family affair because my wife was a music teacher for many years, and both of my sons played in my high school band. Whenever we had a concert or a marching event, the family was there, including grandparents and everyone else. Aside from that, I would always have July off for the entire band program including for myself. July was a time for family and vacation without band events. Some kids went to summer music camps, but that would be the time we always traveled as a family.

What advice would you offer students as they prepare for a career in instrumental music education?

The most important aspect of preparing to teach is seeking out great teachers and learning from them. No matter where you study music, there are good band programs nearby. Take the time to visit for a day or attend an evening rehearsal. I encourage my

VanderCook students, even during marching season, to observe at least two rehearsals during the semester. They take notes and report back on what they learned.

One of the best ways to learn is to watch the best in action as much as possible. Go to the Midwest Clinic and state conventions to learn about rehearsal techniques. Always be seeking to learn how to do the craft. At VanderCook, the Symphonic Band is essentially a lab band. We discuss rehearsal techniques every time we meet. I am always explaining what I am doing and why. I think that's probably the most important thing; just seek out the people who do it well and watch them work.

What type of balance did you try to achieve between your marching and concert band programs?

The concert band was always the hub of the band program. If the concert bands were not functioning at the highest level they could, it affected

every other part of the program. The jazz and marching bands will not play up to their potential if the concert band is not our focus. Many of the warm-ups and fundamental concepts I use with concert band apply equally to marching band. Basically, we never really had a transition between marching band and concert because the breathing and warm-up exercises were the same. In marching band, we incorporated even more lip slurs for the brass and scales for the woodwinds to develop flexibility and dexterity. That helped our concert program.

I was always careful not to schedule students for too few or too many competitions. We competed in a couple of regional events and the state marching band championship, but we were never out every single weekend. I wanted kids to stay excited from seeing other great groups but also wanted to make sure that marching did not consume too much of our time. We rehearsed twice a week on Tuesday and Thursday evenings from 5:00-8:00.

What is the best advice you can give to other directors?

Be consistent and persistent with your teaching. Always demand the best from your students, whether producing a tone, playing a phrase, or showing character as a member of an ensemble. Be consistent so your standards become ingrained in the band culture, and be persistent because it does not happen overnight. Second, seek out those who are good at the craft and watch them work. The more I brought people in to work with my students and the more I sought out mentors, the better we all became. □



John Thomson was director of bands at New Trier High School in Winnetka, Illinois for many years. He earned his bachelor's and master's degrees from Carnegie Mellon University. Thomson is a contributing editor and new music reviewer for The Instrumentalist.