

Connecting our Students to Meaningful Music Making by Travis J. Weller

Band rehearsals and lessons have restarted for some of us in the shadow of the COVID Pandemic, albeit cautiously and in ways that many of us have never imagined. While it looks different from our ideal situation, it is vital that directors provide students with a sense of familiarity and personal satisfaction in music making that has been missing. Large ensemble experiences have hurdles and barriers that are difficult to navigate in the current state, and virtual ensembles may not be a practical option for all directors and students.

Providing students with individual and group experiences that enhance their playing is a vital recovery step for our band programs around the world. Whether at socially distanced in person sessions or across a Zoom call and using Flipgrid, there are certainly options that can be utilized so students do not lose their connection to music. Scales, composition, and chamber ensembles are but three options that might be valuable activities in which students can be engaged and rediscover their personal connection to music.

Many directors use scales in lessons and rehearsals. When working on scales, students can focus on developing their tone and intonation (using a drone), moving in time (using a metronome) and technique and touch (articulation, expression, and playing with a sense of phrasing, thinking horizontally over the scale). Scales let students speak the language of the music. Students can also be asked to delve into relative minors, modes, and chromatic scales. To further push their work in this area, directors could develop a list of melodies and ask students to be able to play them in as many different keys as possible. This list could serve a very functional purpose for a student by utilizing music that is familiar such as *America the Beautiful*, *Amazing Grace*, and *Happy Birthday*. The list can incorporate many different styles, cultures, meters, and tonalities, and certainly students could have the option of selecting several songs to be included on the list.

Another activity for students to utilize during this time might be composition. Some directors have moments of trepidation about starting a composition unit with their students, and I would encourage those people to trust their inner musician. As directors and musical role models to those students, we have more than enough knowledge and skill to guide our students. An initial activity that can connect to the previous activity is to ask students to write a harmony line or a counter melody that could be played over one of the melodies they were asked to learn in all 12 keys. Students could write an 8-measure melody in a key of their choosing in 4/4 time, and use rhythmic units appropriate to the students current ability level (e.g. 6th grade band students would use half notes through pairs of eighth notes). The important aspect of any beginning composition exercise for a younger musician is to provide guidelines under which they can write. A word of caution to directors: once those ideas start to develop, creative students will find a way to write around the guidelines and create some amazing sounds that do not explicitly break the rules!

Finally, as a capstone activity that could incorporate each of the two previous activities are chamber group and small ensemble performances. Traditional groups (e.g. Woodwind Quintets, Brass Quintets) have their place and value for band programs. However, it is perfectly legitimate for directors to be creative in forming small ensembles that connect students and allow them to perform music. Whether they are like or different instruments in each group makes no difference. Our students want to make music in some format with other students. The group I conduct at

Messiah University has been divided into three different pods and we are rehearsing Terpsichorean Dances by Jodie Blackshaw with 23 players, Meditation on Amen by Roger Zare (a Flex Band work) with 21 players, and Tico Tico arranged by David Marlatt (for flexible woodwind & percussion) with 14 players.

The options made available for Flexible Instrumentation over the past few months (are tremendous) and provides one such option. Additionally, students could potentially create their own setting of a piece by composing parts for their peers and then explore options to record it. I have heard many directors voice concern about learning the technology to produce a virtual ensemble and the intricacies that are involved. I would address the apprehensions by reminding all directors that sometimes it is okay to turn some of the smaller details over to students and allowing them to take over production. Even developing the project into a media recording that can be shared could be part of the assignment that the students take ownership.

Creative solutions seem to be part of the unofficial skill set that band directors develop. We certainly do not like being told what we cannot do or what obstacle we cannot overcome. Every step forward that we can take with our students towards a meaningful music experience feels like a win this fall. I hope these suggestions generate some additional ideas and serve as inspiration for the Brothers and Sisters of Phi Beta Mu as we seek to connect and reignite the excitement and love of music within our students.

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