

# Miscellaneous Musings of a Retired Band Director

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# Beginning Band Recommendations

## Recruiting

### 1. Administer musical aptitude test.

- a. Use for guidance to recruit students with strong musical aptitude
- b. Use as a guide for instrument selection
- c. Should be done in prior year or several weeks prior to recruiting meetings.
- d. If possible, invite the high school band to play a few tunes that the young students will enjoy. This will help to establish the link to the overall program and remove the thought process that beginning an instrument is an annual process – music should be thought of as a lifetime pursuit. However, do not reject students who are unwilling to accept that commitment. Rather, give every student the opportunity to be immersed in music as something they will want to do. Your job as a band director is to make these students want to succeed.

### 2. Plan on doing the recruiting yourself

- a. If a music store is involved, be sure that you are the one doing the recruiting, not the salesman. (You do not want to give the impression that you are helping to sell instruments, but rather building a band.
- b. Arrange for tryout instruments. (be sure to check on your school systems requirements for inviting a music store to help with the recruiting process). You may need to explain the need to have a store representative present for the convenience of the parents and that having a local reliable music store available to provide high quality repair service in a timely fashion.
- c. Provide sign up sheets with appointment times for a session with the student and their parent(s). Discuss the options for these meetings during the school day with your principal. Be sure to provide both daytime and evening hours.
- d. Encourage parents NOT to purchase an instrument prior to the recruiting meeting. Advise them that it is certainly permissible to use Aunt Suzie's clarinet or Little Bobby's trumpet since he bought the horn and then did not continue. Advise them that if they choose an instrument that they have purchased from another source that you will be happy to look it over to determine its readiness for use. Explain that some aspects of playing an instrument require some effort and that effort increases when the instrument is not functioning properly. Check with your music store representative to be sure they will provide quick repair service in a timely manner and a reasonable cost. If they do not offer repairs, why are they the store you are recommending?

- e. Be prepared for students making changes after the recruiting session. If you decide that Tommy should be playing trombone instead of drums due to his aptitude test scores and his tryout on the instruments, Tommy may tell his parents that he has wanted to play drums since he was a toddler and he will not be in band if he cannot have what he wants. Give the student a chance to be what he wants. Perhaps later he may develop an interest in the instrument he is best for.
  - f. Bottom line is that you want to incorporate as many students into the band program as possible. Your ability to maintain and improve your band program lies in the number of parents, teachers, administrators and students see the program's value. If you are content with continually diminishing numbers, be prepared to see your program decline into a curricular bump in the road instead of becoming the jewel of the school system. In this way, requesting support and financing to improve will be much easier and more likely to succeed.
- 3. Other items related to recruiting**
- a. When should students begin to study musical instruments? This is probably already established in your school system and needs to be verified with your administrator. If you are asked for input as to when the students should be given the opportunity, be sure to have a ready answer. This answer should be based on circumstances unique to your school situation. The best possible situations may vary between 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades, but may well depend on how much access you will have to your students. Will the students be scheduled for a band class or pulled out of other classes? If the former, try to work in some time to meet with like instruments if at all possible to focus on problems unique to their instrument. If the latter, try to establish a time in the schedule to bring all the students together. This will help establish being in the band as something good that many students are doing together and begin to establish esprit de corps.
  - b. Be sure to record contact information for all students including parents mailing address and phone number and email address if possible. This will allow you to establish a means of communication with them to enlist their help in the process of learning to play their instrument. These can be in the form of a newsletter with hints (try to buy a music stand, schedule practice sessions at home to fit the family schedule and establish regular practice commitments, etc. IF your school has a functional website, be sure to maintain the band pages and include calendar items helpful hints, and musical accompaniments to the students method book.

#### 4. Choosing the Band Method books

- a. Be sure to carefully evaluate the band method you will be using for your beginners. There are many items to consider:
  - i. Is the book attractive for your students? Does it have illustrations to assist with embouchure, fingerings, hand positions, posture? Are there illustrations labeling the parts of the instrument and giving instruction in assembling the instrument safely and securely? Is it something that will hold the student's interest? (more people will buy USA TODAY than the WALL STREET JOURNAL because of its user friendly appearance).
  - ii. Is it put together well enough to survive a year of student use? Remember that the students will want to find the easiest way to carry all of their gear and the method book will probably be rolled into a form that fits inside the case.
  - iii. Are the musical exercises easy to read and interpret? These exercises should be large enough to read easily but not so large that it looks like a "Dr. Seuss teaches Bassoon".
  - iv. Is there good use of color and illustrations to help the students to learn musical terms or fingerings?
  - v. Is the material presented in a logical order to offer new information in a simple logical order to allow them to build their knowledge slowly and steadily?
  - vi. Are the exercises given appropriate names or just numbers? The student will respond to the named exercises more favorably than simply the number.
  - vii. ***DOES THE BOOK START EACH INSTRUMENT ON THE BEST NOTE FOR EACH INSTRUMENT?***
    1. I prefer trumpets starting on second line G rather than low C, and similarly trombones starting on fourth line F rather than low Bb. This allows them to begin the process of buzzing the embouchure rather than puckering and blowing. Another option is the bottom line E for the trumpet and fourth line D for trombone. These may be more practical in a mixed instrument session.
    2. In my opinion, Clarinets should not start on second line G because the student will never be able to hold the instrument while trying to play the note. The more appropriate first note is bottom line E. This allows the top hand to hold on the open hole in the back and the top hole on the front of the instrument. Coupled with the thumb rest, this is a much more secure grip. Similar issues are prevalent with flute and saxophone. Again, choose the method that you feel will allow the student to experience success with the first

note without dropping their instrument and then easily move to the next several notes. Try to find a method that leads quickly to a recognizable tune for the students. Mary Had A Little Lamb needs only concert D, C and Bb. This can be done in the first week's lesson and should provide a strong sense of accomplishment for the students.

- viii. Does the method book provide opportunities for group exercises or performances? Does it provide interesting percussion parts?
- ix. Is a CD or digital music version of accompaniments for the exercises available? I highly recommend this. Once the students are playing the exercises at least moderately well, introduce the recorded accompaniment. The lights you see come on in their eyes, the improved posture, and the exuberant tapping of their feet will make you feel you are not a band director but a magician! These recordings will give the students the correct pitches (making it easier for brass players to find the right slot, and improve rhythm and tempo as well.

#### 5. Establishing parameters for success.

- a. When you first meet the parents, stress the importance of not missing a band lesson, particularly if you see the students only once or twice weekly. Try to allow some time for make up lessons if the students miss. This can also be stressed in a newsletter or informational email to parents. You may also want to assemble a help sheet with the important information about what you expect of the students at home (regular practice time, 30 minutes per day, etc.)
- b. Be sure to include as part of the first lesson information on securely assembling the instrument. Be sure that trumpet students know it is not good to pop the mouthpiece because it may get stuck. Be sure to let them know that if it ever does get stuck – **BRING IT TO YOU ASAP** and **DO NOT USE PLIERS TO PULL THE MOUTHPIECE**. If you do not have a mouthpiece puller, get one ASAP (you can get one at AMAZON for \$44 - called PEP or BOBCAT). Be sure that your clarinet players understand the importance of cork grease and assembling the top and bottom joints in front of their face to not force the joint at an angle that will break the tenon. I always used to assemble the clarinets for the first time prior to their first lesson to prevent this. Same is true of saxophone neck corks.
- c. Determine how the students will be able to purchase consumables such as reeds, valve oil, etc. Be sure to have some spares that you can utilize in the event they need a new reed and do not have the money to purchase one.
- d. Be sure to choose reeds that are firm enough to make the students develop a good embouchure. I recommend a minimum 2.5. Also remember that you need to

demonstrate how to place the reed on the mouthpiece. Develop a technique that will be easy for the students to remember ( I used to tell my woodwind players to give the reed a little finger nail space below the mouthpiece tip). Decide if you are in a position to underwrite the cost of the reeds, oil, cork grease, etc. It is far better to give the child a free reed than have them nurse the same reed for months. If you have a booster organization or other school support group, enlist their aid in this plan. If you have a school store, that would be the appropriate place to sell the reeds and other items, but be sure to have a few handy that you can give to a student to not waste lesson time.

6. **Schedule a performance of your beginning band as soon as you possibly can.**
  - a. It may seem like an impossible task to accomplish, but this performance will provide the necessary adrenalin to sustain your program through the first year.
  - b. When you begin the instruction will determine when your first performance. If you begin early enough in the year, the Holiday Season is a great time to schedule a performance. Jingle Bells requires 5 pitches in quarter notes, half notes and whole notes. You can supplement it with perhaps two other beginning band tunes and you have a complete performance. If possible try scheduling this with the older band students. This is beneficial in many ways. The students see themselves as part of the continuum, three tunes will be enough since other ensembles will be playing as well, and your audience numbers will be quite large since for their first performance nearly all of their family will want to come.
  - c. Try to have the performance recorded and if possible schedule a time for the students to hear their performance and congratulate them on their great job as you let them know that the future will have many more opportunities to perform.

# Middle Band Recommendations

## Scheduling & Other Items

1. Meet with your administration at your earliest opportunity to discuss scheduling. Explain the necessity of meeting your students on a regular basis and explain that it will take 5 to 10 minutes at the beginning and end of each session to assemble instruments and gather for rehearsal. Every situation will be different, but hopefully you will be given a rehearsal space that will not need to be setup for each session. If you are given a 30 minute rehearsal and have to setup chairs, stands and instruments, it is time to end before you play your first note!
2. Be the poster teacher for time on task. Allow no interruptions during the rehearsal. Be sure that the office knows not to interrupt you during this time. Take a phone message, ask visitors to wait in the office, etc. The moment you allow a single interruption, you have begun the process of disassembling the sanctity of the rehearsal period.
3. Choose a method to allow review of technical exercises and scales to continue the progress of the students as they grow into young musicians.
4. Choose music literature that is both within their reach and offers a legitimate study of music in all aspects. Be sure that the students can do more than play in 4/4 time in the key of Bb concert. As the students move through their instruction, be sure to expand their practice to include multiple keys, major and minor, and multiple time signatures. At the very least, by 7<sup>th</sup> grade students should be getting comfortable in both duple and triple meters, understand Cut Time and not panic if they see flats and sharps in the key signature.
5. While music literature of a popular nature has its place, it is not usually in the band's best interest to use any more than necessary. Pop and rock tunes being covered by a middle school band are generally not successful and waste time better spent on more effective literature. Find good literature with valid musical underpinnings that are interesting and exciting to play and let the students learn from these rather than the medley of the Rock or Country Star Du Jour.
6. Learn about the best band literature. There are many texts listing the best available pieces for wind band. One such document is readily available at Wikipedia at this address:  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_concert\\_band\\_literature](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_concert_band_literature) or just do a Google Search for "FAMOUS BAND MUSIC".
7. Many of these are recorded and can be found at Amazon or iTunes. You as the band director need to become the ultimate expert on all things band for your school. Part of that is being knowledgeable about the literature.
8. Establish a regular pattern of sight reading. Musicians need to be able to play at sight and this is the time to begin that preparation.



# High School Band Recommendations

## Complications from all fronts

1. The high school band has been through much in recent years. Block Scheduling, proliferation of sports teams, declining numbers, etc. Survival is most likely for those who can deal with these complications. All of the above tips are applicable to the high school program at a more advanced level. Here are a few thoughts and suggestions that are mine alone – so don't blame anyone else!
  - a. Marching Bands are for Public Relations
    - i. A well trained and disciplined marching band can add to the reputation of the school. This band can also help in recruiting younger students into the music program. Students are drawn to want to participate in a group that is well liked and visible in the community. The marching band should make an appearance to coincide with the elementary recruiting sessions to attract the students.
    - ii. Incorporating some of the middle school students for a special presentation (patriotic occasions, homecoming, etc. This will give the middle school students a sense of inclusion and will also add more bodies to the band on the field – something that will impress parents, teachers and particularly administrators. This will have benefits in funding and necessary concessions in the future.
    - iii. Competition bands will succeed if the climate has been well established. Bands that have never been involved in competitions should focus more on the entertainment value of their show.
    - iv. Do you really need to play Karel Husa's Music for Prague for your half time show?
  - b. Concert Bands should deal with good literature
    - i. The concert band will provide an opportunity to continue to improve the playing of the students, expand their skills in sight reading, playing in more complex key signatures and time signatures and understand the underlying aesthetic values of music.
    - ii. Choose good music that will be well accepted (Holst Suites, Vaughn Williams English Folk Song Suite, Percy Grainger Lincolnshire Posy or if too difficult, Irish Tune from County Derry, William Shuman George Washington Bridge, etc. The list of great tunes goes on seemingly forever. Your only difficulty may be in finding them available since music publishers have decided they are not worthy of archiving. Protect your existing copies!

## Some Random Thoughts

- Build a listening library of good band literature that you can use to demonstrate to your students. These should be outstanding wind band literature and also solo literature so the student can hear the best performances on these instruments in a solo role.
- If you have a band website, post some of these tunes so that students can at least have the opportunity to listen outside of the band room. Be sure to check copyright information for what you post and change them often to keep the list of available tunes fresh. Offer incentives for listening (be creative here – you are in the arts!)
- Technology is your friend. Learn to use music software to your advantage. Finale and Sibelius should be skills all band directors have. Adjusting arrangements, transposing, etc. will assist you. Offering these in a music technology program for your students can be a way to keep the students who are being told they need to learn more computer skills.
- Learn to use a music sequencer – Cakewalk was always my favorite. I would take ensemble music and enter each part from a midi keyboard and then record them so that the students could play along with the entire ensemble or set the balance to either side to play along with only their part or only the other part of the piece. Audacity is a program that will allow you to do this and it is free. You can get it here:  
<http://audacity.sourceforge.net/download/>
- Fundraising – you will never have enough money to do what you want or what you should do. We used to sell a truckload of citrus fruit each year and we also did a band telethon in cooperation with a local access cable TV station. We generally raised \$20k between the two efforts. We bought a ton of new music each year, had a fully equipped percussion section, a repair budget that was excellent and new instruments added annually to replace the troublesome older models. We also underwrote every consumable – LaVoz reeds for any woodwind cost the student \$1 (and free if they needed it). Consider these as options. If you need more information on the band telethon, send me an email.
- Take the kids to a concert. Many organizations offer student concerts. I bring students to see the Pittsburgh Symphony or the Wheeling Symphony or the River City Brass Band annually. Most all of these ensembles have student plans for inexpensive tickets to fill the cheap seats. Use the experience to teach the students about concert behavior, discuss the music performed, etc.
- Finally – PLAY A MARCH. As soon as your students are able to, play a great march every concert. The audience will love it and the students may as well.