



## Focusing on Music Fundamentals: Prepare better musicians and your secondary band program

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Programming. Teaching. Administering. The responsibilities of leading a secondary band program can be immense. While it's difficult, if not impossible, to address all aspects of musicianship in every ensemble, focusing on a key group of fundamentals in each area of your program will help create well-balanced performers. Every program has its own character and organizational details; however, almost any program will benefit from implementing a key set of strategies and methods.

Whether marching, jazz, or concert band, starting each rehearsal with a focus on breathing serves multiple purposes. It's a given that a large majority of the students in your program deal with breathing in order to create characteristic sounds on their instruments. Spending as few as two minutes on breathing will ensure that all wind players are exposed to proper breathing techniques. It is critical to isolate the breathing from the distractions of thinking about embouchure, intonation, or any of the other aspects on which students are asked to focus throughout a rehearsal. While the winds are going through breathing exercises, percussionists can set up their equipment based on the rehearsal schedule. When concentrating on breathing, an added bonus is classroom management. Students cannot participate in most breathing exercises while talking. In most cases you will find the time spent on breathing will help students play with a fuller sound, while enabling them to start rehearsal with a greater sense of focus.

Reinforcing the fundamentals is critical in aiding a program to progress toward a higher level of performance, as well as maintaining an established outstanding band program. Regardless of how your program is structured, spending time reading rhythms on a given pitch serves two great purposes. First, by reading rhythms only, students are able to focus on counting, subdividing, note length, and articulations, if you chose to add articulation markings. Second, while it is not the primary intent of the exercises, by asking each student to play the same note throughout an exercise, you can help students with matching pitch or tuning chords. Three minutes a day will pay huge dividends by the end of a semester and certainly an entire year!

Rhythm reading may not be feasible during your full marching band rehearsal, but hopefully you can incorporate this technique when you rehearse with those same students throughout the regularly scheduled class. As students begin to lock in on counting, subdividing, and keeping time, they will be able to perform at a higher level and should be able to learn music at a faster rate. One word of caution: do not play the same rhythms day-after-day; keep it fresh. This will require a little more work from you as the director, but it is well worth the extra effort.

A critical fundamental in developing successful programs is to set a goal for each musician to learn and memorize all twelve major scales. While this may seem daunting, by starting in the first week of school and simply progressing through one scale a week, you'll enable every performer in the band to play all the major scales within a few months. But don't stop there! Go one step further and add a short technical sequence in the respective key to help increase student's facility. (See *example 1, page 14*) Using the same sequence in each key will help the students anticipate how it should sound. Based on the general ability of your students or ensembles, add articulations or speed up tempos to challenge students throughout your program. One great benefit of using this exercise with your ensemble is that even your bass clarinetist, baritone saxophonist, and tuba players will improve facility on their instrument!

Based on the above suggestions, each rehearsal should begin with a focus on breathing, rhythm reading, and scale/technical exercises. While it will take approximately six minutes from your rehearsal, the benefits are tremendous. Two other critical components that should be incorporated near the beginning of each rehearsal are the playing of chorales or lyrical music and tuning. If the focus on breathing, rhythm, scales/technical studies, lyrical playing, and tuning become part of the routine on the first day of school, by the time the marching band season is over, your ensemble(s) will be better prepared to begin sight reading. The foundation created by students practicing the fundamentals will enable you to expose your students to significantly more music as they progress through your program.

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### EXAMPLE 1

Trumpet in B $\flat$

If you begin the fall semester in a concert setting, start by working on each of the fundamentals and sight reading very easy repertoire with your ensemble. Consider reading three grade levels below the literature you plan to prepare for concert festival or adjudicated performances later in the year. In addition to playing the correct notes and rhythms, ask your students to read with a focus on articulation, dynamics, and balance. If the students are unable to achieve established goals, select more simple music so they are able to achieve the goals you establish for them. Once the students are meeting your expectations in the sight reading process, select more difficult music, two grade levels, then one grade level below your target level or performance repertoire. Set a benchmark for each of your ensembles to sight read at least once a week. If your music library is not conducive to sight-reading frequently, consider setting up an exchange with your colleagues, either at other secondary schools or middle schools in your region.

After building the fundamental abilities of your students, show your audience members at concerts what the students have been learning. While this may seem outlandish, if students are prepared consistently, they will be able to sight read at an adequate level at a

concert. It may take some time to build the ability throughout an entire program to ensure a successful public sight reading experience. Be sure to take the time to find repertoire that you are confident the ensemble will be able to read successfully as well as be certain that any exposed solos will be performed with confidence. One additional note: make sure that the primary percussion parts will be performed without large unwritten rests due to lack of personnel. Sight reading at the concert is a terrific teaching tool for the students, and also brings awareness to the parents of the skills you are teaching their students.

If each and every student in your band program spends time practicing these critical fundamentals, you'll find that your marching, concert, and jazz ensembles will all benefit.

If the members of the marching band are able to sight read music, you'll be able to spend much more time teaching the music and not having to spend hours of rehearsal teaching notes and rhythms. If every student in the program can play through all twelve majors scales after a few months, you will avoid having to explain how to play in complex keys when working on more advanced literature. When working with your marching band, you can improve your concert and jazz ensembles by spending more time improving your student's breathing capacity and ability to play with a full, high quality sound.

While your goals and responsibilities as a music educator may seem overwhelming at times, don't doubt the power of calling on fundamentals. Each area of your program can benefit from student musicians being exposed to these critical methods and strategies, regardless of the ensembles in which they participate. The end result will lead to well-prepared students who can successfully tackle almost any challenge throughout their musical career.

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