

In Search of the Perfect Rehearsal

By John Thomson

There is no such thing as the perfect rehearsal, but we all can aspire to construct efficient and productive rehearsals that excite and challenge students, providing them with a sense of success and accomplishment. Here are several rehearsal ingredients that could contribute to satisfying and productive rehearsals.

A Good Start

It is essential that rehearsals consistently begin on time. Do not allow yourself to get distracted. The starting time should be established in the first days of the school year and assiduously observed. With no exceptions, there should be that special moment in time when rehearsal begins and all that has gone before ends.

You should not be the only person in the room who knows the plan for the day. The rehearsal menu should be posted for all to see as the students arrive in the rehearsal room. This will help your percussion section and wind players who double be ready to begin rehearsal, and you will not have to wait while students look for their music or mutes. Consider announcing the rehearsal schedule a few days in advance, perhaps on Friday of the preceding week. Include what you are going to rehearse and when. Even a day ahead will give your ensemble members time to practice. It would be difficult to criticize your students' lack of preparation if they do not know the rehearsal priorities. College and university colleagues do this routinely, and school groups should as well.

Every rehearsal has a number of non-musical routines that need to be accomplished, including daily logistics, attendance, and announcements. Make every effort to delegate these responsibilities to student leaders. A student staff could take care of the rehearsal set-up and other equipment matters, members of an audio/video recording club could take care of recording preparation and mic set-up, and if school authorities allow, a student could take attendance. Do those pre-rehearsal

tasks that only you can do and delegate the rest. To save time, place announcements or bullet points in a handout or on a blackboard or screen for all to see. Additionally, your ensemble's website could effectively contain the necessary details.

Warming Up

Playing a musical instrument requires a combination of intellectual, visual, physical, and auditory processing skills. Try to access each of these skill sets in the early moments of rehearsal.

Intellectually, draw your students into the rehearsal. Avoid playing the same warmup material daily. If the routine is too repetitive, the students will not become engaged. Avoid the B \flat concert scale in octave unisons. Instead, begin with a breathing exercise that fosters mental focus and stimulates your students' sonic awareness followed by long tone exercises in the middle register that encourage sustained playing. I have found the Emory Remington Long Tone Study along with its many and varied permutations to be particularly useful at this point in rehearsal as it develops flexibility and intervallic accuracy.

Visually, promote and encourage communication between students and conductor. Insist that students are watching and reacting to your conducting gestures in a way appropriate to their age and experience remembering that it goes both ways. You need to be watching them.

Physically, encourage and emphasize production fundamentals such as breathing, embouchure, posture, and instrumental position. Remember that during these early moments in rehearsal, your students are relearning what it feels like to play correctly. Enrich your daily rehearsal language with specific word prompts that trigger these fundamentals.

Finally, stimulate your students' auditory processing by encouraging their listening skills. Be sure that they are listening for characteristic tone, pitch, rhythm, balance, and blend. Sing daily. It should be an integral part of every rehearsal.

When students are unable to play a passage correctly at tempo, slow it down before the errors become habitual.

Unison studies and harmonized chorale material will work well at this point in the rehearsal and don't forget the lip slurs for the brass. The *Sixteen Chorales* by J.S. Bach, compiled and arranged by Mayhew Lake (G. Schirmer) and the venerable *Treasury of Scales* by Leonard Smith (Alfred) are good places to start. *The Creative Director, Alternative Rehearsal Techniques* by Edward S. Lisk (Meredith Music) offers many terrific warm-up approaches based upon the circle of fourths.

Tuning

It takes several minutes of playing time before a wind instrument is ready for tuning, and it takes some instruments longer than others based upon the object's material and mass. The goal in tuning is to get every instrument as closely calibrated as possible to a particular pitch, usually A440. There is a difference between tuning as calibration and playing in tune; one does not necessarily lead to the other. Calibration is a formal tuning process tailored to the specific developmental level of an ensemble. Playing in tune happens after calibration, when your students match pitch both melodically and harmonically in an exercise, etude, chorale, or repertoire selection.

Promote thoughtful tuning (calibration) habits and routines that develop independent and efficient tuning. These habits and routines should be established in the first days of the school year and reinforced daily in ways appropriate to students' age and experience. With more mature ensembles who have mastered the process, it will only take a minute or two. Simply give them the selected tuning note and allow them to play, listen, and correct. Develop a systematic approach so that everyone is not trying to tune at the same time. I like passing the pitch down through the sections. With less developed students who are still learning how to tune, more time may be needed. Select a section each day whose pitch is particularly egregious and assist them as the others learn by listening. There will never be enough time to tune every player individually each day.

The fundamental skill set is to teach students to listen for the presence of acoustical beats (the *wa-wa* effect) and to correct errant pitch as needed. Serious tuning cannot begin unless or until your students can hear and correct faulty pitch. It has been my experience that once developing players

hear the beauty and clarity of a beatless sound, they will accept nothing less.

Once you have players who can produce a reliable sustained pitch on their instruments, use one of them to sound the tuning note instead of an electronic tuner. I prefer the vibrancy and resonance of a real instrument such as the oboe, clarinet, or tuba over an electronically produced tone. A word of caution is warranted concerning the overuse and overdependence on electronic tuning aids. I have gone into rehearsal rooms recently where each student has had an individual tuning device connected to the music stand or instrument. While an electronic tuner will help students understand their instrument's tuning tendencies, it may not necessarily solve your ensemble's tuning problems. The emphasis must be on developing the ears and not the eyes.



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Compliment good work, but do not give compliments away.

Skills and Concepts

The next part of rehearsal should be designed to develop technical fundamentals and musical concepts in a sequential and progressive way. This is a particularly important part of the rehearsal for younger ensembles and ensemble programs where private lessons are not assumed. This segment could include technical exercises, scales and arpeggios, and articulation and technical etudes of all kinds. There are many published materials available at local music stores or online, and there are always new publications being made available.

This is also a time to expand your ensemble's understanding of music history, theory, and performance practice. Develop age-appropriate units of instruction based upon the elements of music (melody, harmony, rhythm, tone color, texture, and form) using a cyclical approach that revisits fundamental concepts and principles with ever increasing details and complexities. A unit of study on the four forms of the triad; a unit of study on the difference between monophonic, homophonic, and polyphonic textures; or a unit of study on rondo structure are some of the many possibilities. It will be most effective, however, when these learning units are connected and related to the repertoire that you are currently rehearsing. In fact, selecting a unit of study composition from a list of exemplary works for extended study and investigation would be a terrific way to integrate this approach into your curriculum. One selection per grading period or concert cycle will get you started.

A primary objective of this portion of the rehearsal is to develop students' musical literacy leading them toward becoming independent and responsive

Helpful Resources

Sixteen Chorales by J. S. Bach compiled and arranged by Mayhew Lake (G. Schirmer).
Treasury of Scales by Leonard Smith (Alfred).
The Creative Director, Alternative Rehearsal Techniques by Edward S. Lisk (Meredith Music)
Foundations for Superior Performance by Richard Williams and Jeff King (Kjos).
Blueprint for Band by Robert Garofalo (Meredith Music Publications).
Habits of a Successful Musician by Scott Rush and Rick Moon (GIA Publications).

musicians. Someone who cannot read the English language is considered illiterate and will be forever a dependent learner. Similarly, an individual who cannot read our musical language and interpret our established symbol system is musically illiterate and will be forever a dependent musician.

Independent learners are developed, in part, through regular sightreading. Systematically teach counting fundamentals, time signatures, and rhythmic subdivision. This is the mathematics of music. Also, systematically teach the musical road signs that appear in the score, such as articulations, dynamics, phrasings, and all relevant musical terminology, remembering that each musical symbol requires a specific musical behavior. In the fall, start with sightreading material that is easy enough for your ensemble to play from the beginning to end with few technical and musical difficulties. Set the bar high. Expect more than notes and rhythms, and don't compromise good tone and pitch. Gradually and progressively introduce more complex material, always insisting on strong production fundamentals. As your students develop this kind of musical independence, rehearsals proceed more efficiently because students recognize and correct their errors. Rehearsing at this level will be a joyful and rewarding experience.

Selected Repertoire

On most days, the largest block of rehearsal time (50% to 75%) should be devoted to preparing selected repertoire for performance. The rehearsal strategies here are as numerous as there are directors and could be the subject of multiple articles, but here are a few guidelines. First, as you begin to work with a new selection, ask students to play through the work from beginning to end. This allows them an opportunity to become acquainted with the whole work before any analysis begins. At this point, a high-quality recording could be very helpful, perhaps as a listening assignment prior to the first run-through. If your students cannot read through a particular work without multiple stops and starts, the work may be too difficult and your valuable rehearsal time will be spent chasing notes and rhythms. Instead, consider less complex material that will allow you to focus on higher-order learning. After you have sightread through the work, each subsequent rehearsal should then deal

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with ever increasing details and complexities moving from the general to the specific.

Daily work on each piece should follow a whole/part/whole approach. Play through a section, apply your corrections, and then play through the section again, assessing any improvement. There may be times when you have to repeat sections a few times with additional comments and corrections, but if a passage is not improving, move on and come back another day with a different approach. Do not allow the rehearsal to get bogged down.

Avoid endless repetitions without purpose. Each time an error is repeated, it becomes more cemented in your students' mind and muscle memory. At some point, they will have to unlearn and relearn the passage in question, which will take twice as long. Inexperienced directors will often say "play it again" in rehearsal, hoping for an improvement without offering a reason or solution. Be specific; every repetition should have a purpose.

When students are unable to play a passage correctly at tempo, slow it down before the errors become habitual. If it is a rhythmic problem, discuss the correction in terms of the musical mathematics using your established counting system. Have students count, sing, or scat the rhythm before trying to play it again. I have found *ch* to be a useful scat syllable. If it is a coordination problem, such as articulation or fingering, a slower tempo will allow corrections to be made before the errors become solidified. In addition, don't allow arrhythmic repetitions. An unevenly played passage will also be uneven at the correct tempo. Practice at half or even one quarter of the tempo, but always with an underlying pulse.

When students cannot play a particular passage up to standard in rehearsal, show them how to practice. Instead of being critical of their efforts or lack thereof, show them how to solve the technical or musical issues. Instead of feeling bad because they were unprepared, students will leave rehearsal with new energy and the tools to solve the problem going forward.

Closure

A successful rehearsal should end on a good note with everyone involved in a complete musical experience. This can be accomplished in several ways. Play through an entire work or part of

a work that you have been working on giving both you and your students an opportunity to assess and appreciate the progress for the day. You could also end rehearsal with something fresh, perhaps playing through a selection that was not on the schedule that day. A familiar march or a movement from a larger work would work well in this situation. You could even sightread a new work in the final minutes, particularly if it is part of your ongoing sightreading curriculum.

When rehearsals routinely end well, with a sense of group accomplishment, students will be more likely to practice, look forward to the next rehearsal, and ultimately will be more likely to sign up for band next year. At all costs, avoid ending rehearsals by working with a few students while everyone else is silently waiting.

At the conclusion of the rehearsal period, you should not be the first person out of the room. Stay away from your office for a few minutes to interact with your students. This is an excellent opportunity to compliment, encourage, or just wish students a good rest of the day. What student would not appreciate a kind word from their director while on their way to the next class?

Rehearsal Style

The best rehearsal planning and intentions will not yield significant accomplishments if the students are unmotivated and disengaged. More than anyone or anything else, the director creates the rehearsal environment that will determine whether students succeed. Students need to feel safe and secure in rehearsal; they will not risk making an error if they feel unsafe. A powerful quote by the school teacher and child psychologist Haim Ginott hung on the corkboard near my office desk as a constant reminder:

"I have come to a frightening conclusion. 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 tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated, and a child humanized or de-humanized."

As you develop a podium style, it is essential that you try to be yourself. One of my mentors, John Paynter, would say: "If you try to be someone else, you will always be second best. Instead, be the best *you* that you can be."

Try to develop a businesslike demeanor in rehearsal. Project the notion that you are there to get things done. Mr. Paynter used to call it creating a sense of urgency in rehearsal. You always want to make the most of the limited amount of rehearsal time available. Do not digress or chit-chat in rehearsal; make every effort to stay on task. Do not talk too much; less is more. Say what needs to be said and move forward.

In addition, make each rehearsal experience enjoyable for the students. Make your delivery interesting, and do not be afraid to laugh at your own mistakes. Be encouraging and positive at all times. Rage, sarcasm and ridicule are unacceptable pedagogical approaches.

Compliment good work, but do not give your compliments away. They must be earned. Many make the mistake of saying "good job" when it really wasn't a good job. "That's really coming along" or "keep working on it" will work just as well. When you have to address a rehearsal indiscretion with a student or group of students, address the behavior that is inappropriate or unacceptable. Do not make it personal. When Paynter did this, he would always find a way to praise that student's behavior or performance later in that same rehearsal. In other words, after you have caught them doing something wrong, catch them doing something right. That is what they will remember, not the admonishment. □

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