Making Bands Sound Better

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This is a series of practical hints designed to address the challenges bands face regarding sound quality, blend, tuning, pulse and balance. It is by no means a comprehensive list, but consists of exercises either invented or “borrowed” over many years. Hopefully, it will inspire conductors to develop exercises specifically for their own ensembles. Be creative!

“It’s all listening!”: Fine ensemble playing is predicated on attentive listening by every performer. Often students practice “selective deafness” – they only hear themselves, or they don’t listen at all. Our goal is to teach them to assign a significant part of their mental energy to “panoramic listening”, hearing what is happening around them at all times. For example:

- “Imagine you have four ears: one on each side of your head, one in the middle of your face, one on the back of your head. This time listen with the ear on the back (front) of your head.”
- “Listen for the parts you’re not playing.”
- “We need to hear the ________ here.”
- “In rehearsals we all need to learn everyone else’s part.”

Warm-Up: I am a firm believer that every band class/rehearsal should begin with sustained-note playing in order to establish air flow and set embouchures. Many possibilities exist: chorales, scale exercises, expand the interval outward from a middle register pitch, etc. However, playing such exercises straight through is not very helpful. Students need guidance on what they should be doing, what to listen for, etc. Add a breathing exercise that they employ every time they need a breath, direct their listening and work on sound quality and blend. Throughout the following class/rehearsal constantly remind the group about the substance of the warm up.

During chorales draw their attention to important or interesting lines, chords or notes with particular harmonic significance, and encourage listening for all four parts. Remind brass players to use “warm air”; single reed players “cold air.”

Scale exercises are often a practical alternative, since they can be played without music wherever you happen to be. Maintain focus and develop listening and blend by constantly varying the approach.

- Scales in canon – assign each student a number, 1, 2, 3, (4). Part 2 starts when part 1 reaches the third note, part 3 when part 1 reaches note five. This works better if the top note is not repeated. A fourth part can be added to create 7th chords and heighten the tension to resolution feel. Encourage students to listen for the parts they’re not playing.
- Harmonized scales – divide the students into three groups, everyone starts together on the tonic. Group 1 plays the scale normally from doh to doh; group 2 plays doh-it-doh and ahead up and down the scale; group 3 plays doh-it-lah-it-doh and ahead up and down the scale. Again, encourage students to listen for the parts other than their own.
- “Listen to, and blend your sound with, the person on your right (left, behind you, in front of you, the clarinets, etc.)
- Dick Floyd, formerly of Baylor University, directs students to work with their “trio of players” – themselves and the person on each side of them. Blend sounds, match note lengths, etc.
- Divide the students into two groups. Group 1 plays the scale in whole notes, group 2 plays doh-re-mi-doh or doh-mi-re-doh in quarters. Direct students to listen for the gentle tension/resolution between the parts and to match the pitch when everyone is playing the tonic. Switch parts. A somewhat more challenging version of this exercise is to have the moving part play mi-re-doh-mi or mi-doh-re-mi.

Some directors do not conduct during warm-ups, which in itself creates an excellent listening exercise. If not conducting, perhaps use this time to check holding and sitting positions, etc.

The “High Bias” Phenomena: All bands are “high biased” – many more high register instruments than low instruments. Many of our challenges originate in this effect. When the bass is weak or disappears, the sound takes on stridency, there’s no grounding for the pitch and balance/blend become very difficult to accomplish.

Have your group play something they know well and ask everyone to listen for whatever is (are) the lowest instrument(s) you have. You’ll notice immediate differences. The sound warms up, the pitch improves and you’ll hear better blend. The students will hear it too.
Recruiting students to play instruments like tuba is a challenge, but you can help yourself in other ways. Perhaps double up on baritone sax and bass clarinet. Baritone sax is strong enough to serve as a bass for the brass instruments, but may require some part re-writing. Unfortunately, electric bass is not much help in this regard, because the instrument doesn’t sustain well and the electronic sound doesn’t blend. (Incidentally, I often hear electric bassists tune up sharp, and completely ignore dynamics. They need to be instructed in listening, too.)

Consider “pyramiding” sections. For example: 2 first clarinets, 4 seconds, 6 thirds. Work with sections to tip the balance in favour of the lowest part, and reinforce constantly.

Try grouping all of the low instruments together in the centre at the back, irrespective of sections. For some reason, this produces more bass sound.

**The Tuning Enigma:** Many approaches to band tuning have evolved over the years and most work well, but also have limitations. One technique that doesn’t work might be called “the orchestra approach.” During an orchestra’s tuning routine, the oboe sounding the pitch is always audible through the texture. This is not the case with the band. The oboe, clarinet, etc., sounding the pitch quickly disappears and the players tune to whomever they hear the loudest – not a prescription for unified pitch!

My preference is to tune up from the bottom; however, students must be reminded to play softer than the instrument they are tuning to, or the process flips around. Allan McMurray, formerly of the University of Colorado, directs students to “fit your sound inside the sound you are tuning to”, an efficient instruction that addresses tuning, balance and blend at the same time. Any exercise that encourages listening, balance or blend will also develop awareness of pitch (“It’s all listening!”). A few other suggestions:

- In sustained-note exercises, direct students’ attention to the ends of notes, which are often ragged and out-of-tune. In rehearsal, apply this same idea to the ends of phrases.
- Incorporate modal scales into the warm-up (doh-dooh, re-reh, mi-mi, etc.). For younger groups scale segments work just as well. The farther away from the tonic-tonic scale, the weaker the tuning becomes. The less familiar exercise requires students to focus more on the notes (fingerings); encourage them to always assign mental energy to tuning.
- Play scales against a tonic pedal. Low pedals are probably best, but middle and upper register pedals are useful, too.
- Play scales in parallel – i.e. B-flat, D, F concert. Every scale degree creates a major chord, allowing students to focus on one sonority. D-flat instead of D concert creates minor chords, and other chordal structures are also possible.
- In any key, have the group play doh-sol-dooh-mi-dooh. Remind the students to match the pitch on the three tonic notes. By approaching the tonic from both directions, this exercise acquaints students with the tendency to push the pitch up when ascending and down when descending.

**Pulse:** Pulse gives music movement. When not handled well, the music “stands in one place and jumps up and down”, rather than developing momentum.

Many band works, particularly those for young band, have repeated-note or syncopated accompaniments. If played all at the same volume, these figures quickly take on a “jackhammer” quality. Encourage players to lighten any note not on a beat. Rather than accenting downbeats or syncopated notes, suggest lengthening the note (agogic accent) and lightening everything around it. Lead to downbeats or to the climax of the phrase. Attending to pulse will give your group a buoyancy and sense of forward motion that is quite delightful!

**Balance:** We need to use their ears. Much of what conductors do relates to balance. This may be especially true of bands because we have so much middle register (low clarinets, low trumpets, saxophones, horns, trombones in the same register), and inner lines get covered easily. Direct the players listening by pointing out the most important lines at various points, and have them note these into their own parts so that they remember at the next rehearsal.

A couple of ideas:

- “What do we want the audience to hear at this point?”
- Dick Floyd tells players to “bring out your black notes.” I prefer to go the other way: “whenever you have a white note, listen around you. Probably there’s something more important occurring.”
- As much as possible, avoid asking specific groups to play louder or softer; instead, encourage everyone to listen around for the most compelling lines of the music and support those ideas. Otherwise, you can spend enormous amounts of time “pulling and tugging”, only to have to do it all over again at the next rehearsal.

**Create a miracle!** Shot or stinger-type chords, or repeated chords resonate better if the length is varied by register. Have the highest instruments play as short as possible (“dit”), the alto register play half value (“de”), the tenor register play ¾ value (“do”), and the lowest instruments play full value (“dah”). Chords “feathered” in this way will ring in the space, while they won’t if played all the same length. Apply the same technique to held chords at the end of sections or pieces. Give a large circular release and have the players stop at various points along the circle – high register first; low register last. You and your band will like the effect!

I hope these suggestions are helpful and can be easily applied in many situations. Enjoy your rehearsals!