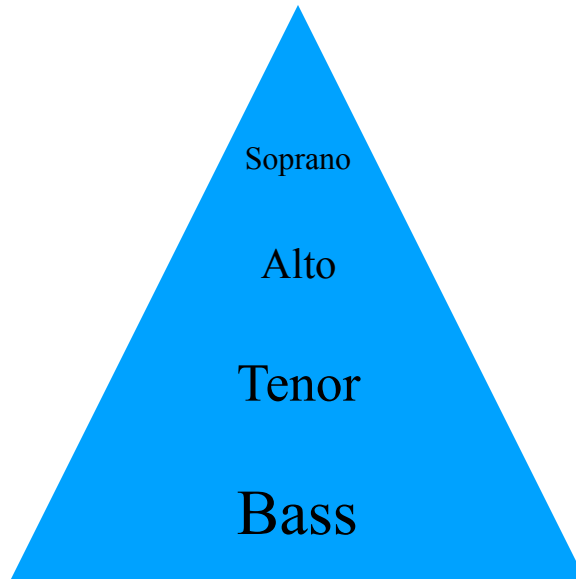


A Question of Balance

The Pyramid of Sound



OR

The Column of Sound



How do professional ensembles approach *Balance* of voices or parts within a section?

Listen carefully to the Chicago Symphony Orchestra brass section, the Philadelphia Orchestra string section, the St. Olaf Choir, Gordon Goodwin's Big Phat Big Band and the Black Dyke Mills Brass Band. Most of the time it is the Column of Sound. It depends on the musical context and the repertoire.

A Question of Balance

Where did the concept of a Pyramid of Sound come from for school groups?

In 1972 Francis McBeth wrote *Effective Performance of Band Music* proclaiming the values of a pyramid approach to balancing the band sound. I believe it was a reaction to the typical 1960's school bands that were very top-heavy in balance and instrumentation. Many directors "jumped on the bandwagon" but did not apply all of McBeth's concepts as outlined in the book. He clearly differentiated the musical contexts, the repertoire style and the intent of the composer in the application of *many models for balance*. Somehow only the simple pyramid above remained with many directors. The pyramid works well to interpret a chorale, for example, although perhaps a steep isosceles triangle would be more appropriate than an equilateral triangle.

Could this approach in modern bands be the reason we frequently do not hear a good balance of *melody* versus *accompaniment*?

This is perhaps the *main concern* from adjudicators evaluating contemporary marching bands. *Where is the melody?* Judges frequently talk about balancing the *musical hierarchy*—the primary, secondary, tertiary, etc. lines. "Make the main thing the main thing" is a frequent comment.

Escaping the Pyramid Trap: Reconstructing the Concepts of Balance by Dr. Ken Thompson from School Band & Orchestra magazine