

TIME SAVING REHEARSAL TIPS

Gary Smith: Associate Director of Bands Emeritus, University of Illinois

INTRODUCTION: The most valuable asset when developing a musical ensemble is rehearsal TIME. Higher goals can be achieved when rehearsals are organized, efficient and productive. During music rehearsals verbal instructions are given to define objectives. Non-verbal gestures are also used to convey musical interpretations while the ensemble is playing. Some typical gestures communicate volume, articulations, tempo, phrasing, etc.

The purpose of this session is to demonstrate some unique gestures. They were created to be used for warm-ups or while rehearsing music to minimize verbal instructions. This enhances the use of non-verbal communication allowing the conductor to solve typical musical problems in less time.

To avoid overwhelming the ensemble with new information, introduce these gestures gradually. Once they have learned how to use them all, the amount of rehearsal time saved will be substantial.

In order for these unique gestures (or even traditional gestures) to yield results the ensemble must develop a dependency on following the conductor at all times. They must learn how to stay mentally connected to the conductor, even when the players are looking at the music. This can be achieved by using their peripheral vision. Developing this dependency and responding with action can be developed during warm-ups, whether playing scales, exercises or chorales.

Most conductors know how to convey musical messages with traditional gestures to achieve these basic musical responses: Volume, style, articulations, tempo, accents, phrasing, cuing, holds, cut offs, expression, etc. Unfortunately many conductors simply beat time without these gestures therefore relying on verbal instructions to convey the appropriate stylistic elements for the music.

VOLUME AND BALANCES: This involves using your arms and hands much like adjusting volume and equalizer controls on an audio mixer. It helps solve problems with instrumentation and scoring imbalances. To teach the use of this gesture use a well-balanced Bb chord with instruments voiced in their middle range. Assign bass voices on the tonic.

The arms should be parallel to the ground with the finger tips touching at chest level, palms down. Assign soprano instruments to the left elbow, alto instruments to the left hand, tenor instruments to the right hand and bass voices to the right elbow. Chest level is MF, F is chin level, FF is eye level and FFF is at the top of the head. MP is bottom of the chest, P is at the top of the stomach, PP is at the middle of the stomach and PPP is at waist level.

Woodwinds and brasses can be isolated by pulling the arms apart horizontally. The woodwinds become the left arm and the brasses become the right arm. This allows an opportunity to balance the woodwinds and brasses in groupings. Dropping either arm is an indication for that group to cease playing.

INTONATION: Palm down, fingers extended, rotating hand quickly indicates pitch is not good. Hand cupped over ear means listen for pitch center and adjust.

Cupping hand over nose and mouth means to hum the pitch that each person is playing at that time (to resume playing that pitch use a regular preparatory beat).

Finger tips down means lower the pitch. Finger tips up means bring pitch up.

Pointing at an individual or a group of instruments while holding a note means to isolate that that group from the ensemble when a cutoff is given. Use a regular cue to resume playing with all players. Instruct players to always hum their pitch when they are not playing.

ON UNISON NOTES: Pointing the first finger up followed by a prep means to play up on scale tone up. Pointing the first finger down means to play down one scale tone.

ON CHORDS: Pointing the first finger up followed by a prep means to play up 1/2 step. Pointing the first finger down means to play down 1/2 step.

Holding three fingers up means to play an arpeggio on a major chord with the current note as the root. Bass voices should only play the tonic or check their octaves. Play notes only in the middle range and move slowly between the notes. Sliding your hand from side to side horizontally with the palm down is an indication for everyone to return to unison.

BREATHING: Use a very slow upward prep gesture to breathe in and a very slow down beat to exhale. Spinning both hands in front of the body means to move the air faster (not play louder).

RHYTHM: Tapping on the left hand with the first finger of the right hand indicates rhythmic precision is not good. The ensemble should concentrate on internalizing and a snare drum should begin playing a subdivided duple or triplet pattern loud enough for everyone to hear while playing. When ensemble improves signal the drum to cease playing with a cut off gesture.

PHRASING: Pulling the fingers of both hands apart from the center of the body indicates to the ensemble they are not sustaining long tones or cheating the ends of phrases.

Sir Georg Solti in an interview with the Instrumentalist magazine several years ago discussed the role of a conductor. Essentially he said a conductor should constantly compare what the ensemble is playing with what is inside the conductor's head. The conductor should attempt to get the ensemble to match up with the conductor's preconceived ideas of how the music should sound with gestures / and or / verbal instructions. Ensembles enjoy rehearsals that are less dependant verbal instructions. Even young ensembles can learn to achieve musical responses from gestures if it is incorporated into the teaching process during rehearsals.