

Principles of Expressive Playing in Music: Bringing Life to the Notes with Young Bands—Part 1

Every musician and music educator believes that the very essence of music is that it is a language capable of expressing human emotions and feelings. Leonard Bernstein once said, “Music can name the unnamable and communicate the unknowable.” Yes, music can say things that can be said in no other language.

The question that we must ask is, “Are our ensembles an instrument of expression?” Do they express human emotions and feelings? Do they re-create the thoughts and feelings of the composer, or do they just play right notes and right rhythms in the right places?

There are five levels of preparedness as we get our ensembles ready for a performance:

Level 1 Sight-reading.

Level 2 The process of learning to put the right notes and rhythms in the right places.

Level 3 The point where we can play all the right notes and rhythms in the right places, but we haven't yet begun to make music, for notes are not music.

Level 4 The process of learning to express the intent of the composer.

Level 5 The point when the entire ensemble has become an instrument of expression.

As band directors, we often spend the majority of our time guiding students through Levels 1–3, and are then left either trying to squeeze Levels 4 and 5 into the last few rehearsals, or hoping that these stages will automatically emerge as the ensemble gets more confident. It is vital, however, that we prepare and plan ahead from the very beginning of Level 1, in order to allow ample time to transition our ensemble from simply playing the notes on the page to playing *music*.

But is it possible to teach middle school and high school students to be expressive; to bring life to the notes; to start the process of doing what mature musicians do intuitively?

Absolutely. Not only is it possible, but it is a responsibility that each director has to his/her profession. The challenge, then, is how to help our students express that which they have not yet experienced.

In order to lead your students in this direction, it is important to understand the following:

1. An individual or ensemble cannot play expressively until the required technique is mastered.
2. If the ensemble doesn't believe in what they're saying and express it with confidence, the audience won't get it.
3. In order for our ensembles to be expressive, they need to know the direction of particular notes and measures. All music has direction; each note and each measure is going *to* or *from* those on either side of it.
4. It is much easier for an ensemble to be expressive when they are performing high quality music.
5. Students and ensembles should be challenged *musically*, not just *technically*.
6. In order to be expressive, a conductor must really live with a piece of music — studying it, gathering knowledge about it, and developing feelings — by being around it for a while. Fortunately, many of today's band composers are still alive, and most composers love to receive calls from conductors to inquire about the work they're performing.

Bruce Pearson

Music

7. The more the conductor knows about the music, the more expressive it will be. Frank Battisti (founder and conductor of the NECE Wind Ensemble) once told the story of how, before performing Copland's *DownCounty Lane*, he visited the town that was Copland's inspiration.
8. Before an ensemble can perform expressively, it must be capable of producing a beautiful tone at all volume levels. As your ensemble's conductor you must know the sound you like and be able to explain to your ensemble how to achieve it.

Isolating this last point, here is an exercise to help achieve a good sound at all volume levels: Have your ensemble play an E-flat concert chord for 16 beats.

1. To play softly with a good sound, have the students "shout a whisper."
2. To play loudly with a good tone, think of the pyramid documented by W. Francis McBeth, that illustrates the idea that the lower the range of the instrument, the more pronounced the instrument must be.
3. All instruments make a contribution to the composite sound.
 - a. Warmth – conical brass (tubas, euphoniums, French horns)
 - b. Strength/Support – Trombones
 - c. Resonance – Low Woodwinds
 - d. Brilliance – Upper woodwinds and brass
 - e. Sparkle – Percussion
4. Remind your students: "Get into the sound of the conical brass," and/or "Get into the sound of the person sitting next to you."
5. Demonstrate how a band tone can change by emphasizing either the Sopranos and Altos or the Tenors and Bases.

For artistic expression and meaning to occur, we must look beyond the symbols of notation. Illustrating this point, Elizabeth Green wrote, "Music lives only when the notes fly off the page and soar into glorious sound. The performer, the conductor, releases those notes from bondage through his or her feelings for the message through the power of imagination."² Gustav Mahler also said it well: "What is best in music is not found in the notes." Finally, another favorite: "The musical notes illustrate everything — except the essential."³

¹McBeth, W. Francis. *Effective Performance of Band Music – Solutions to Specific Problems in the Performance of 20-Century Band Music*. Southern Music Company. 1972.

²Green, Elizabeth A., and Gibson, Mark. *The Modern Conductor*. Prentice Hall. 2004.

³Anonymous.

Bruce Pearson is an internationally-known author, composer, clinician, and conductor. He has taught at the elementary, junior high, high school, and college levels for over thirty years. In December of 1998, Bruce was awarded the prestigious Midwest Clinic Medal of Honor in recognition of his outstanding contribution to music education.

Copyright © 2009 Neil A. Kjos Music Company