

Good Musicianship and Ensemble Traits for Band Members

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These statements pay tribute to the mentors and teachers I have had over the years, plus good friends and colleagues I observed.

There are scientific and mathematical elements in the structure of music that are static, but the art that lies within music requires a sense of judgment to determine what is in good taste. It is this subjective part of music that shows it to be a folk art, passed down from generation to generation. Rely on the wisdom of your musical elders and mentors to define your personal sense of musical taste.

Style

A note followed by a rest is longer than a note followed by a note.
(The musical taper.)

Legato notes touch.

Staccato notes are half value and half volume.

Staccato notes are lifted. Everyone thinks “short,” but not everyone remembers staccato should also be “light.” Play staccati $\frac{1}{2}$ dynamic softer than marked.

“The wind staccato is analogous to the string pizzicato and both, in turn, are related to laughter.” David McGill, principal bassoon, Chicago Symphony in “Sound in Motion.”

Marcato: ^ accents are half value and twice volume.

Marcato notes have added energy (not added tongue, especially the younger the player) at the front of the note. Marcato notes are immediately lifted with the ^ “housetop” marking

Marcato: > accents taper, but touch (with notable exceptions).

The > accent should probably have more length than the ^, especially if both are used within the same piece, and especially if written in the last 70 years. In orchestral music and band overtures, > accents should probably not be spaced. March or fanfare style dictates that > accents are spaced, so be on the lookout for expressions such as “alla marcia,” “marziale,” etc. When > accents are not immediately lifted, define and unify the shape (length) of the taper. (e.g. “These quarter notes are 75% value and taper equally through that 75%.”)

Referring to a >, Pablo Casals said “A strong accent must have a diminuendo: then it is more powerful and more natural.” David Blum, “Pablo Casals and the Art of Interpretation.”

In tempi of about $\downarrow = 120$ or faster, tongue the quadruple subdivision (sixteenths) legato, even if they are marked staccato, and play $\frac{1}{2}$ dynamic softer—it will sound “light” in character and not choppy. I finally found an author who says this: “...think of playing long notes when tonguing extremely fast passages—even if the notes are marked staccato.” David McGill, principal bassoon, Chicago Symphony in “Sound in Motion.”

Articulation

Dooh tongue.

If one starts beginner classes using a “dooh” syllable, consider using “tooh” for flutists.

Faces still.

Young players should end all sounds without tongue (“dooh,” not “doot.”)

Lift the two-slurs.

In rhythmic music involving slurred note values less than a beat, lift the last note of the slurred grouping.

For good slurs, “glue” one note to the next; think of the air moving between the notes.

Never say “attack.”

Avoid using the word “attack” to talk about the start of the note. Use “front,” “start,” “beginning” or any other word than refers to the commencement of the note.

Never say “cut-off.”

In the same vein of thought, you don’t really want a person to “cut off” sound, do you? Use “release” or “end of the sound.”

Note endings

Simply put, notes can have two different kind of endings: the tapered (“feathered”) release that can happen before a rest or phrase ending, or the dramatic (“block” or “square”) ending: think of the last note of 1812!

Legato notes and most > accented notes either touch the next note or they touch the rest that follows.

Keep the body still (especially the face) at the end of a note. Think “follow through” after a note ends like an athlete follows through when releasing a ball.

Intonation

Get rid of the waves.

Tune down.

The overtones of the lower instruments must be matched by higher sounds.

Always assume you need to adjust.

Tuning can change even during the course of a piece, due to temperature and other “player factors.” Never stay adamantly where you are set if you hear waves.

When unsure which way you are out of tune, lip down and lip up until the waves stop.

Humans can tolerate a greater degree of sharpness than flatness—most humans cannot tolerate even a little bit of flatness.

Melodies are best played in Equal Temperament and sustained chords are best played in Just Intonation.

In held major chords, raise the fifth 2 cents and lower the third 14 cents.

In held minor chords, raise the fifth 2 cents and raise the third 16 cents.

(There are charts that show chords beyond these two, but this is the starting place.)

Musicianship and Ensemble Skills

Unify.

Ensemble is French for “together.” Together, we are constantly unifying all elements of music when playing in ensemble. What do we unify? Time, style, dynamic volume and dynamic contour, phrasing, and every other element encountered in the work.

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The art, music and architecture of the Western Civilization are all built on the arch. In the music of the Western Civilization, most phrases rise and fall in volume. This can be a stress-release phrase or simply following the melodic contour.

4 leads to 1.

Barlines visually hamper us—more often the last note(s) in a bar need(s) to lead across to the next downbeat.

Low leaves last.

When a held chord is released (especially in quiet music) high sounds leave immediately, middle sounds leave “on time” and low sounds leave last. The amount of time between the early and late release described here is almost imperceptible.

Stay still at the end of the release.

Give it time to resonate.

Be part of the music in every way.

In slow, quiet music, if your part ends, bring your instrument down slowly, in the character of the music. Also, bring your instrument up slowly in music of that style.

The breath is part of the music that follows.

Always breathe in rhythm, and if possible even breathe in style.

Never play louder than a good sound; never play softer than a good sound.

Be able to sing your part accurately.

In lyrical music with slurred running notes, good musicians often hold the first note imperceptibly longer.

Melody should be predominant. Long notes and repeated figures are usually background.

Bring out chromatic lines.

Bring out moving parts.

Sequences should usually crescendo.

An anacrusis (pick-up note) needs more air to define and project it and to lead it into its phrase.

The lower note of an upward leap should be energized so the higher pitch can naturally float out of it.

Descending passages can get lost in the texture of the music: crescendo to define and project these lines.

Higher notes in a passage can leap out of the texture: control the volume of these.

Grace notes are ornaments and should be noticed. Tongue the start of a grace note, even when edited under a slur. Casals, in Blum: "...the first note of an ornament must receive an accent; otherwise it is lost!"

Style up

Principal players (1st parts) define style, section follows.

Vibrato waves should be faster when the music is either higher (in range) or louder and softer when the music is lower (in range) or softer.

Wind instruments should not use much (or any) vibrato when playing in ensemble passages (tutti and unison). Double reeds may use a bit, and flutes, even less than that. No one else should use it in ensemble unless you have a solo.

"The first step is to compare your line with the bass line, if you are not already the bass. Then check the other lines to see how they interact with yours. However, the bass line is preeminent, having the greatest effect upon phrasing because of its innate harmonic weight." David McGill

Only by listening to great performers (live when possible, but also on recordings) can a person begin to develop a sense of the consensus of the world community of music.

Listening to great artists teaches us that there are many common points of conventional wisdom in playing music artistically while individuality can still be heard.

Most players play “mf” “f” and “ff” too close to the same volume—be sure you define a difference.

Avoid letting soft music slow down.

Short notes surrounded by longer notes need more air to define and project them. In a note to the singers, just before the premiere of “The Ring,” Wagner wrote: “The big notes come of themselves; it is the little notes that require attention...” *quoted in Blum.*

Rhythm

Subdivide.

Subdivide to the smallest practical unit for accuracy in rhythmic music and for accuracy in slower music.

Use subdivision in passages with ritardandi to slow down in an even manner.

Do the math.

Use accurate math in rhythms. Very noticeable in rhythms with a ratio of 3:1 (e.g., dotted-eighth and sixteenth).

You have to step on the escalator the speed it is already going.

If you enter music in which a pulse has already been established, internalize it before your entrance to avoid entering late or dragging.

Balance

Balance down

Listen for lower sounds to provide the foundation for balance. We perceive high sounds more easily than low, so the higher sound have to be careful not to dominate.

Balance triangle

The standard balance triangle (more sound on the bass, less sound on top) applies in chordal situations, and to a smaller degree, within choirs of sound (conical brass, cylindrical brass, sax family, clarinet family) or individual sections.

Corollary: in younger band (middle school) it is more critical to balance larger numbers on lower parts in divided sections. For example, in a MS clarinet section, one might balance 2 1sts to 4 2nds and 6 3rds. In a more advanced HS or university band, the balance may be more like 2 1sts, 2 2nds and 3 3rds. Older students can control volume of upper register to a greater degree and can boost a lower part more easily.

Balance to brass

The brass section is the backbone in the literature for the modern full concert band. “Listen down” is still good advice, but woodwinds must also listen across to brass parts

relative to their parts (low woodwinds listen to tuba, alto sax listens to horns, etc.). This is applicable, of course, in portions of a piece scored full tutti band.

Listen to your trio

Be sure you can match tonal color and energy to the players on either side of you.

Special note on “blend”

The word “blend” is often used in tandem with advice to balance: “balance and blend”. Some educators teach “hide your sound in another instruments sound.” **I do not believe in this concept. I do not want anyone “hiding” the specific tone quality peculiar to his/her instrument into another.** It is my belief that when most people say “blend” they are wanting two sections (e.g., saxes and horns) to use a similar tonal color and energy. Personally, I do not want saxes to “hide” the color of the saxophone sound: a saxophone should sound like a saxophone. What I think these people want is for the saxes to let the brass sound dominate (*balance to brass*) and unify the color and tonal energy (not to mention articulation, intonation, etc.) of the line.

On rare and wonderful occasions, a composer will combine colors of instruments into a single line, creating a new tonal color.

Example 1: In Symphony No. 3 by Gustav Mahler, in the 6th movement, there is a beautiful theme that occurs at rehearsal 11, in which Mahler skillfully uses one flute, one oboe and one clarinet in unison. This is a masterful *combination color*: not a “blend,” by hiding one of those sounds into another, but the creation of an entirely new sound, a “fluobinet,” if you will, by having the proper unification of the three sounds into one.

Example 2: In Ravel’s “Bolero,” there is a masterful scoring that occurs where the melody is played by horn, overlaid with two piccolos, one at the 12th above (3rd partial of the harmonic series) and the other 2 octaves and a M3 above (5th partial of the harmonic series). In a good orchestra, with a conductor who understands what Ravel was doing with this “odd” scoring,” the piccolos play with no vibrato and softer than the horn, becoming overtones to the horn’s line. When played correctly, it sounds like an organ!

Harmony

V goes to I (i), and V7 goes to I (i) more strongly. Likewise, ii goes to V and ii7 goes to V more strongly. What you learned in theory about chord progressions applies to tonal music!

In tonal music in a major key, if you have an accidental, the harmony has been altered in a way that causes tension. (Secondary dominants, 7th chords, augmented 6th chords, etc. all have accidentals in them.)

If a piece looks like it is in a minor key, it might be modal. There must be a V-i progression to define a minor tonal center. If there is not a V-i you do not have a minor tonality, you have a modal piece. Modes are much older than the major-minor system. The harmonic rhythm of modal music is not predicated on the same progressions we are used to in music of the Common Practice period. If the setting of a modal folk song or dance is harmonized with diatonic chords, the progressions follow the format of the Common Practice period.