



Teaching for understanding: Tips to improve your ensemble rehearsals

BY PETER J. HAMLIN, PH.D.

Conducting effective ensemble rehearsals is one of the most important responsibilities for music teachers. Teachers are extremely busy and have to contend with many obstacles in planning for these rehearsals. These include both musical and non-musical constraints and responsibilities that go beyond teaching itself and which consume a great deal of time. For example, ensemble rehearsals sometimes are compromised due to testing and other similar interruptions. Therefore, it is essential that teachers are organized and maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of each rehearsal. The purpose of this article is to provide suggestions to music educators on how to plan and execute ensemble rehearsals to optimize student learning.

Repertoire Selection

Choosing appropriate repertoire is one of the most important aspects of teaching. Teachers should strive to locate and choose the best music possible for their ensembles. The first step in the selection of music is to ascertain what are the strengths and weaknesses of the ensemble. These might include such things as articulation, technical facility, musicality, range development, balance/blend, and tone development. From there, develop measurable learning outcomes. The chosen repertoire becomes the vehicle through which these skills and concepts are taught. The goal is to improve musicianship through the study of the repertoire.

Other factors influencing repertoire selection include the educational value of the piece; the importance of choosing music that varies in style, form, and content; choosing music from a range of historical periods and cultures; keeping students, audiences, and ourselves (as directors) engaged; and to provide students with the opportunity to make a deep emotional connection to the music being performed. Students deserve to have an aesthetic experience with the music no matter the age level. Choosing appropriate music will help students and teachers to make this connection. Try to locate and select ensemble repertoire for the upcoming year during the summer months when there is a little more freedom to research and study the music.

Score Study

A conductor must have a clear, mental image of any

composition being performed in order to communicate its musical expressiveness to the ensemble. To do this requires score study. A barrier to engaging in score study is the busy schedule that most music teachers maintain. It is important to plan a regular time to study scores and stick to it. Try to locate a quiet space and work to eliminate distractions and interruptions.

Prior to beginning rehearsals on a piece of music, study the score to identify potential issues and their solutions. During rehearsal, give students an opportunity to make mistakes before you immediately begin correcting them. Many times students are able to figure out solutions to mistakes on their own, conserving valuable rehearsal time. If there are any errors in the parts make sure to mark them prior to handing them out. Also, write in any other makings that may be necessary such as vowel pronunciations, bowings, or alternate fingerings.

Setting Goals

Set long and short-term goals for each ensemble and piece of music. Goals should be measurable and attainable. A good activity is to develop goals in collaboration with the students. Students should be aware of any goals that are established and they should be provided with constant feedback about their progress. These goals will determine in large part the rehearsal plan.

Non-Musical Considerations

There are many non-musical considerations that should be taken into account when planning for rehearsal. If these are not handled properly they can create anxiety and inhibit productivity.

Rehearsal Room

Make sure the rehearsal room is set up appropriately prior to rehearsal. See that the room is properly ventilated, that the air conditioning or heat is set at a comfortable temperature, and that there is adequate lighting. Ensure that you have enough chairs and stands for everyone. The room should be organized and clean. This facilitates concentration and focus. Try to set up the rehearsal room so that students can gain access to music folders and instruments quickly. There should be clear procedures for entering the room and getting set up. Make sure all music is placed correctly into the folders. It may also save



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time to place the folders on the chairs before rehearsal. Consider playing quality recordings of ensembles as students enter the room. In addition, write the order of the music that will be rehearsed that day on the board so that students know what to expect during rehearsal and can be prepared.

When taking attendance and making announcements do so in a way that will least disrupt rehearsal. Perhaps enlist a student to help you. Write announcements on the board or display them through a projector so that students can read them on their own. Work to minimize any distractions that might inhibit making music.

Rehearsal Atmosphere

Establish a rehearsal atmosphere that is conducive to efficient and effective rehearsal. Maintain discipline but avoid using fear to motivate students. Musicians who have a strong, positive self-belief are likely to be more motivated to persist in developing performance skills. Students must be provided with opportunities where they can be successful and in which they can develop the confidence to continue learning. The rehearsal environment should be free from harsh criticism and students should be allowed to be creative without a high fear of failure. The teacher needs to lead by example. Be early and prepared just as this is expected of the students. Start every rehearsal on time even if not everyone is there.

The Rehearsal

WARMING-UP

Each rehearsal must include a warm-up. This serves as an opportunity to bring focus to the rehearsal and to mentally prepare the students to effectively practice the music. The warm-up is also used to teach musical skills and concepts, as well as, warm up the instruments and muscles. Align warm-ups to concentrate on the musical skills and concepts found within the music. Students should focus on establishing pitch, tone, balance/blend, technique development, musicianship training, and aural skills. All of that will lead back to greater progress toward achieving the curricular goals. During the warm up don't forget to pay attention to the percussionists in the ensemble.

TUNING

Learning to play in tune should be something that is deliberately taught and developed. This must include information related to acoustics and the physics of tuning. Begin by ensuring the equipment is in good playing condition and the instruments are set to the correct length. Students need to be taught how to produce a characteristic sound. This includes knowing how to form the correct embouchure, using proper air support, and having a mental image of what a good characteristic sound on their instrument is like. This is done through focused listening to quality sounds either in person or through the use of

recordings. Other concerns include how to properly tune specific instruments, knowing the characteristic or idiosyncratic tuning problems on each instrument, and having an understanding of the overtone series. Even with all of this knowledge, including the use of a tuner, students will still play out of tune. Ultimately, students must develop the ability to audiate or hear their music internally to solve most of the remaining issues.

REHEARSING THE MUSIC

It is crucial to have a rehearsal plan every day. Daily rehearsals should include a mix of rehearsing repertoire, sight-reading, and the development of fundamentals. The following is a good rehearsal plan based on a 50-minute period.

Warm-up and Tuning	10 minutes
Familiar Section	5 minutes
Primary Rehearsal Section	15 minutes
Secondary Rehearsal Section	10 minutes
Sight-Reading	5 minutes
Closing	5 minutes

When rehearsing, try to stop the ensemble and immediately make comments. Keep feedback simple and positive. When talking, be brief to allow students to play as much as possible. Another good habit is to conduct from the podium but teach from off the podium. It is also a good idea to move around the room to visually assess students' performance and to let them know you are paying attention. Have students sing during rehearsal to develop their ears and to play more in tune and make sure you are rehearsing what needs the most work, not what already sounds good.

During rehearsal, ask students questions and invite them to participate in making musical decisions. Ask questions such as (1) Who has the melody? (2) How long is the phrase? (3) How would you shape this phrase? During rehearsal when we ask students to make changes or to alter their performance it is extremely important for them to understand why and to connect it to a broader musical concept so that they will be more able to transfer that learning to other music and situations. Over time students will develop a deep understanding of musical skills and concepts creating a web of knowledge that they will be able to draw upon allowing them to become more independent and capable performers.

Sight-Reading

For many educators, a goal for students is to become independent musicians and to continue playing an instrument or singing after the end of schooling. This is very difficult to achieve if students cannot sight-read. Each rehearsal should include time spent sight-reading. Sight-reading can be new music, etudes, or other exercises designed to increase sight-reading fluency.

After the Rehearsal

After rehearsal it is important to evaluate what happened so that you can adapt and modify future rehearsal plans and goals. An important tool for evaluating rehearsals is to record them. It is very difficult to hear everything that is played during rehearsal. Recording your ensemble can give you additional opportunities to evaluate student performance. Then develop strategies to address any shortcomings. It can also be helpful to have others listen to your recordings and to ask them what they hear and how they would fix any problems they perceive.

Summary

It is important that rehearsals are well planned to facilitate learning and minimize issues in classroom management. Teachers are always busy and time is scarce but taking the opportunity to carefully select repertoire and engage in thoughtful score study is a must to ensure success.

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