

# **The Interactive Rehearsal**

## **Empowering Students to Think, Listen, and Move**

Missouri Bandmasters Association  
56th Annual Convention  
Margaritaville Lake Resort  
Osage Beach, Missouri

Tuesday, June 17, 2025  
1:30–2:30 p.m.  
Windgate Hall

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Students learn most completely and most permanently when they are actively involved in rehearsal—mentally, aurally, and physically.

Can we engage a greater percentage of our students' energies for a greater percentage of the rehearsal time?

"I see the role of a rabbi or a pastor in general sort of like the role of a quarterback who throws the ball a little bit ahead of the receiver—this is, you want to make people run just a bit to catch up to the message that you offer."

– Rabbi David Wolpe, Sinai Temple, Los Angeles

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# CORE BELIEFS

- Each and every rehearsal should offer students an opportunity to be musical and expressive.
  - Accuracy alone is not enough, but accuracy is a prerequisite to expressiveness.
  - Students perform better when they understand their *shifting* melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic roles within the ensemble—and which other players have the same or complementary roles.
  - What we say and how we conduct either empowers students to think, listen, and move or discourages them from becoming invested in the rehearsal process.
  - Movement provides students powerful means to communicate with each other, reinforce musical gestures, and release physical tension.
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# LISTENING TARGETS

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|-------------------------|---|
| • Percussion            | • Complementary pitch or rhythm                 |
| • Bass voices           | • Overtones                                     |
| • People on either side | • Resonance                                     |
| • Principal player      | • Dynamic shape                                 |
| • Melody                | • Pulse underlying dynamic shapes on long notes |
| • Counter-melody        | • Fingers pressing down keys                    |
| • Fastest notes         | • How and when people breathe                   |
| • Same pitch or rhythm  |   |
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# MOVEMENT PRINCIPLES

- Informed by breath
- Informed by phrasing and line (towards and away)
- Communicative
- Fluid
- Personal

Don't just breathe in a way that makes you sound good; breathe in a way that inspires the people around you to sound better.

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# REHEARSAL TECHNIQUES

**Demand that students always make the best possible sounds, even on warm-up exercises and tuning pitches.**

- Set a high standard, determine through expert listening whether the players are meeting the standard, insist the players do better, and provide tools and information to help the players overcome any barriers to success.
- In addition to warming up their instruments, bodies, and ears, warm up their acceptable level of achievement and performance.
- It is more beneficial in the long term to wait and insist on doing it correctly than to allow (or lead) students to practice and reinforce careless or inaccurate playing. The level of demand is only as good as the thoroughness and consistency of follow-up.
- Direct students towards different instruments and timbres during the warm-up routine to develop agile listening. Encourage them to think (and listen) beyond themselves.

**Ask lots of questions—direct, leading, and/or rhetorical. Instead of allowing students to be passive participants in the rehearsal by telling them what is happening, ask them to think about and express what they believe is happening.**

- Once you and/or the students diagnose an issue, ask them to consider ways to make it better.
- Instead of telling students what *not* to do, tell them what *to* do. Use affirmative language.

**The first note prepares all other notes that follow, the breath prepares the first note, and listening and feeling the music in time prepares the breath.**

- Principal players should lead their sections in breathing, especially on internal entrances. Sometimes the conductor may need to specify on which beat players should breathe.
- A two-beat breath is usually better than a one-beat breath; a one-and-a-half-beat breath is almost always better than a half-beat breath.
- Percussionists, keyboard players, and string players (and conductors) should breathe, too!
- First notes matter. Demand that students breathe together and move air immediately through their horns.
- Students almost always sound better two or three seconds into a note—what do they do differently to sound better? Can they simply do that from the very first second?
  - ♦ Move the air *through* your horn and right *at* me (or the back of the hall).
  - ♦ Excite the air inside your horn—all the way through your horn.
  - ♦ Good tone is a party of dancing molecules, and air is the DJ. Once the air or DJ stops spinning, the party stops.
  - ♦ In order to initiate and sustain a vibrant sound, you must vibrate the air.
  - ♦ Don't just make the horn speak. Make the horn sing.

**Buzzing on mouthpieces always makes brass players sound better. Singing always makes people play better in tune. Singing with good articulation helps people play with good articulation.**

- Sing during every rehearsal, as if it were the most normal thing in the world.
- Brass players should buzz every day as part of the warm-up procedure and while rehearsing difficult technical passages.
- Demonstrate rhythm and articulation using syllables and airstream. Have students emulate every step in the sequence: singing syllables, airstream, buzzing (for brass), and playing.
- Encourage students to use a *legato* airstream, even with *staccato* notes. Practicing the airstream independent of the instrument allows them to focus on sustained breath support.

**Long notes are simply a series of short notes tied together. There is no such thing as a “held” note.**

- Long notes should usually be played softer than more active rhythms, but when it comes to the pulse of the ensemble, their stakes are higher, because they have fewer chances to contribute positively. Softer does not mean less important.

**Rhythmic pulse is the foundation of expressiveness. Dynamic shapes can be enhanced by rhythmic practice.**

- Rehearse on attack points (“bopping”) to help line up unison rhythms and reveal how contrapuntal lines interact with each other.
- Focus student listening on whoever has the pulse, keeping in mind that this can change frequently and quickly. Rehearse sections by asking students to play only when they have the pulse.
- Use students who are not playing to generate and keep the pulse for students who are playing, instead of using a percussionist or metronome.
- Rehearse long notes as a series of quarter or eighth notes (using a “dah” tongue) to keep the air moving and define dynamic shapes, especially in slow music.

**It’s more important to play together than to play with the conductor (although that’s nice, too). Listening is (almost) always more important than watching.**

- Allow the ensemble to play without a conductor as much as possible. It forces all students to take greater responsibility for maintaining the pulse, especially the principal players.
- Begin pieces with non-traditional conducting gestures, such as taking and giving a big breath or gently lifting an instrument.
- Get off the podium and join the ensemble as a player (with a real or mimed instrument).
- Encourage students to think about passing melodic and rhythmic lines between each other physically, as well as musically.
- Use principal players to model individual lines and phrases. Find something from each model to compliment and incorporate into the ensemble interpretation.

**Define which roles belong to the conductor and which belong to the ensemble. Some roles are shared, but the players are responsible for the vast majority of musical elements.**

**Every moment of a rehearsal should build and reinforce musical listening. Find new ways to listen, which may include different ensemble setups.**

- Every setup is a compromise. Different setups may work better for different pieces. Encourage students to think about alternative setups.
- Temporarily seat together students who play together. Bring percussionists into the ensemble proper.
- Turn around the front half of the ensemble so that everyone is playing inward, as opposed to forward.
- Seat students in quartets, quintets, and even random instrument combinations to promote better listening, allowing them to hear the music differently. Challenge them to listen for the same parts and sounds once they return to the traditional setup.

**Make connections between conducting gestures and playing, especially articulation and line. Show it before explaining it.**

- Sensitize students to non-verbal communication by using redundant gestures along with verbal explanations.
  - Sometimes you have to conduct the players more than the music; if a particularly soft entrance or a *diminuendo* requires a lot of breath support, a small gesture might not be as appropriate as a more generous one.
  - Different moments in the music require different degrees of energy from the conductor (and different degrees of conducting ahead of the ensemble). There are times when you need to step on the gas pedal and times when it makes just as much, if not more, sense to coast.
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# ENSEMBLE vs. CONDUCTOR RESPONSIBILITIES

<i>Musical Element</i>	<i>Conductor</i>	<i>Ensemble</i>
<b>TONE QUALITY</b>		
Characteristic Sound		
Clarity		
Consistency		
Control		
Likeness of Qualities		
Resonance		
<b>INTONATION</b>		
<b>TECHNIQUE</b>		
Articulation		
Attacks		
Facility		
Note Accuracy		
Releases		
Precision		
<b>RHYTHM</b>		
Accuracy		
Meter		
Precision		
Steadiness		
Tempo		
<b>BALANCE</b>		
<b>MUSICIANSHIP</b>		
Artistry		
Dynamics		
Energy		
Expression		
Interpretation		
Phrasing		
Style		
Dynamic Contrast		
<b>GENERAL FACTORS</b>		
Attitude		
Choice of Appropriate Literature		
Confidence		
Discipline		
Instrumentation		
Posture		
Stage Appearance		