

Listening to the Band
by Elva Kay Lance
Director of Bands, Mississippi State University

Hearing is an action that is fortunately routine for most of us. But by definition, listening requires us to make a conscious effort to hear. The violinist, Nicola Benedetti says: "Listening well is a discipline, one that can become lazy unless we are reminded of the energy and focus that it requires."¹ When we are in front of our bands – are we really listening? Are the students in the ensemble really listening? Have we given our students the information they need to know *how to listen?*

With tone quality as our top priority, we should assist our students in the identification and mastery of the concepts necessary to produce a consistently resonant characteristic tone. Phillip Jones, legendary trumpeter and impresario of brass ensembles said, "If you want to be a good musician on any instrument, you must go and listen to singers and to fiddle players. From them you can learn about line, about joining up the notes in interesting ways, which we are not taught on our instruments."² As educators, we must guide our students' listening and understanding through various demonstrations, recordings, and performance opportunities.

All ensemble members should be able to assess their playing for consistency of tone in all registers of the instrument and in various dynamic settings. We should never allow students to play with an unacceptable tone quality – *especially* in the warm-up and *even* when they are performing technique exercises. We should always insist on resonant and controlled tone quality as the ensemble sound that is produced in the warm-up period sets the tone for the ensemble sound for the remainder of the rehearsal period.

Vertical alignment of the music as printed on the score is an absolute necessity for clarity. We often achieve a measure of success in this area. However, we must be careful that the focus on vertical alignment does not overshadow our attention to the horizontal line of the band, adversely affecting the expression of the music. Clarity of the vertical alignment must compliment the horizontal musical line for an expressive performance.

While bopping the notes on the marching field helps to improve rhythmic inaccuracies and aides our students' awareness of precision, we must not allow this shortened tone or overblown attack to become a characteristic of the tonal concept of our ensemble. Producing a resonant tone from the individual players, the sections, the different choirs, and the full ensemble should always be our top priority.

The acoustical properties of the rehearsal space may also contribute adversely to our critical listening of our ensembles. A block wall classroom with limited or very little acoustical treatment often results in a very vibrant rehearsal space. In our effort to align the band vertically and improve precision, perhaps we have allowed our initial articulation to become too explosive and our notes too short, often interrupting the shape and flow of the musical line.

In *Effective Performance of Band Music*, composer Francis McBeth devoted a complete chapter to the responses from composers and conductors to inquiries regarding articulation markings. James Neilson, long time Director of Education for the G. Leblanc Corporation, said "the appearance of articulated notes must be controlled carefully. For herein lies a conductor's success in achieving stylistic authority. Like a nova in the heavens, some accented notes burst forth suddenly with glaring brightness. Others steal on the scene gently, like stars dim in a distant sky. Some articulations march across silence with

measured tread, the space between the notes controlled as rigidly as are the notes themselves... If a nova-like entrance should be golden-hued, what sonorities and timbres should dominate? Certainly not those of shrill soprano-voiced instruments.”³

Overplaying or harshness of the left edge of the note is problematic for all wind voices. Certainly there are musical settings that call for an accent or emphasized attack. The interpretation of the accent should be determined by the style and tempo of the piece. All accents are not to be short and separated. Some accents just indicate stress. The interpretation and performance practice of the accent is of particular concern for the bell-front brass. Accents seem to be often played as a *forte-piano* and often out of character with the style of the piece. Careful interpretation and matching of articulations by the ensemble players should result in a musical line free of unnecessary interruption and a performance that gives attention to the ebb and flow of the phrase.

As educators, we frequently assess our students’ knowledge of the academic definition of the markings dealing with expression. In addition to developing this academic understanding, we must then provide opportunity to explore specific application examples. Devoting a small segment of the warm-up to varied applications of the expressive markings in music will help us make great strides in developing comprehensive musicians who are able to make mature musical decisions.

As we strive for an expressive musical line, we must first establish the desired rise and fall of the musical phrase. Then we must give our careful attention to the harmonic and rhythmic voices, insisting that they support the musical phrase idea with similar intensity and understanding. Students should develop listening skills that help them identify their role in the ensemble, i.e. melody, countermelody, harmony, rhythmic accompaniment, harmonic rhythmic accompaniment, etc. As the sustained harmonic voices exit and re-enter in lyrical playing, they should re-enter as a part of the existing sound, careful not to overplay their entrance. Improving the listening awareness of the parts that make up the whole and giving attention to appropriate performance practices of these different musical roles will result in ensemble members with increased sensitivity to musical details.

As we devote careful attention to the horizontal musical line, it is desirable to give added attention to the end of the musical phrase being careful not to clip the ends of the phrase. Note lengths morph over time and typically become shorter, particularly at the ends of the phrases or preceding a breath, and often without our notice. Identification of all transitions and careful attention to the phrasing in these transitions will also improve the musicality of our performance.

Interpretation of the color impact is also important in developing an expressive ensemble performance. The impact (*sforzando*, *fp*, *fz*, etc.) should be in context of the style and dynamics of the musical passage. Typically, these impact moments should only be expressed one dynamic level louder than the existing dynamic. (Ex. If the line is marked *mezzo piano* then the application of an *sforzando* would typically be *mezzo forte*.) This marking is frequently over-played.

Just as we use changes in volume with the human voice to help convey our message, any dynamic changes from the ensemble should enhance the musical line and should always be in context with the character of the piece. We frequently have a tendency to overplay the crescendos. A crescendo - diminuendo of short duration typically should be accomplished by a slight swell and should move to only one dynamic level louder. Careful monitoring of the pacing of the longer crescendo is necessary to maintain good ensemble balance in an expressive performance. The percussion (particularly the suspended cymbal) often arrives at the peak of the crescendo too early.

Young bands often perform music that utilizes block scoring with a large number of voices sharing the same line. It is the responsibility of the conductor to develop a clear concept of the desired ensemble sonority and to assign appropriate dynamic levels that mix the tonal colors into a well-balanced and sonorous sound. As the orchestration of a line changes, i.e. more voices added or removed, adjustments should be made in the volume of the individual players. If all of the upper woodwind voices and the trumpets have a unison/octave line at a *forte* dynamic level, then individual playing volume should be adjusted to maintain good ensemble balance. If all voices in the winds and all percussion have the same rhythmic figure at the end of a piece or section, individual playing volume should be adjusted so that the unison figure is not overstated. The ensemble should also guard against the age-old problem of allowing volume changes to affect the tempo (rushing as we play louder and dragging as we play softer.)

In order for our students to develop proficiency at making appropriate pitch adjustments as they play, it is essential that all wind players develop an intonation chart to assist with awareness of pitch tendencies. Once that knowledge is in place, students must then be given information about *how* to make appropriate adjustments to improve their pitch level. Then we must assist our students with developing an awareness of how volume affects their intonation. As a general rule, the flute pitch will push sharper as they play louder and the clarinet pitch will flatten as their volume increases. During a diminuendo and in pianissimo playing, brass players will often tense the embouchure (pinch) causing the pitch to sharpen. If students are aware of the inherent pitch tendencies in their playing and of the impact of various dynamic settings, they can proceed to adjust their tuning as they play. Otherwise, they must wait for us to give them instructions – “push in, pull out, etc.”

As educators, one of our goals is to develop comprehensive musicians who have a passion for and an understanding of the skills required to be an expressive musician. Developing listening awareness is an essential element of this musical journey. Whether in our noisy world or in our ensemble setting, to be able to really listen is a challenge for us all and requires skill, practice and patience.

¹Walker, Timothy. *Understanding and Developing Listening*. Keynote Address. Incorporated Society of Musicians. May, 2010.

²Cichowiz, Vincent. “*Phillip Jones, The Prince of Brass.*” *The Instrumentalist Conductor’s Anthology*. Vol. 2. Second Edition. (p. 1009-1014) Northfield, Illinois: The Instrumentalist Company. 1993.

³McBeth, W. Francis. *Effective Performance of Band Music*. San Antonio, Texas: Southern Music Company. 1972.