Teaching Your Band or Orchestra to Sight Read

A clinic presented to the Band and Orchestra Directors of the Socorro ISD
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Sight reading is a test of music literacy. It is your job to make sure your students are literate. Teach the fundamentals of music, all year, every day, every rehearsal, and sight reading will be easy for your students.

**TONE**

1. Use these words, or others of your choosing, to describe the tone you want students to strive for: beautiful, clear, steady, firm, supported, rich, resonant, vibrant, characteristic.
2. For band students, breathing exercises at the start of rehearsal get the body ready. Work for noiseless intake and full exhale.
3. Move lots of air. String players should do long bow exercises.
4. Starting in your beginning classes, stress correct posture and position (hand, arm). Band students should focus on correct formation of the embouchure. Continue to monitor older students. Don't forget that posture affects the air intake and support, and therefore, the sound. Also remember that for all instruments, tension in the body comes out in the sound. Work for relaxed bodies.
5. In your daily warm-up use scales (played slowly) to develop tone and to extend range. Wind players should play Remingtons and lip slurs and include practice on mouthpiece alone to develop embouchure and tone. Have your students work to make the same quality of sound in all registers, at all dynamic levels.
6. Introduce vibrato for appropriate instruments.
7. Provide examples of great players: symphony performers, commercial recordings (video and audio), and class role models. Encourage student attendance at live recitals and concerts by professional players.

**TECHNIQUE AND KEY AWARENESS**

1. Scales and scale exercises are tried and true technique builders.
2. Include major and chromatic scales (minor for high school.)
3. Range should be appropriate for the age of the student.
4. Additional scale things to try:
   - Students recite the order of sharps and flats and play scales individually as others listen and determine accuracy.
   - Students write the sharps and flats in their proper locations on the staff and name scale notes in the various keys or write scale notes on the music staff, placing proper sharps or flats where needed.

**ARTICULATION/BOWING**

1. Work for consistency throughout the ensemble: "matched articulation/bowing."
2. Remember that the ends of notes are just as important as the starts of them: "matched note length."
3. The Taaffet-Gaubert Mechanism Studies for flute gives twelve different articulations to use on scale studies. Use these on exercises you devise, or use the ones in Foundations for Superior Performance band book by Jeff King and Richard Williams.

**RHYTHM**

1. Young, inexperienced students have the most rhythm trouble on long notes, ties, and rests. They must actively count through these.
2. Teach your group to look at stems, not just the note heads.
3. Have a counting system and use it. Make sure that individual students actually understand it and are not parroting what others around them are counting. Use foot tap, and clap rhythms while counting aloud. Individual counting aloud is mandatory.
4. Sight read rhythm sheets for chair tests.
5. Write notes and rest patterns on the board, and have students identify note values as well as count the rhythm.
6. Written tests give you a good picture of whether or not students understand subdivision. Also have students draw notes, compose their own rhythm patters and write rhythms you dictate.
7. On new music or new lines in the book, have students count out loud, tap, clap, air-band/shadow-bow, buzz, or sing exercises prior to playing. Or, divide the class in half: one group claps while the other half plays.
8. Supplemental materials: pages of rhythm drills, commercially prepared slides or flash cards, and Master Theory workbook/worksheets.

**SKILL BUILDING BOOKS - BAND**

Here are some good band books to use for rhythm, technique, learning music reading, and warm-up: (They are in alphabetical order, not a particular order of preference.)

- 14 Weeks to a Better Band
- 25 Lazarus-Concone Studies
- 101 Rhythmic Rest Patterns
- 204 Progressive Sight reading Tunes
- Division of Beat
- Division of Measure
- Exercises for Ensemble Drill
- Foundations for Superior Performance
- Hal Leonard Intermediate and Advanced Methods
- Harmonized Rhythms
- The Logical Approach to Rhythmic Notation
- Rhythm and Rests
- Rhythm Master
- Rubank Advanced Methods
- Sight reading for Band Series (1-4)
- Symphonic Band Technique
- Books continued
- Teaching Rhythm
- TRI (Technique, Rhythm, Intonation)
- Winning Rhythms
- Sightreading for Band and Orchestra 1-4

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**LISTENING SKILLS**

1. Focusing on listening skills in the classroom will continue to develop sound awareness, sound discrimination and sound sensitivity. Developing listening skills will assist students with these things:
   a. The ability to concentrate
      - The ability to understand what one is listening to
      - The ability to remember sounds and sound sequences.

2. The ability to concentrate is essential to the listening process. Students must be able to remember what they have heard because of the abstract nature of the music, which is sound passing in time.

3. Choose music that will capture the attention and interest of students. Music that has strong rhythms, appealing melodic flow, obvious contrasts or unusual tone colors will usually spark the students' interest. Students will need time to develop their listening skills to be able to listen objectively to music that is unfamiliar to them.

4. Students will bring their own varied perspectives and associations, including their unique cultural and personal perspectives to the listening process. If students feel comfortable bringing in and discussing their own music, they will be more receptive to approaching other less familiar music in a similar fashion.

5. Remember, people respond to music in various ways and at different levels.

**ANALYSIS**

1. As your group learns music during the year teach them to analyze the music. Focus on the elements present within a piece of music and look for the relationships between and among these elements. Teach the ensemble to recognize the pattern of organization and overall structure of the music (form).

2. The following are examples of questions to consider during analysis, AND THEY ARE THINGS YOU WILL LOOK FOR IN THE SCORE OF THE SIGHTREADING PIECE:
   - Does the music have repetition? Contrast? Is the repetition exact or a variation?
   - How does the composer/musician create variety?
   - Is there tension in the music? How is it created? Is the tension resolved?
   - Can you identify phrases that are alike and similar?
* What does the composer/musician do to try and catch your attention ("hooks")?
* Is there syncopation involved? How is it used?
* What is the tonality used? (Major, minor, pentatonic, other?)
* Can you identify the sections of a song (introduction, chorus and verse) and the organization or form of the music (for example; two-part, AB; three-part, ABA; rondo, ABACA)?

3. The particular way the ingredients of music are combined or put together creates **style** in music. Style refers to the musical characteristics of a particular composer, musician, culture, region or period. This might refer to the music of the Romantic era, music from South America, or the music of the Beatles or Percy Grainger.

**PREPARATION FOR SIGHTREADING**

1. Students should be able to make a beautiful in-tune sound, play scales, read rhythms, read articulations, and know common terms and signs, terms such as andante, moderato, allegro, allegretto, maestoso, grandioso, cantabile, sostenuto. Common signs would include repeats, 1\textsuperscript{st} and 2\textsuperscript{nd} endings, railroad tracks, fermatas, D. S. (al Fine, al Coda), D.C (remember that you do not take repeats when you have a D. S. or D. C. unless the music calls for repeats.)

2. Students need to know where they are in the measure, which beat they are on, and which beat YOU are on.

3. Since the band division uses the composed-for-Texas UIL sight reading music, it helps to know that you can find out the criteria, (keys, time signatures, and rhythms) that composers use to write the music for your school's classification. This information is available on the UIL website.

4. Start preparing for sight reading contest at the beginning of the year. Read EASY tunes, and many of them so that your group will feel confident when confronted with new music. When they are successful, they will enjoy reading at sight.

5. Closer to the actual event, practice sight reading the way you will do it on contest day (timed, etc.) You can purchase band sight reading music that was used in previous years from RBC Music Publishers in San Antonio and most of the orchestra music from TRN Music Publishers. I suggest that you buy your classification as well as at least one class lower (easier) than yours.

**PREPARATION FOR THE ACTUAL CONTEST**

1. Know the rules for the contest. Read the sheet to see what criteria the judges use in evaluating your ensemble's performance. Share that information with your students.

2. Teach your group how to study their parts. I use KTTDC (key, time, tempo, dynamics, changes). Some beginning band books use STARS (Signatures, tempo, accents, changes, repeats, signs). Students should look for repetition of rhythms and melodies. My groups used to touch the key signature in the upper left hand corner, then slides down to the bottom, touching the key signature at the start of each line to discover if and where the key changes.

3. Coach your students in the art of asking questions (1) LOUDLY (2) First identify a place, like "Square 32" and count from there, before or after, rather than saying "1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 before 32." (3) Have the question in mind before they ask it to avoid stutters (4) Ask all questions at the end UNLESS you miss some pertinent piece of information, like "Mrs. Lambrecht, is there a key change at 36?"

4. First chairs should ask questions they think members of their section might miss, such as, "Is C flat the same as B natural?"

5. Pre-assign parts, perhaps putting your second best player as first chair second part.

6. Since many students get lost on rests when they sight read, train your group to count rests on their fingers and aloud (but softly). First chairs can check the section counting. I used to teach beginners to bring their instruments to the knee two bars before the end of extended rests, and to playing position on the downbeat of the last measure of rest. If anyone was lost, they quickly got with the rest of the section, and we had fewer missed entrances.

7. Vary your warm-up tempo, or volume, or style, to train your students to watch closely and to follow you.

8. Touch your music. Use this sense to enhance sight and hearing. We have five senses. Students use two of them — sight (looking at the music), and hearing (listening to your instruction.) Add touch, as in touching the music at important spots such as repeats, accents, key signatures, and changes of key and time and tempo and touching the instruments (fingering the notes). Please, touch with fingers, not instruments, bows, or sticks. As Jim Suduth used to say, "Absorb through the skin to the bloodstream, to the brain."

9. Teach your band to "Air Band" and string players to "Shadow Bow" with instruments in playing position. Put the brass mouthpieces on chins. Place flute lip plates to the right or left of the lips. Then use fingers, valves, slides, sticks, bows (and AIR, wind players). You can practice articulation and bowing in this way.
JUST BEFORE THE BIG DAY
1. Make a set of time cards (10, 9, 8, 7, 6, etc.) large enough that you can see them from the podium when your assistant or spouse holds them up behind the back row of your band. I use time cards to eliminate the spoken interruptions from the timekeeper which tend to distract my students.
2. Arrange for water (cold) for your group between the stage and SR room (not just a bottle for you). And you will probably want additional water for yourself after talking nonstop for ten minutes. If you forget the bottled water, walk the students by a water fountain after the stage performance.
3. Put paper clips into your coat pocket for any D. C. al Coda, etc. (These are rare in band pieces but often are in orchestra selections.)
4. Tell the ensemble what warm-up procedure they will use after the explanation at contest. I prefer not to play a new scale or note (Concert Eb instead of our usual Concert F or our Remington exercise) just because of the key of the sight reading piece. If, in your at-home practice you vary the scale before you sight read, then, by all means do that in the room.

ON THE DAY, IN THE ROOM
1. Are you wearing uniforms? If so, be “uniform.” Wear the same socks, shoes.
2. Make the setup be like at home. Adjust chairs until they are just like things are in your home rehearsal room. Don’t forget to adjust stand height.
3. Train the group to place their music under their chairs so you don’t mix it up with the sight reading music.
4. Enter the room quietly, in a businesslike manner. Remind your students to look at the judge who gives the instructions and to look at you or at their music during the study time. Perhaps let them look around the new and different sight reading room before you start. Then remind them not to look around.
5. If you teach a young group, perhaps a middle school second or third group where the large percentage of students are at this kind of contest for the first time, be sure you keep them engaged. The first row will finger along, but realize that the back row will hide behind their stands. Monitor them.
6. Tell the timpanist to tune quietly during the explanation time.
7. Speak the language of the listeners. Don’t use this time to impress the judges that you know what an anacrusis is. Don’t call a pickup that, unless you use that word regularly in your rehearsals.

THINGS YOU MUST DO IN YOUR EXPLANATION
1. Identify the pitfalls.
2. Establish all tempos and changes of tempo. Don’t just assume the group will follow you. Show them the speeds you intend to take during the general explanation. (band)
3. Look for and call to the students' attention repetition of rhythm and melodies.
4. Warn them of thin scoring, and soft, especially if thinly scored, passages.
5. Identify minor keys. Accidentals are the telltale sign.
6. If dynamic contrasts are few, exaggerate them. Thinely scored spots, especially if they are marked piano, I tend to overplay. But don’t say "Pianissimo - play out." Students might really be confused, unless you have told them prior to the contest that if only one or two instruments are playing and the marking is soft, you’ll ask them to overplay the volumes for the sake of confidence.
7. On key changes, don’t just say "add an A flat. Or C sharp" Identify the measure(s) and if you teach a young group, check their fingers.

USING YOUR TIME (Geared to Band)
1. GENERAL EXPLANATION (As stated, general info – no counting, etc.)
   1. You will have had three minutes to get the road map: keys, repeats, time changes. When you start the timed explanation discuss those things and the style and tempos you want them to play.
   2. Try to get to the end of the piece during the general explanation so that during your 3-4 minutes of being able to sing or count, you are actually doing that, explaining tricky rhythms or singing important passages.
   3. Discuss style, perhaps relating it to music you played onstage. Remind the students about phrasing, not chopping off every two bars.
   4. Let the group know who has the melody, and who has accompaniment so that they can balance to the melody.
SUMMATIVE EXPLANATION (Counting and singing on the part of the conductor are allowed.)
1. DO sing. Practice your sight singing. When the line goes up, sing up. Join your church choir. You are a musician, you should be able to sing. I finger my instrument when I sing. It helps me find pitches.
2. Learn to sing one line and clap another to demonstrate how parts fit together.
3. Vary your singing, perhaps counting on pitch, change to calling out pitch note names if the section is a soli, or say on pitch "clarinets have this" or "low brass enter here" especially if you are jumping around from part to part.
4. Don't stop early when explaining a tricky spot by saying "and so on" because many times the pitfalls are toward the end, perhaps the addition of a different or difficult rhythm.
5. Last ten seconds, return to the opening to reestablish the key and tempo.
6. After your warm-up note, if you teach band or full orchestra, have the brass empty the water from their spit valves.

DON'T FORGET
1. If you say, "Practice the fingerings to the scale in X key" give the students time to do so.
2. You know the group's strengths and weaknesses. If your flutes/1st violins never miss anything, there's no need to count things for them. (Or, there might be no profit in talking to the percussion if they'll miss it anyway.)
3. Thank your students for their hard work.

YOU HAVE CHOICES
1. You can speak in a loud voice, talking at a fast speed to get everything done in the time allotted. Or you can speak softer, in a calm voice with slower talking to instill confidence.
2. Tempos are yours to set. How slow or fast is your decision. Allegro - fast enough to be convincing in style, but not so fast that the band cannot look ahead or control technique. Avoid "tempo di Tear-Ass."
3. Orchestra teachers, should you start talking immediately to be sure you cover everything, or should you study the score a minute to find the pitfalls to make sure that you talk about the most important spots? That's your decision, (but don't wait too long if you choose that option.)

DID YOU KNOW?
1. There are not supposed to be solos in Texas UIL band sight reading music. But remember that all percussion parts are, in reality, solo parts.
2. It will help your students if you can identify courtesy accidentals as such. Even though composers may not use courtesy accidentals in their scores, the persons extracting the parts for Texas UIL are adding them. Courtesy accidentals are confusing to students. After a key change when courtesy accidentals are present for a few measures and then removed the students wonder, "Was that Ab an accidental, and now I have A natural, or were they reminders that now I have Ab?" You can certainly help your students if you can identify courtesy accidentals as such.
3. On band music the measures are numbered on your score and on the students' parts.

REMEMBER
1. Judges do watch the band during the explanation period.
2. Good tone is always going to be the most important factor.
3. Phrasing counts.
4. Intonation is important in the sight reading room too.
5. Balance to the melody.
6. Judges are looking for musical groups that read confidently, with good style, balance, and convincing changes.
7. Good bands and orchestras are flexible and respond to their conductors. They listen to themselves play and correct errors quickly.