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Tom Dodson

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Are Students Learning Music in Band?

by Tom Dodson



Photograph by David Najjab

Tom Dodson, an associate dean of the College of Fine Arts at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, raises some questions and presents some strategies that can increase your students' musical understanding.

The school band—what is it? What is its purpose? Does the band exist for the benefit of the students or do the students participate for the good of the band? Is the band's performance more important than student learning? What is the relationship between the nature and role of the school band?

Why do we ask these questions and why do we answer them as we do? Have we always answered them in the same way? Will our answers be the same tomorrow?

The Challenge for Instrumental Teachers

Questions such as these invite us to examine basic issues related to bands in educational settings. Because we are responsible for the education of young musicians, it is healthy to ask such questions. It is also appropriate to consider these issues now because the role of the school band has changed in the past and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

Why the band?

The school band is an ensemble of wind and percussion instrumentalists who are in the process of becoming musically educated. Such a definition recognizes the band as an entity—a group of individuals seeking further education. The relationship between the whole (the band) and its parts (the students) is important, as is the link between product (the performance) and process (education). The more thorough we are in guiding the process, the more likely we are to realize a successful product. It follows, therefore, that the primary purpose of the school band is to provide its members with a music education in the highest degree possible. This position parallels that found in “The Role of Bands in Education” statement of the American School Band Directors Association, which is generally accepted by band directors, administrators, and school board members.¹

What does it mean to educate band students musically? Have bands always aspired to the goal of providing members with a musical education?

An evolving concept

Historically, the band has struggled to become an accepted musical ensemble. Fortunately, it had considerable success in attaining this goal. Early American school

bands were modeled after either professional bands, which served primarily to entertain, or military bands, which fulfilled ceremonial functions. Given these models, as well as the flexibility of the band (i.e., the ability to perform both indoors and outdoors while stationary or mobile), school bands became an important part of school and community events. In order for a band to be successful, students needed to develop performance skills. Thus, teaching students the skills necessary to entertain or to function at certain events was the primary purpose of these early school band classes.

The need for a more musical role for school bands gradually emerged. The school band contest movement helped to satisfy this need by providing the motivation to strive for fine musical performances. At the same time, however, this movement solidified the teaching of performance skills as the educational component of school bands.

Subsequently, the development of a new model, the college wind ensemble, was most influential in providing a musical purpose for school bands. As a result, more original works of quality were composed for the “concert” band. While the entertainment and functional aspects of the band still remained important, the purpose of the band, now, was to teach students the skills necessary to realize competent performances of quality literature. It was implied that, through fine performances of good literature, students would understand and appreciate music. While this change provided the school band with a more musical product, the educational process still focused on developing performance skills.

The next struggle—which still

continues—was for the band to become an accepted *educational* ensemble. What were the influences? Where do we stand at present in this struggle?

A revolution?

Realizing that a good performance does not guarantee musical understanding, and recognizing that a series of momentary successes does not naturally lead to a lifelong involvement with music, members of our profession have suggested that by acquiring musical knowledge along with performance skill, students in ensembles would gain greater musical independence. The ensembles, then, would clearly be considered educational. Twenty years ago, the pages of this journal were filled with articles that provided rationales for developing “more than performance skills.” Published materials for application and implementation of this approach with school bands became available; works such as *Teaching Musicianship in the High School Band* by Joseph Labuta² and Robert Garofalo’s *Blueprint for Band—A Guide to Comprehensive Musicianship Through School Band Performance*³ are examples of these. A complete curriculum based on “comprehensive musicianship” ideals was created for, and adapted by, the state of Hawaii⁴. Although suggested approaches varied, the general goal was for the rehearsal to become a laboratory in which students would be guided to understand the music they were learning to perform. Music theory, ear training, and music history were proposed areas of study. Reports of a few research projects even supported the notion that greater musical understanding contributes to a more musical performance.

After twenty years and countless

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words, are school bands any different? If one reads all that has been printed about this movement without observing any school bands, one might assume a revolution was in progress. How many bands do you know that can claim "more than the development of performance skills" as their goal? While this movement has had some impact, it has been sporadic, and certainly it cannot claim general acceptance, to say nothing of its having the effect of a revolution. In fact, there was hardly a struggle.

The challenge

Why is greater musical understanding often not part of the curriculum of our school bands today? If a band director were selected at random to answer this question, the answer would likely be, "How do you expect me to teach all of that when it is all I can do to get the band ready for the next performance?" While most band directors agree in principle with the ideal of a comprehensive musical education for their students, implementing such an ideal is generally viewed as overwhelming. Yes, there are variables that can be controlled to allow for greater musical understanding in rehearsal settings (i.e., the number of performances and the level of difficulty of selected music), but to do so would necessitate considerable change—in student behavior, in teacher preparation and behavior, and in how the band is perceived by students, parents, and administrators. Change to this degree, by its very nature, is difficult to accept and to implement. So where do we go from here?

Musical intelligence

If it is the primary purpose of the school band to provide its members with a musical education in the highest degree possible, we must

clarify what is meant by a "musical education." To provide a basis for discussion, let us consider music to be the art of expression in sound. Such a definition implies that performance is not just important, it is the essence of music. Furthermore, it presumes that the development of performance skills is an indispensable component of the musical education of students in band. The art of expression, however, suggests that there is something more to the performance of music than merely displaying accurate psychomotor skill. Expressive performance demands that physical skill be accompanied by musical thought. To enhance the ability to perform musically, the student must develop psychomotor and cognitive skills. This is the core of a musical education in this context: Students in band learn how to play instruments *and* to know music. But what does it mean to know music? To think music?

Music is an aural art; the brain receives musical information via the ear. To process that informa-

tion is to think music. To conceptualize that information is to know music. Music is a unique mode of expression. In fact, researcher Howard Gardner theorizes that music is one of several human intelligences.⁵ The development of aural skills is essential to dealing intelligibly with music. Active listening stimulates musical thought and therefore enhances musical performance.

But cognitive activity should not be viewed as a separate component in the development of performance skills. Whereas the "more than performance skills" movement of the last twenty years has been perceived by many, rightly or wrongly, as advocating a considerable addition to the band curriculum (and reducing, to some degree, performance skill development), the purpose expressed here allows for a singular, but expanded, focus. The development of performance skills involves an integration of psychomotor and cognitive activity that aims, ultimately, at the ability to perform musically. This, then,



Photograph courtesy of Ball State University, Muncie, IN

The Challenge for Instrumental Teachers

becomes the musical education of band students.

Some guidelines

How can we guide the development of those cognitive skills that are inherent to musical performance? How can we encourage active listening in rehearsal? How can we help students to process and conceptualize musical information?

In guiding the development of these cognitive skills, we must advise students about what to listen for and about how to process musical information.

- We can encourage learning in a thinking mode by fostering systematic and analytic inquiry about tonal properties.

- We can ask students to identify, relate, compare, select, explore, classify, and compile. When we ask them to do these things, we are telling them how to think and we are suggesting an order for that thinking process.⁶

The ability to make relationships in sound is fundamental to thinking musically. Given that musical information consists primarily of relationships in pitch and duration (in our culture, at least), melody, harmony, and rhythm are important both independently and interactively. The ability to audiate (to hear inside one's head) pitch and duration events becomes a goal. Discrimination, diagnosis, and problem solving are common teacher/conductor behaviors because they are inherent in preparing for musical performance. It is both logical and desirable, therefore, to expect our students to develop similar behaviors.

Specific suggestions

Vocalization will contribute to the realization of these goals.

There is certainly nothing original about suggesting that band students sing. Those who employ this method, however, have discovered that their students play better in tune and are more successful at sight-reading. Vocalization aids the ability to audiate; in fact, singing forces one to "think music." (The young instrumentalist, unfortunately, may function without thinking musically.) With regular practice, students will discover that singing contributes greatly to their ability to perform musically.

How can we motivate students to listen actively during rehearsal? Asking questions will help. Questions serve to direct student attention toward the desired concept as well as to stimulate thought. Student responses will likely prompt further questions (which will allow for further exploration and consideration), and they will provide feedback for evaluation. If we are to expect students to identify, relate, and compare in the rehearsal setting, questioning may be the most direct and efficient way to accomplish this.

How might this translate to the rehearsal setting? Practically speaking, what are some activities that might be appropriate? What kinds of questions might be asked? Consider the following examples:

Pitch

- Have the students sing/play the keynote of the piece. Similarly, have them sing/play the root (or other members) of the chords.

- After realizing that a person or section is playing a certain chord member, challenge the students to locate others playing the same pitch as the whole band plays the chord. Besides providing pitch training, this could logically lead to improved balance.

- Ask the students to discover who is playing the melody, the counter-melody, or the harmony.

- After listening to the trumpet melody, ask the band to sing/play the melody.

- Have the students sing/play melodic intervals.

- Have the students determine whether the piece is in a major or minor key. Follow this by having them play the appropriate scale.

Rhythm and tempo

- After listening to the flute rhythm pattern, ask the rest of the band to sing/play and decipher the pattern.

- Ask who else has this rhythm pattern; have the band play the passage again for consideration.

- Ask how this rhythm pattern compares with the pattern played by the trumpets.

- Have everyone play a specific passage and challenge the students to locate a steady, metronomic part in the music. In addition to providing ear training, this exercise could help the band learn to maintain a steady tempo.

Additional learning

- Have the band play a passage and ask them to listen to the tuba section. Afterward, ask the students to describe the tuba part. Doing so might contribute to improved balance and intonation.

- Have the band begin to play at letter B and invite them to stop playing when they get to the end of the phrase.

- Ask the students to compare two phrases (for example, in terms of contour or feeling of repose). Have them also consider the implications for the performance of these two phrases.

- Have the trumpet section listen to discover how the clarinet section ends a phrase so that they may

enter in a similar fashion.

- Ask the students to analyze the tempo of a passage in which the band typically rushes. After diagnosing the problem, have the band sing/play the passage as you conduct a subdivided beat. Then, have them sing/play the passage as written while encouraging them to think in terms of the subdivision. Parts or all of this activity may be done without a conductor.

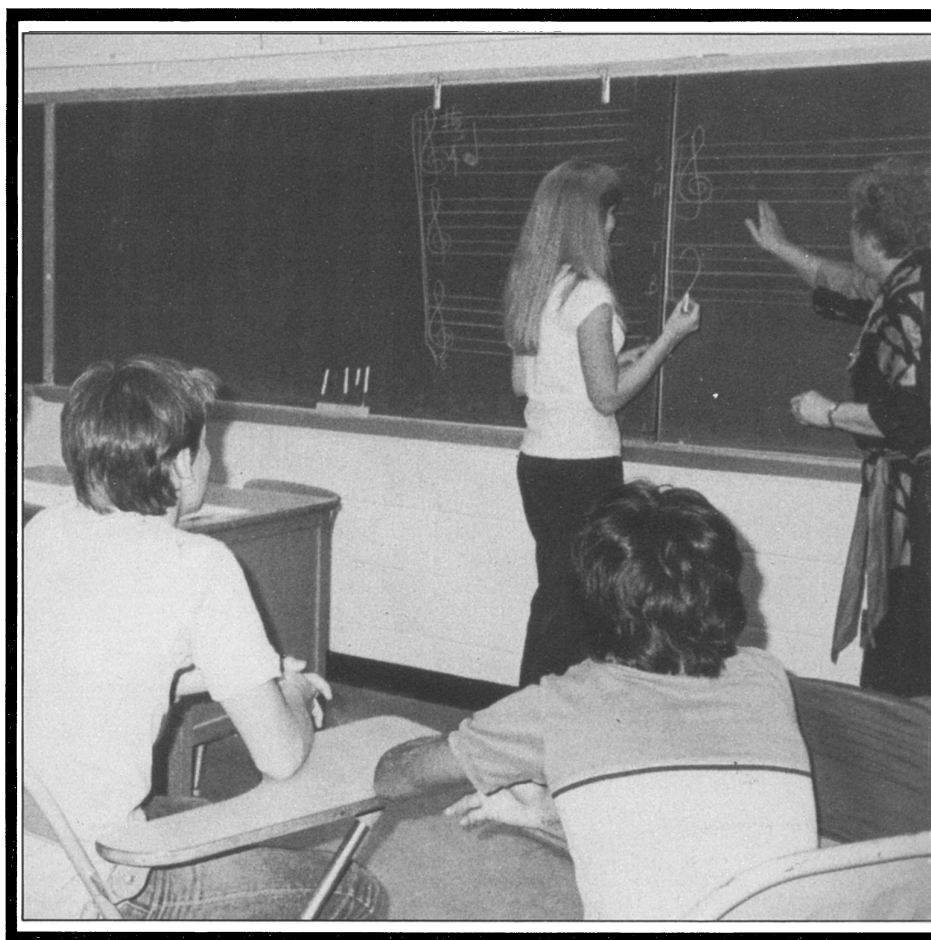
- Ask the students to compare two sections of a piece. Have them consider the implications for the performance of these two sections.

- Have two sections of the band with similar passages play separately while the rest of the band compares the articulation. Have the students select the appropriate articulation and invite them to provide supporting reasons.

All of these examples assume that greater musical understanding will result in a more musical performance. The activities, therefore, are not artificially contrived but emanate from the music being rehearsed. The teacher/conductor must accept the responsibility of assessing the students' understanding and performance in order to select passages and concepts for their consideration. The warm-up also provides an excellent opportunity to concentrate on specific aspects of performance. Using the warm-up period for mental as well as physical exercise will contribute to efficiency in the realization of musical performance.

To what benefit?

Although this approach may provide students with a musical education in the highest degree possible, what does it do for the band? First, it is reasonable to assume that an ensemble of instrumentalists, each capable of performing musically, is



likely to realize a successful collaborative musical performance. Second, knowing music allows one to transfer acquired skills and concepts to new settings. Wouldn't it be wonderful if our students were able, on their own, to apply what they just learned to similar passages in the piece? Or, even better, to similar events in another work? With greater ability to transfer musical understanding, efficiency in performance preparation becomes a third advantage. Efficiency in the rehearsal process is, of course, essential to realizing a successful product.

This approach can also be implemented gradually and, if psychomotor and cognitive skills are truly integrated in the rehearsal setting, any difficulty as a result of change will be less apparent. Although our immediate goals are developing the musical abilities of band students and achieving accurate and expressive performances by the band, the ultimate benefit may be our students' experiencing meaningful involvement with music through-

out their lives. Could we ask for more?

These ideas are, in fact, currently implemented (to some degree) in many fine band programs, and they contribute to the success of those programs. If you are searching for ways to improve the education of your band students, give some of these suggestions a try.

Notes

1. Paul R. Austin, "The Role of Bands in Education," *Journal of Band Research* 17, no. 1 (Fall 1981), 27-46.
2. Joseph A. Labuta, *Teaching Musicianship in the High School Band* (West Nyack, NY: Parker Publishing, 1972).
3. Robert Garofalo, *Blueprint for Band—A Guide to Comprehensive Musicianship Through School Band Performance* (Ft. Lauderdale, FL: Meredith Music Publications, 1976).
4. Brent Heisinger, *Comprehensive Musicianship Through Band Performance* (Menlo Park, CA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1973).
5. Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind—The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).
6. Malcolm Tait and Paul Haack, *Principles and Processes of Music Education—New Perspectives* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1984), 107-8. □