

Warming-up your Band

by Mark Heron

Firstly let me dispel a misconception: warm-ups and exercises are NOT just for 'non-expert' players. Just because you don't hear a professional orchestra playing scales and chorales doesn't mean the players turn up at rehearsal, pick it out of the box, and are good enough that they don't need to bother. Rather, they are expected to have prepared themselves before the rehearsal - this is part of their job. In most of our bands however, this is not practical - the players have just finished work or school. Therefore, warming-up is realistically something that must take place in rehearsal time.

Sources

The sources of most of the techniques in this article are not original. I've been lucky enough to study and play under some terrific conductors, performers and educators and this routine is my personal selection from sources as diverse as John Paynter, Arnold Jacobs, Tim Reynish, Howard Snell, members of the Empire & Atlantic Brass Quintets, Pierre Thibaud, and many others, together with my own experiences from 8 years with the Nemo Brass Quintet.

Why?

Good question. The obvious answer is to get the players warmed-up, particularly in amateur groups where people might only play once or twice a week. However, this could be achieved by them tootling away by themselves for 10 minutes thus allowing you, the conductor, some extra time to learn the score. The real reason for me is more mental than physical. Any form of ensemble playing is a corporate activity. In order to blend, balance and produce a coherent musical result all members of the groups must be on the same mental wave-length.

Next time you conduct a rehearsal ask a cross-section of players what they have been doing during the previous 3 hours. Some will have been at school, others at home, some might have been asleep, others will have been sitting in front of a computer monitor for 8 hours. Somebody might even have been playing their instrument! The point is that your players will start the rehearsal in very diverse mental states.

Your task is therefore to get everybody's mindset geared towards making music together as quickly and efficiently as possible, whilst ensuring that the physical aspects are also covered.

How?

This is where it becomes more subjective. The age, experience and ability of your players should shape your routine. Having better players however, doesn't necessarily mean spending less time, in fact the opposite could be true. The better your players are, the less time you will need to spend on the nuts and bolts of putting a piece together. If they can play the dots, why not spend even more time on honing intonation and ensemble skills?

With Nemo, we would regularly spend an hour on scales, chords and hymn tunes. Admittedly we had the advantage of being able to rehearse for as many hours as we wanted, and we were lucky to be in a professional situation where rehearsal length wasn't strictly controlled to the second as it is in orchestras, but even if time is limited the benefits of this approach are proven.

Sam Pilafian, ex-tubist of Empire Brass, will sit and play basic lip slurs for 2 hours - if that's how long it takes to get them right - and not even look at the concerto or quintet programme he's playing the next day. The message is that good preparation and rehearsal doesn't have to mean trawling through the piece all the time.

Here's a brief idea of what I do with bands:

Breathing

How many of you make your band do breathing exercises? Try it - you'll be amazed at the improvement in tone quality. Allen Vizzutti reckons professionals move 14 times more air than amateurs - simply because they have to. Research shows a professional clarinetist playing a sustained 8 bar orchestral tutti at forte moves 6 litres of air, 12 for a trombone, 18 for a tuba or a flute. That's a lot of air. Why does no one practise this fundamentally important area of wind playing? Try these, it only takes 5 minutes (and it's a laugh);

§ With the metronome on 60, inhale slowly over 8 counts aiming to be at full capacity by 8, hold the breath for another 8, and exhale slowly in a controlled manner over the next 8. Repeat twice.

§ Take a deep, full breath, and then take another 5 sips of air and exhale slowly. Repeat 3 times.

§ Bend over with your face on your knees (or as close as you can get!) and inhale and exhale quickly 4 or 5 times. Stop if you feel dizzy!

Unison note

Build a concert F from the bass end. Ask the players to play, listen, and adjust if necessary. Don't spend too long on this at this stage. Getting one note in tune when everyone else is playing it is not a sign of secure intonation.

Scale work

Use your scales for intonation, ensemble, articulation, dynamics and phrasing. Start with a unison major scale in minims at a constant tempo around 76 at mezzo piano. Ensure there are no gaps between the notes, and that the articulation is clear.

Then split the band in two with half playing as before and the rest playing staccato. Good intonation on short notes is a problem, by giving the staccato players the 'crutch' of the long notes this will be improved. Then swap.

Change to a different key. Perhaps select an unusual combination - flutes and tubas is a good one. If you can get the top and bottom in tune with each other the rest will fit in much more easily. Vary the articulation - legato, tongued, bell tones, staccato, breath entries.

Ask your players to sing a scale. Persist if they are shy and make sure you sing loudly yourself. My singing is so bad that players quickly stop being self-conscious when they hear me!

Use the well known exercise starting on an F and dropping a semitone at a time returning to the F in between. Get them to sing this, and also invert it. A small added point here - explain to your players why you are doing these exercises and the specific difficulty involved. With this exercise think about what James Stamp says in his excellent *Warm-ups and Studies for Trumpet*. Most players of reasonable ability play sharp when they go upwards and flat when playing a downwards interval, i.e. they over-compensate. In doing this exercise, as they play each downwards interval ask them to think of going upwards. You can assist by moving your arm up as they go down, and vice-versa.

Play a scale in a round (see below). Divide the group into 4 sections, varying the combinations each time although it's good to start with tubas and bass wind instruments in group 4.

Do something rehearsal-specific

This is common sense, but it also lets the players see some sort of relevance, and they might even think you are smarter than you really are! Examples could be choosing scales corresponding to the key of one of the pieces you are going to rehearse, or doing scales in groups of 5 if there is a 5/8 section.

Chorales or hymn tunes

It's always worth having something like this available. The Salvation Army hymn books are excellent, and there are many sets of chorales available if you don't want to arrange your own. At this point, or in some of the later scale exercises, start to ask more of your players by varying tempi, articulation and dynamics with the baton. They must learn to respond to your gestures, and this should be more easily accomplished in scales or simple chorales than in more technically complex music. Jim Croft's 'silent' rehearsal technique could also be used to facilitate this.

General points

Focus on smaller sections within the band, getting the clarinet and saxophones to do a chorale for example. Always designate an exercise specifically for pianissimo practice, and try to rehearse crescendi and diminuendi. Above all, be imaginative - ask the band to stand up to play a scale, get them to transpose a chorale, or even have half the band transpose and the rest play as written. Turn out the lights and play a unison scale - it really focuses the ear. I've even had clarinetists standing on one leg transposing a difficult passage with their eyes closed. Everyone has their own views on psycho-babble, but if it is unexpected, innovative and well thought out it's worth trying.

At a couple of points in the process break off and re-tune. An A for the wind, B, and F for the brass (B, is better for tubas, but not for trumpets. It's also worth making sure the horns tune a good note on the B, side). Emphasise that balance and tone quality are just as important to good intonation than having the slide, mouthpiece or head joint in the right place.

Above all, continuously stress the importance of good ensemble and clear articulation. Just because a particular exercise is aimed at improving intonation doesn't mean there is an excuse for sloppy ensemble.

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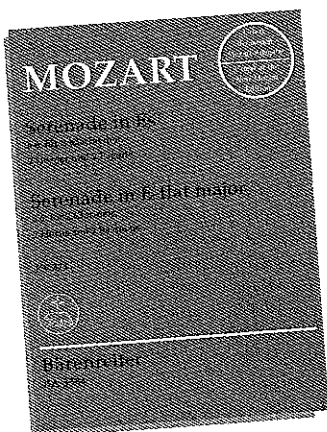


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