

Choosing Quality Literature

by Roland Sandoval, Texas Bandmasters Association President Elect, 2019-2021

Learning and growing as a teacher is a never-ending journey. As a musician I have been “banding” since 6th grade. I sat in rehearsals, observing, doing, practicing, performing and eventually studying the art form to earn a degree. In higher education I realized I was entering the IKEA of music study... musical nuts, bolts and parts everywhere that I had to figure out how to put together. All this with the idea of giving back so a student like I was can have music in their life but also perform at the highest level. Entering a classroom with all that experience and knowledge is just the beginning. It takes me back to that IKEA analogy. I may finally have that piece of furniture built but now I realize I need accessories and more furniture to complete the room. My project was not finished. It was just beginning. I also needed some unique tools to build everything. Some of the tools I already had, some came with my package and others I just had to invest more in to complete my project. Your tools for your students is that never-ending journey of learning so you can complete that musical project all can be proud of.

In our state we have tremendous organizations, leaders, mentors and teachers that are willing to share their knowledge so we can in turn give back to our very own students. The Texas Bandmasters Association Convention is a wonderful opportunity for you to find those unique tools to build something special for your band community. As I look back at the thirty years of attendance and learning I wanted to share just a few things I learned at the TBA convention attending clinics, concerts, and talking shop. Granted, many of these concepts weren't new to me just at the convention. It's like watching late night infomercials and seeing a tool like the one you already have but this new one is going to make the job so much easier and efficient. Bottom line, I bought a lot of NEW TOOLS at TBA! Here are just a few tools you can add to your toolbox:

IMPROVE PRECISION BY DEVELOPING A SYSTEM FOR ATTACKS, SUSTAINS AND RELEASES. I learned from a band director at a South Texas school we must teach the band in diverse ways to uniformly take a breath, syllables to use for attacks and how to stop air for exact releases professionally. In sustain sounds keep the vowel sound the same and teach with a sizzle for understanding steady air speed. Do exercises that work a 4, 8, 12, and 16 count note lengths in fundamentals then apply to music. Work those sustain sounds in various dynamic levels so when applied to music there are no new experiences physically with long tones. Use concepts like bopping and adding subdivision to long tones to improve alignment and precision.

IMPROVE STYLE. Playing with proper style asked by the composer and or reflected by the conductor should be guided by a simple system of articulation. I observed one of many demonstration groups use vocalization and develop a vocabulary for their band when they see a musical marking. For example, if they see a “-” use DOO, “>” use DAH, “^ or .” use DIH and so on but stick to it. Students should be able to explain simple terms like legato, marcato, and staccato and what they will do musically/physically to demonstrate those concepts. Work all fundamentals in various styles. So do a chorale one time smooth and connected and then immediately play it with accents. Change style on your scales like ascending staccato and descending legato. Make style second nature.

IMPROVE INTONATION. From 6th grade a student must learn to listen, evaluate and most importantly adjust correctly. A past Texas Bandmaster of the Year explained how to teach critical listening and have students start to make the intonation decision based on their ears and not just a tuner. Teach the characteristic of each instrument and learn all the alternate fingerings to adjust. Know how to teach manipulation of pitch with the embouchure, oral cavity, breath support, and direction of air column on every instrument. Understand the chord tone roles of the root, 3rd and 5th in all types of chords and how to adjust. Seek technology that reinforces ear training and match pitch with an accurate source.

IMPROVE INDIVIDUAL AND ENSEMBLE TONE QUALITY. Understand the fantastic equipment (mouthpieces, reeds, mallets, brands) being used by professionals and outstanding musical organizations that can help produce quality characteristic tone qualities on each instrument. Just walk the exhibit hall to experience first-hand. Ensemble tone quality is also impacted by dynamics so teach a simple approach to dynamics...especially with young bands. Teach "MF" as normal, "P" as a whisper that can still be heard and "F/FF" as full and urgent. Understand the classic pyramid of sound and find fundamentals that are built around this concept of bottom to top. Have students listen to recordings of the top professionals on their instruments and great wind band recordings as assignments. This idea came from a past honor band winner.

IMPROVE PHRASING. A TBA featured clinician reinforced having students mark every breathing place. Apply staggered breathing between stand partners for long musical sentences using different colors. Use conducting techniques that fit the established phrase pattern. Seek ways to shape each phrase by creating peaks and valleys or as simple as following the contour of the line. Give special attention to the full value of sustained notes at phrase endings. Sizzle the phrases in one breath and once again seek fundamentals that are similar in phrase lengths in the works you are performing.

MARCHING BAND. I spent my entire career teaching marching band. NEVER did I think when I started that old man me would be teaching plies, Ronde de Jambes, or a full cardio stretch routine to train a musical athlete. At TBA I witnessed state champions at every level teach me how to do those marching fundamentals, warm ups, rehearsal techniques for drill learning and yes...even a dance routine to teach my band for movement. I got to see the best in our nation demonstrate a fantastic guard and percussion program and everything from designing to budgets.

For an investment in yourself you will continue to learn and grow as an educator. Keep building. Your tools will be shiny and new and help you be a master carpenter of music and your musical projects a source of pride and excellence for your community. I am honored to serve the Texas Bandmasters Association. Join us in July. Bring your family along and make this an annual journey to beautiful San Antonio. My best to you as you finish another school year and the wonderful work we have making music!