

Rehearsing the Very Young Band - Part One

A good rehearsal starts with a good teacher. In other words, the educational attitude that is reflected on the podium will have a tremendous effect on the success or failure of the conductor rehearsal time.

A good rehearsal starts with a good musician. A thorough knowledge of music, as it pertains to musical performance, is an attribute that every conductor should possess.

A good rehearsal is planned in advance.

A good rehearsal can be achieved if your “people skills” will allow you to relate to your students in a highly positive manner.

As the above reflections by Jim Swearingen clearly indicate, the quality of a rehearsal depends in large part on the skills, personality, and attitude of the conductor on the podium. While these attributes vary from conductor to conductor, every good rehearsal shares two common elements: clear objectives, and a structure which will allow those objectives to be met in a timely manner.

Every rehearsal should be:

- well-planned
- a music education laboratory
- a place of change and transformation
- a self-contained event
- preparation for a performance

As directors, we are stewards of our rehearsal time and have the responsibility to allocate our rehearsal time where it can be used most effectively. One basic question requires an answer — are we going to use our time to build skills or to rehearse the music?

Obviously, both need our attention. I believe, however, ***the younger the band - the more rehearsal time that should be devoted to skill building.***

The young band needs to develop the following skills:

- Tone
 1. Individual
 2. Ensemble
- Rhythmic Accuracy/Independence
- Phrasing
- Music Reading
- Intonation
- Technique/Facility
- Balance
- Dynamics
- Articulation
- Ensemble Playing
- Comprehensive Musicianship

Over the years, band directors have wrestled with how they can develop these skills in their students and prepare a concert with their limited rehearsal time. There are three things to consider when attempting to answer this question:

1. Students with developed skills need less rehearsal time to prepare their music.
2. The difficulty of the repertoire we select to rehearse and eventually perform will determine the amount of rehearsal time that is required.
3. The number of pieces we select to rehearse and perform will determine how much time can be allotted to each piece.

In order to develop the aforementioned skills, consider selecting fewer pieces to perform. If you usually prepare six pieces (30 minutes of concert music), consider preparing five pieces (25 minutes of concert music). Another consideration is the level of difficulty of the pieces to be performed. Many directors put undue pressure on their students and themselves by attempting to play music that is too difficult for their ensemble to prepare in the allotted rehearsal time. If your band can play Grade 3 music, program some Grade 2 music so that skills can be developed and an artistic performance can result. Both you and your students will enjoy it more.

There are many components to a good rehearsal. This article will address two components of the rehearsal: the rehearsal environment and the rehearsal structure.

The Rehearsal Environment

SILENCE is the most important element of a good rehearsal. Neither the director nor the ensemble can be musical or creative in an atmosphere of chaos. Demand and expect your students' full attention. It is part of our responsibility as teachers to teach our students good discipline and proper respect for authority. Yes, even middle school students can learn to be quiet and attentive during a band rehearsal. The following are some tips to help establish and maintain a productive learning and rehearsal environment:

1. If student motivation lags, examine yourself as a conductor/teacher. Remember that our students are a reflection of us. We must be genuinely excited about the music we are teaching, and about the process of learning that music. If we find that our motivation is lagging, reflect back and experience those things that initially called us to be a band director.
2. Be demanding of your students; both musically and behaviorally.
3. Avoid "down-time" during the rehearsal.
4. Conduct high-energy, up-beat rehearsals.
5. Provide an environment for your students where they have permission to make mistakes.
6. Define your expectations.
7. Stay with a piece or section of music you are rehearsing until everyone can recognize progress. Then.. .celebrate your achievement.
8. Use the "macro-micro-macro" plan. That is, once you have taken a piece apart, put it back together before moving on.
9. If discipline is required, remember the following:
 - a. Discipline only the offenders, not the entire ensemble.

- b. “Say what you mean, mean what you say, and do what you say you’re going to do.”
- Barbara Colorosa
 - c. Don’t threaten to do something you can’t or don’t want to enforce.
 - d. Praise publicly but discipline privately.
10. Make certain that the stands and chairs are in place at the start of rehearsal. Have the students put them back in their proper place at the end of rehearsal.
 11. Write the rehearsal order and the section to be rehearsed on the board prior to the rehearsal.

The Rehearsal Structure

An important characteristic of a good rehearsal is that it is well-planned. While every rehearsal requires a degree of spontaneity, in general, the more well-structured the rehearsal is, the more productive it will be. In the case of most school band and orchestra rehearsals, the following six-part plan offers such a structure:

I. Warm-up

The warm-up is one of the most important components of a good rehearsal because it is where most skill-building takes place. It also sets the rehearsal atmosphere for the day and warms-up players’ minds, muscles, and instruments.

Every warm-up should include three types of exercises:

1. Embouchure Warmers (long tones and lip slurs)
2. Arm and Finger Warmers (scales, intervals, and rudiment studies)
3. Mind warmers

While the warm-up is part of the daily routine, it should not be mindlessly repetitive. Be musically demanding while challenging students both mentally and physically.

II. The Familiar Selection

The objective of the familiar selection is to allow students to make music confidently and to have a sense of “ensemble” before undertaking the primary rehearsal selection. Select a well-rehearsed piece or portion of a piece (not exceeding five minutes) and play it with as few stops as possible. Resist the temptation to rehearse this selection.

III. The Primary Rehearsal Selection

The primary rehearsal selection receives the most attention during the course of the rehearsal. Players should be beyond the “woodshedding” stage and ready to enter the next phase of learning. This stage often includes phrase identification and learning to shape those musical phrases.

Use time wisely by rehearsing this piece in sections. (Much valuable rehearsal time can be squandered by continuously starting from the beginning). Isolate potential problem passages before the rehearsal begins. Know the score well enough to recognize passages that are similar to others, and limit the time spent rehearsing them.

Once this selection (or a portion of this selection) approaches performance readiness, move it up to the familiar selection segment to make way for a new primary selection.

IV. The Secondary Rehearsal Selection

The objective of this rehearsal segment is to “woodshed” a selection which has been sight-read recently. Once again, rehearse in sections, repeating and drilling as necessary. Be careful, however, not to “over-drill.” Instead, aim to thoroughly familiarize students with a fresh piece of music. Once students become familiar with this selection move it (or portions of it) up to the primary rehearsal selection segment of the rehearsal.

V. The Sight-Reading Selection

The objectives of the sight-reading segment are two-fold. First, it is reserved as a time to introduce students to new music. Second, this rehearsal segment allows time to sharpen students’ sight-reading skills. Choose selections and read them in their entirety. Stop only if the band “falls apart.” Once the sight-reading has been accomplished, move this selection up to the secondary rehearsal segment.

In a subsequent issue of *Kjos Band News* we will address, in-depth, ways to teach sight-reading and rhythmic independence skills.

VI. The Closer

Educators want their students to enjoy music for a lifetime. This segment should bring the rehearsal to an enthusiastic close, ensuring that everyone feels good about the experience. Choose a selection or portion of a selection that students enjoy and perform masterfully.

By following these tips, your rehearsal will become more productive and effective.

Published in *Kjos Band News*, Spring 2002, Volume 5
Copyright © 2009 Neil A. Kjos Music Company