

# Developing Ensembleship



Wisconsin State Music Conference, Room E, Monona Terrace

Friday, October 26, 2012 (10:00-11:15 a.m.)

## Techniques to help the whole become more than the sum of its parts.

*Ensemble* is the French word for “together.” In English, the definition specifies a group working together to produce a single effect. Among musicians, it implies a particular quality of relationship - a quality that is essential, yet widely misunderstood.

### Balancing the Equation

Ensembleship is the ability of musicians to function effectively (i.e. artistically) in groups. Whether the group is small or large, amateur or professional, the fundamental elements of ensembleship remain the same. Individual preparation and connection through convergent thinking are often viewed as the sum total of ensemble performance. Learn your part, match those around you, and voilà! However, that’s only half of the equation. Ensembleship also requires divergent thinking and improvisational skill to reach its full potential.

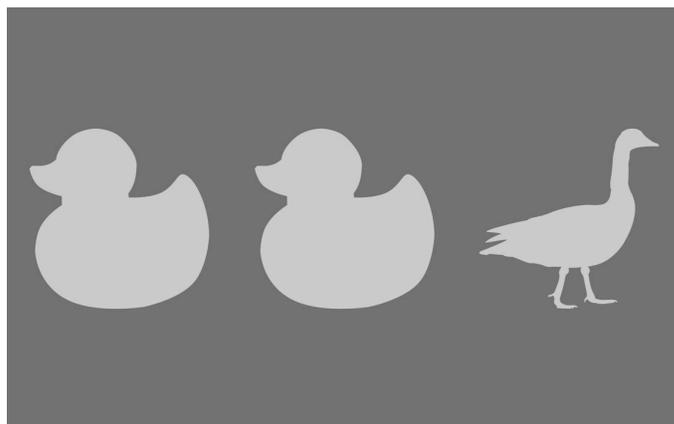
The first step in building ensembleship is to develop an understanding of the myriad roles each person plays. An initial diagnosis of the ensemble’s character leads to guided role playing and eventually instills independent musical intuition. Even as step one is in progress, new and variable patterns of connection emerge as the musicians send and receive information, influence each other, and are themselves influenced. This lays the groundwork for the ultimate goal: improvisatory play and the exercise of artistry.

### Magnetism

With magnets, opposite polarities attract (e.g. north to south) causing them to converge and lock together. Matching polarities repel (e.g. north to north), causing the magnets to diverge and move away from each other. If you were to strive to touch

a matching pair together you would feel the repelling forces increase in strength as they came closer together. This “cushion” is exactly analogous to the invisible yet palpable connection between a conductor and an ensemble and between members of an ensemble. Every performer has the ability and responsibility to experience and exert artistic force.

There are games and exercises for individuals and groups that help to develop this capacity. Several will be discussed in this session. They are designed to exercise basic elements such as pulse and pitch, as well as compositional characteristics (style, form, etc.). These elements establish and stabilize the metaphorical magnetism within an ensemble. Note: a cushion can exist regardless of the maturity or skill of the musicians involved. A sixth grade band has a force of its own, just as the United States Marine Band does. What distinguishes the two is the strength of the force each transmits.



# Expectations for Ensemble Participation

“Creativity is not only a natural process; it’s the natural process. Once we are willing to tap our creative potential, we will move to doing what nature does, creating the impossible; not just doing things differently, but doing different things.” George Land & Beth Jarman

## Individual **PREPARATION:**



- to achieve complete flexibility and facility,
- to amass vocabulary (aural, technical, & stylistic), and
- to evoke and work effectively within the context created by the composer.

## Personal **ENGAGEMENT:**

Evaluation, emulation, absorption, and transfer throughout the rehearsal process.



## Confident **POINT OF VIEW:**

To support conversation, persuasion, influence, reaction, and rebuttal in rehearsal and performance.



**ARTISTRY**

## Reminders

These expectations apply to every member of the ensemble, including the conductor. The conductor has the additional responsibility of monitoring the cultural development of the ensemble. Practice “reading the room” and using that insight to tailor your activity for optimal results. Watch PBS’s *Horse and Rider*, National Geographic Channel’s *The Dog Whisperer*, and TED’s David Logan for insight into group dynamics and energy. Remember that your own attitude, expectations, and actions may be amplified and reflected back to you through the ensemble – the good, the bad, and the ugly. Strive to remain in Patsy Rodenburg’s “second circle” (see the resource link for Michael Howard Studios). Listening is the key.

Peter Abbs in Wayne Bowman’s “Educating Musically,” in *The New Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning*, edited by Colwell and Richardson, Oxford University Press, 2002.

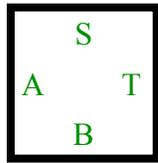
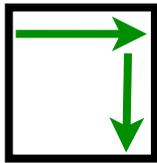
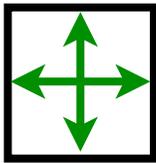
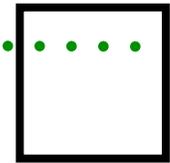
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[www.ted.com/talks/david\\_logan\\_on\\_tribal\\_leadership.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/david_logan_on_tribal_leadership.html)

# Working “The Box”



works as a “free radical” in the center. Begin with exercises that pass scales (one degree per side,

The basic premise of the box is simple: direct musician-to-musician communication (including eye contact) to exercise flexibility, agility, awareness, and influence. For ensembles of up to c. 50 members, a single perimeter is optimal. For larger ensembles, the box can function very effectively with as many as three rows deep per side. Allow the character and abilities of the various players and sections to influence the seating arrangement even as you consider the specific topics to address. The degree of challenge increases as you move from alternating, to consecutive, to random patterns of motion around the box. Visual and aural feedback can be easily incorporated through peer interaction, and assessment can be immediate and individualized as the conductor

eventually working toward one degree per person). Emphasize “ghosting” along with the scale to promote continual mental and musical engagement. The same concept can be applied to phrasing, rhythmic continuity, and pulse maintenance. Using chorales, the box can efficiently illustrate function even as it enables the ensemble to experiment with different harmonic and formal configurations. Abstract concepts related to orchestration, balance, and blend are easily brought within grasp as the ensemble plays with and evaluates a spectrum of possibilities. Perhaps most importantly, the box promotes individual responsibility, and develops the “cushion” described on page one of this handout.

# Rehearsal Planning

Planning is a constant state of mind for the conductor, based upon an “if...then...” thought process. The most effective plans are the result of Janusian thinking, or holding contradictory ideas in your mind and allowing their interplay to fuel the creation of new ideas. Janusian thinking enables musicians to view the rehearsal process as the simultaneous exercise of both convergent and divergent thinking and behavior. It also enables a conductor to remain flexible and improvisatory within an exhaustively detailed and carefully structured rehearsal agenda. In

other words: we plan to be spontaneous.

In a large-scale sense, rehearsal planning is the last phase of a spiraling process that began with establishing foundations and goals. As each intermediate goal is achieved, the ensemble’s profile (musical and cultural) will evolve. New goals will be set based upon an ongoing diagnostic process that fuels subsequent rehearsal plans.

This circular structure is also present in miniature in each and every rehearsal. Musical and cultural foundations are established and reinforced,

intuition and anticipation guide planning and execution, diagnosis determines what is needed and when, methods of therapy are developed, and the design of the rehearsal itself is tailored to the moment. All of this can – and should – happen in every session, no matter how brief.



## Diagnosis

The ensemble building process springs directly from the diagnostic process. Your primary function when working with any ensemble, for any length of time, is to help everyone become a better musician – including yourself. The fundamental goal when working with any ensemble, for any length of time, is to exercise everybody’s artistic faculties – to do what the very best musicians do, and to get as near to them (the quality of their work, the characteristics of their thinking, and the depth of their emotional engagement) as you can.

Score study is the process of discovering and clarifying the context (musical environment or landscape) in which the ensemble will play/work. Although the composer determines the basic parameters, the opportunity for the musicians to improvise within that context remains of paramount importance if artistry is to be achieved.

Think of it in these terms: the composer designs the playground, the conductor builds it according to those specifications, and the ensemble (including the conductor) plays on it. The conductor has to know the limits, location, and potential of each piece of equipment (the swings, the slide, the jungle-gym) in order to keep the ensemble as near to the intent of the composer as possible

(to keep the kids from wandering into traffic). When the ensemble is on the playground, each musician must enjoy the freedom of divergent thinking (to climb on the slide, or swing side to side rather than back and forth, etc.). This freedom will enable the ensemble to get the most out of their time on the playground, and to demonstrate the full potential of the composer’s design to the listener. The ensemble, however, does not have the freedom to tear down, move, or ignore pieces of equipment. They must make every effort to respect the composer’s blueprint. Thus, the conductor also functions as a referee of sorts (“Johnny, please don’t eat the wood chips”).

In some special cases, as with a band with restricted resources, or in conducting “lab” ensembles, the requisite building materials may not be available. For example, the composer may call for a swing set but all the ensemble can muster is a rope and a tire. The intent of swinging can be achieved, if not the exact method. However, if an ensemble doesn’t even have a rope, they should re-think whether a swinging-based playground design is a good fit for them. Intelligent, artistic literature selection and programming are essential skills for any conductor.

## Musical Therapy

Using the playground analogy: if the playground design includes a slide, but the kids don’t know how

to climb a ladder (or don’t have the strength), what will the conductor do to teach them or help them build the strength they will need to play on the slide? Answering “what will you do” = designing a course of musical therapy for the group, much like designing a course of occupational therapy for workers, or physical therapy for athletes.

Bear in mind that therapy is not rehearsal in the traditional sense. It is more holistic than that. It attempts to treat the underlying illness (e.g. inability to maintain a steady pulse) rather than the symptom (imprecision or tempo trouble in a specific passage). Physical therapy for an athlete will make them more flexible, stronger, and quicker: all attributes that are valuable and transferable to any athletic endeavor. Musical therapy should be equally fundamental and transferrable to any musical context.



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