Defining and Realising Your Band's Ideal Tone

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Several years ago, when the William Revelli-led University of Michigan Band recordings were collected for that now famous Golden Crest record series, Clark Galehouse, president of Golden Crest marvelled at the consistency of the timbre and texture of Revelli's band over the 14-year span of the recordings in the midst of constant personnel changes from year to year [1]

We are all familiar with successful band directors at every level that seemingly shrug off 'down years' and produce consistently fine ensembles that 'really sound.' What does it take to achieve this? Many musicians believe that achieving a beautiful band tone heads the list of challenges confronting the school band director. The issues that contribute to this challenge are many. Ranging from subtle to drastic, there are constant changes in group size due to scheduling, attrition, recruitment and graduation. The effects of student leadership and variations of ability on key areas of instrumentation can affect the band's tone as well. These conditions occur with every band, from grade school ensembles through collegiate wind bands and even the professional military bands. Why is it that the most successful conductors can accept these changes and adjust accordingly while others succumb to the vagaries of the ensemble and accept the sound it gives them? What does it take to achieve consistency?

Achieving your tonal concept

The answers often lie with the conductor's concept of the band's tone production. A band cannot meet performance expectations if its conductor cannot articulate, define or otherwise establish his concept of ensemble tone. What are your sonority preferences? What quality of sound is desirable; what blend sounds best to your ears? Could you begin to describe your ideal tone in terms like homogenised, brilliant or warm?

Preference toward a particular band sound is a combination of personal taste and convention. Personal tastes are established by past influences and experiences in ensemble participation, workshop or master class experiences, listening and reading. There are many acceptable band tones in the spectrum and the act of developing your preferences is the first important step toward the long term goal: achieving consistency in timbre and texture in your band's sound. There is admittedly a degree of subjectivity in the process. What might be one's ideal band tone could need refinement from another's viewpoint.

How does a conductor get started? There are five basic components that contribute toward a band's overall tone: balance, blend, acoustics, sonority and chord voicing. These key components can be supported by several basic 'principles' that can be applied to achieve the ideal tone.

Balance principles[2]

Human ears hear higher frequency notes more efficiently and clearer than lower frequency notes. This implies:

I. For each instrument family (Brass/ Woodwind/Percussion), bass instruments will provide the foundation, followed by tenor, alto and soprano families. The analogy of the pyramid of sound is appropriate.

II. For the section: the inner parts or the third or fourth parts may oftentimes need to project more than the upper parts.

III. For the individual: A forte passage in the lowest range on the instrument often needs more presence of sound than a forte passage in the highest range.

Blend principles[3]

If you hear yourself above all others, one of three things is happening:

I. You are overpowering or over-blowing. "Never play louder than lovely."

II. You are playing with poor tone quality. Make the necessary adjustment to embouchure, breath support, posture, reed, etc.

III. You are playing out of tune. Make the necessary adjustment by extending or shortening the length of your instrument.

Acoustic principles

I. The larger the instrument and/or the further away you are from the front of the stage, the more you will have to anticipate the beat to avoid sounding 'behind.'

II. Directional instruments (trumpet, trombone) will sound louder than non-directional instruments (bassoon, clarinet).

III. Tutti crescendi will maintain balance best if softer instruments lead louder instruments in the swell (generally woodwinds first, brass next, percussion last). In diminuendi, vice versa: louder instruments should lead the softer instruments.

Sonority principles

I. The faster the tempo, the less loudly you should play; let the speed carry the intensity. Generally, a forte at *presto* is softer than a forte at andante.

II. The more people sharing a rhythm, the less loudly you should play.

III. The more people sharing the note, the less loudly you should play.

Chord voicing principle

In diatonic/homophonic music, the tones that make up the quality of the chord are generally balanced under (are softer) than the foundational chords. For example, in a C major chord, the loudest tones are the C and G (the root and fifth) because they comprise the foundation. Since the 3rd defines the chord's quality, I often balance it inside the sound of the root and fifth.

Achieving a Consistent Tone

Although the students' ages in a school band remain consistent, different players often participate each year. It will take several rehearsals to shape the group's sound to match the band a conductor hears in his or her head. Taking the time to define a band's tone to the students improves the chances of satisfaction with the product. Moreover, at this point it is important to guide students toward formulating their own ideal band tone because guiding the aural development of students will help them become more discriminating listeners. The following seven suggestions may be helpful.

1) Explain and establish goals for the band's tone. This point is one of the most crucial. Goals should be decided upon as soon as possible. A strong, agreed-upon aural image of what a band should sound like should be established with the students. Then, when a deviation is appropriate, such as an unusually bright passage, adjustments can be made within the context of the established goal.

2) Teach the students the principles of tone. All of the principles work interdependently. For example, bands usually need to learn to control the volume in general, but especially when they play in their upper ranges. Long tone exercises in octaves promote a free-flowing sound that allows students to evaluate their tone quality and intonation in the upper tessitura. They adjust to keep their individual sounds full, yet without undue brightness.

Articulations must be well defined but never to the extent that they distort the tone's beauty. Accents are normally achieved with a distinct tongue, but with more air behind the tongue on the initial impact.

If a C major chord is voiced in first inversion in woodwinds with the bass clarinets carrying the only third of the chord, use the principles of balance stated above (e.g., pyramid) to be sure the quality of the chord is appropriate. If the composition calls for a brilliant unison with the trumpets over the general band texture, then an adjustment can be made.

3) Listen to good examples. The concept of 'dark' or 'bright' sonority may have to be taught, but verbal explanations often fall short compared to aural images. Record the band and locate examples of passages where the group is approaching or has achieved your idea of bright and dark, even if for only a chord. Have your students compare and contrast the qualities. Seek out recordings of professional or collegiate bands that are worthy of emulation and have the students in your band listen and imitate the quality of last chords or excerpted passages. Be sure the students hear the music on the finest equipment affordable. Considering the abundance of fine band recordings available, an aural model may provide your students with a truly valuable non-verbal learning experience.

4) Practice for tone. Numerous warm-up books are available for teaching consistent timbre and beautiful tone production. Any chorale book, such as

Treasury of Scales[4] is useful to encourage a full, flowing chordal sound without edginess or lack of control Typically, these exercises can be done at the beginning of the rehearsal and then be reinforced as the literature is introduced Students will practice opening up their sounds within a technically easy format and then, with coaching, can be expected to transfer it to the music you intend to perform

5) Control instrumentation Defining your ideal band tone and then working with your students to realise the concept are two important steps requiring a partnership with band members But, there are also several steps the conductor must take to ensure that the desired tone is even feasible. The 'ideal sound' may be impossible to achieve without several instrumentation requirements While the conductor may need to be flexible with the size of the group from year to year, two bass clarinets, a bassoon, two tubas and two euphoniums are the minimum numbers needed in these sections in order to facilitate the desired tonal balance If a band averages 70-75 members there can be no more than 10 flutes and 10 trumpets and the clarinet section is stacked with three on the first part, 4 on the second part and five are on the third part Variations in the middle to lower brass are inevitable and easier to deal with than overpopulations in the treble winds

To some it may appear peremptory to control instrumentation, but if the goal is a first class musical experience for the students, the students as well as parents must accept the established conventions of instrumentation While enforcing these conventions may necessitate careful diplomacy, the effort can pay off in a more worthwhile experience for everyone

6) The seating of the band has to be analysed to maximise success in realising the band's ideal tone Grouping the bass voices, irrespective of whether they are brass or woodwind can boost confidence with younger ensembles Experimentation with acoustic shells and clouds, risers and upstage and backstage placement have a huge effect on the ensemble tone If there happens to be a large flute section, experiment with seating them in twos on the conductor's right, going back to the final row Start a second tier (as in orchestral violin seating) to accommodate the second flutes Brass bells straight on or from the side of the group is another variant that affects the ensemble's sound

7) Finally, choose program music that enables the ensemble to perform under the stencil of the agreed upon tone quality Not every selection qualifies, although every style of music is eventually possible Choose some music at every concert that students can breeze through technically so they can concentrate on tone production, especially at the beginning of the concert season Shelve the popular 'macho bravura' genre of band pieces until the time when all of the variables to band tone have been scrutinised and demonstrated

Putting it all together

Striving to achieve the ideal control, blend, clarity and quality that defines the 'perfect sound' begins with developing a way to communicate the concept to the ensemble and practising to attain the goal When all of these elements are addressed - establishing and explaining the goals, teaching students the principles of tone, listening to good examples, practicing for tone, controlling instrumentation, evaluating seating arrangements, and choosing music to optimise tone - students, audiences and conductors will enjoy consistent timbre - the ideal band sound

(1) Clark Galehouse. Unpaginated liner notes for The Revelli Years with the University of Michigan Symphony Band Golden Crest Records, Inc CRS-4202D, LP recording

(2) For a more complete discussion on this refer to W Francis McBeth Effective Performance of Band Music. San Antonio: Southern Music Company 1972 In this book McBeth also states that "good band pitch is a direct result of good balance."

(3) A most thorough discussion of this can be found in Edward S Lisk The Creative Director: Alternative Rehearsal Techniques Ft Lauderdale, FL: Meredith Music Publications 1991

(4) Leonard B Smith. The Treasury of Scales. Melville, NY: Belwin Mills Publications 1961

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