

Beginning Band Primer

by Henry Duitman

Intended audience

It is recommended that this approach be learned and faithfully practiced by all those music education students who have yet to develop their own methodology. Certain areas of the approach may also be beneficial to practicing teachers; these ideas may be tried and used or blended with other preferences as they are effective.

Rationale for the approach

Based on 11 years experience teaching heterogeneous beginning band classes and on 13 subsequent years of visiting student teachers who are facing the same type of teaching challenges, my rationale for the approach listed here is simply, "It works." The reason it works, I believe, is that it is based on the best research and traditions in the field of music education. The basic tenets of this approach include:

- * breaking down complex tasks into simple ones, often game-like in nature
- * learning one thing at a time
- * going from musical sound to note-reading and technique rather than beginning with note-reading and technique
- * good tone and intonation can be learned during the first year of band
- * students should spend plenty of time learning and practicing the fundamentals of tone-production (embouchure formation, breathing, etc.) before moving on to harder music

In my experience with practice teachers, I have tried to avoid saying, "Do this because I say so and it worked for me." However, I am beginning to realize that time is a precious commodity and, while it is true that each teacher has to find out the *modus operandi* that works best for her/him, it is also true that any type of teaching techniques needs to be practiced before it can be used effectively. It makes no sense to have a first-year teacher struggling to "find his own approach" while students are quietly waiting (or more probably making mooing sounds through their instrument).

Therefore this is a "do-it-this-way" approach. Student teachers should learn the classroom methods so that they can do them in their sleep. Obviously, different teaching situations will necessitate variations on the approach. However, the student should approach this method as "gospel truth" for maximum effectiveness early in his/her career. Adjustments may then be made.

Homogeneous vs. heterogeneous classes

While studies have shown, and common sense would seem to indicate, that time can be more wisely spent in a homogeneous beginning band setting (e.g. all trumpets one day, all clarinets another, etc.) or in a private lesson approach, many situations simply cannot accommodate such individualistic scheduling. When the 5th grade teacher sends his/her students over to music, this may be the only "prep" period in the day for that teacher. In other words, the decision of class type is usually not in the hands of the band instructor.

However, the teaching of a heterogeneous class need not be viewed as a "necessary evil." Indeed, many aspects of playing can be taught as well, if not better than in a mixed instrument ensemble.

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These include aspects of motivation, listening to other parts, and learning how to read another clef, for example. However, preparation, organization, and classroom management skills do become even more necessary in the heterogeneous setting. Therefore, the theme of the approach offered here is to have every teacher become exhaustively prepared with an educationally sound "bag of tricks" so that learning can take place in the best possible manner for students in the heterogeneous classroom.

Program requirements

Schedule

While it sounds simplistic to say, every band program needs a time to meet. Too often, beginning band classes are scheduled during recess or against other courses and often there is too little time each week. MENC recommends at least three 30 minute classes each week and this is an excellent guideline. It often works well if beginning band classes can be scheduled next to a recess or study hall so that students wishing to have extra individual instruction may receive it.

Budget

If music is important (it is) and if students can learn music through band (they can) then the band needs the same budget consideration as other classes. However, student ownership of instruments is to be encouraged because parental involvement in their student's practice is usually greater if there is a monetary investment. Working with a music store to develop a good three month rental plan is recommended. Students should also purchase their own first method book since this is used a lot and will be tattered by the end of the year.

The school should provide all sheet music and the larger band instruments, ones that cannot usually be rented. These school purchases would include, in order of importance:

1. percussion
2. euphonium
3. tuba
4. French horn
5. bass Clarinet
6. oboe
7. bassoon

Facilities

Every beginning band needs a place to meet. This room should be large enough so that each student has room to place her/his instrument case behind the chair; in other words, about twice as much room per person as an advanced band needs.

Instructor

The instructor should be trained as a musician and an educator and a pedagogue. Understanding of the way to teach the fundamentals of embouchure is most valuable and the GIA Visual Diagnostic Series is recommended as a resource.

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Beginning band recruiting/signup

Previous year motivation

If possible, schedule a special day near the end of the school year where the fifth-graders (those completing their first year of band) perform for and coach the fourth-graders. This seems to be a most effective motivation since the fourth-graders can see how much their buddies learned in only a year. It also motivates the fifth-graders to be the "big shots" and show the lowly fourth-graders how much they know.

An effective format, I've found, is to play about 5 short pieces and have the fourth-graders sit on the floor next to any instrument that they are interested in. While it is rather noisy, let them ask questions of the players they are sitting next to after each song.

The best part of this class is the time when fifth-graders get to give fourth-graders their "first lesson." Preparing for this class provides yet another wonderful opportunity for reviewing the breathing, buzzing, sitting, etc. exercises with the fifth-graders in preparation for their teaching. Obviously, since this is done all at once there is a cacophony of sound. However, the motivation for fourth-graders is outstanding.

Now is the time to get your first indication of who is interested in band.

***Try-the-instruments* parent's night**

During the early part of summer, be sure to send a letter to each parent with information about Parent's Night in August. It is often good to schedule two times, since vacations may conflict. This letter can begin, "Since your child _____ has shown an interest in band,...." It should be made very clear that at least one parent and the child must attend a Parent's Night. The format of the Parent's Night can be:

- * Welcome and short explanation of the program
- * Have a few of last year's beginners show off what they learned
- * Introduction of a music dealer -- he presents the rental plan
- * Students and parents can try to get a sound on the instruments (again, cacophonous but effective)
- * Individual meetings to sign a contract before every parent leaves

Contracts

Every parent and child attending the meeting must sign a contract before leaving. The goals of this contract are to:

- * agree on the instrument the child will start on
- * get an agreement in writing that the child will not quit band during the three-month trial period. After three months, the director agrees to send a report to the parents about the progress made and a recommendation for continuation after the trial period.

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- * know where the child will be getting the instrument--recommended procedure is to also have them sign a contract with the music dealer at the same meeting

The importance of this contract cannot be overestimated. Explain to the parents that there will be discouragement when learning a new instrument and that the agreement to try it for three months gives the director the certainty that students will not give up too early. The contract also gives parents the knowledge that they can get out after a minimal investment if it is just not working after three months, and it gives the students the responsibility of not backing down on their promise.

Balancing the instrumentation

In most cases, the best results will happen when the student is allowed to choose the instrument they will play. The problem with this, of course, is the fact that all girls may want to play flute and all boys saxophone. Therefore, you may wish to start working with students well in advance of the Parent's Night, encouraging them to try certain instruments.

Advance work with the elementary music and classroom teachers is important to the balance of your ensemble. I recommend the following:

- * Find out which students have the best ear, play piano, and have a temperament that allows them to overcome minor frustrations.
- * Talk with these students and their parents during the summer before the Parent's Night. You can say, "I have heard from your teachers that you have a good background in music and I want to offer you the chance to play one of the band's special instruments."
- * Work to start students on special instruments in pairs. Usually two players on oboe or French horn, etc. is more successful than a loner since they can help each other and do not seem as isolated from the rest of the band.
- * Work with your rental company so that, if a student is having difficulty during the first three months, they are allowed to switch to another rental instrument without having to sign another three month contract. This is extremely important not only for the student, but for the instrumentation. If a student is having difficulty on the flute and you have the option of moving her/him over to clarinet, for example, you can adjust instrumentation balance after the year begins.

Working with dealer rental plans

A fine music dealer is one of your most important allies. If the dealer is a former music educator, all the better. Make sure the rental plan includes the following:

- * a three-month trial period
- * free repairs during that period (unless caused through negligence)
- * delivery of all the instruments to the school on the date you stipulate. Make sure that the store doesn't let parents go in and pick up the instrument ahead of the first class period. You

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want to be able to show them everything on the first day.

* as mentioned above, the ability to switch instruments during the trial period if, and only if, the director determines with the student that this is best.

Pre-playing instruction

The goal of this approach is to play exercises relatively well the first time. Try to avoid "sight-reading" in the traditional sense of having the music sound terrible and fall apart during the first run-through. The way to do this is, once again, to break down the learning into component skills and practice these first. This can be done before the students receive their instruments and should continue before every first playing of an exercise in their method book. **Every student should understand the rhythm, the counting, the note names, the fingerings and positions, and, most importantly, how the piece sounds before ever playing the song.**

Recorder work

During the year prior to beginning band, many fundamentals of playing an instrument may be taught using the recorder. This is a wonderful instrument since it is a legitimate but low-cost way to teach posture, rest and playing position, steady airstream, holding an instrument at the right angle so that you can't see your fingers, covering the holes, etc. Additionally, of course, all the music elements may be taught.

Reading rhythm

Counting and clapping the rhythm is usually very helpful. Simple counting (with non-durational syllables) and clapping loudly with the full hands may actually be detrimental, since it introduces very nonmusical noises. Consider the following approach:

* The students can be taught to tap the start of notes using only 2 fingers and striking them on the top (not palm) of the other hand. It is very hard to make a loud noise this way.

* All counting should be sung in a durational way. This could be in a non-pitched monotone or could be the actual pitches of the song. *Go Tell Aunt Rhodie* would then sound like this: "o--ne three four o--ne thre--e.

* Another variation of the one above would be to sing: "ha--lf quarter quarter ha--lf ha--lf"

Reading note names

Writing the first five notes for each instrument on the board and having **all** of the children sing these note names as you point at them is a valuable aural training exercise as well as a good way to learn the names of their notes. A good variation is to have one section sing their fingering for that note while the rest of the band sings the note names.

Singing the exercises

Singing is vitally important in the "ear-to-hand" approach. During the time before students get their instruments, have them sing some of the early songs in the method book. This should be accompanied by the piano with a song-like introduction. Each singing experience now and after they get their instruments can have the following pedagogical variations:

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- * Sing the note names. Students on different instruments may sing these together so that some will be singing "Eb" while others are singing "F" or "Bb" or "C." This is ok. The goal is not perfect diction but knowing the note names **before** playing the song.
- * Sing the fingering or/positions. For *Go Tell Aunt Rhodie*. the trumpets would sing "A - A G F - F-" while the trombones would sing "4 - 4 1 3 - 3 -".
- * Sing on "tu" or "lu" trying to come up with the smoothest legato sound possible, while breathing only at the correct phrase ending.
- * **Sing any or all of the above while students have their instruments in playing position and are fingering or doing their positions on their instruments.** This will also help you see, in an instant, who is having trouble **before** they are actually making a bad sound.

Posture game

1. Sit on the front side of the chair
2. Stand when told
3. Sit when told, always remaining alert for the command to stand again.

This exercise gives new meaning to the phrase "Keep them on their toes." Since the rules of the game are that they have to be able to sit or stand without moving their feet, they simply cannot play the game if they slouch back into their chair. Do this exercise a lot before they get their instruments and, after they have their instruments, do it whenever they need to have better posture. Make it fun with rapid commands to sit or stand. Tell them they can watch their neighbor to make sure he/she doesn't move his/her feet.

Rest position/playing position

While dealing with posture, introduce the **second-most important way to keep your sanity** while teaching Beginning Band. The problem of "doodling" sound is endemic in any class of beginners since every player holds a noisemaker! Suzuki class violin teachers often stop this doodling by the "bow-on-your-head" game. This obviously stops the sound and the kids like to look at each other when they have a three-foot bow extension on a two-foot chassis.

In like fashion, teach your students rest and playing position early and drill them on it. **Then use it each and every day in band, starting every piece with rest position going to playing position and having the students stay in playing position at the end of the piece until you tell them to move to rest position.** Here are the basics:

- * Rest position
- * Instrument held ready to play but on knee or across lap in a uniform manner
- * No movement (includes talking)
- * Every eye on director's hands so that all instruments will come up together into playing position

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- * Playing position
- * Instrument snapped to the lips in one easy motion
- * Quickly make a visual check and if everything is not perfect in posture, embouchure, instrument holding, looking at the director, **immediately go back to rest position**. Nothing frustrates students more than being ready to play and having to return to rest position because of someone not being ready.

Breathing game

1. Touch index finger to center of lips.
2. Smile widely and inhale silently but deeply through corners.
3. Move hand from lips to 6 inches ahead of lips
4. Blow steady "laser" stream of air against an imaginary candle flame.
5. Try to "bend" the flame without blowing it out for 8 counts
6. Repeat

Embouchure game

- * For brass players
 1. Lick lips
 2. Form embouchure and bring first two fingers to lips, index finger lightly touching top lip above buzz and second finger lightly touching bottom lip below the buzz
 3. Produce a steady buzz at an appropriate pitch (trumpets higher than trombones) for 4 or 8 counts

- * For flutes
 1. Revise breathing game above and extend number of beats
 2. Stress a very small aperture

- * For single reeds
 1. Place thumb against top front teeth and hang head down on the thumb.
 2. Move head and thumb as one (as if you have an elephant's trunk)
 3. With other index finger, make sure there is a firm, "pointy" chin with no air puffs and with the bottom lip stretched firm against the lower teeth.
 4. Blow a steady air stream out the opening right below the thumb for 8 counts

Taking care of the instrument

The basics of assembling the instruments, cleaning mouthpieces, oiling valves and slides, etc. can and should be taught using individual "show and tell" instruments **before** the first day with their own instruments.

Room setup

There is absolutely no reason to set up a beginning band room as you would a high school band, in semicircle with the woodwinds in front, etc. Balance and blend are far less important at this stage than the cardinal principle: **You, the teacher, must be able to physically move to any**

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student rapidly to give them individual help. Your particular room setup will be determined by how much space you actually have.

Chairs

Set up the chairs in a large semicircle or even circle, if you can, with you at the piano in the center. If you must have rows, make sure that there are many aisles that allow you to walk among the students.

There must be plenty of room in back of each chair for the instrument case during the first few days of band. After the students know how to put their instruments together, cases may be left in a different part of the room. **Under no circumstances should cases be placed in front of the chairs with students resting their feet on the cases!!**

Stands

Stands will only get in the way during the first few days of beginning band. Don't use them until you absolutely need them.

Music

The method book will only be an unnecessary distraction during the first few days of beginning band class. Put as many of the first notes and exercises on the board as possible. Take out the book at the end of the first day only to show the students where they should practice and to show them how to use the fingering chart.

Teacher's equipment

The piano is the single most important piece of equipment used by the teacher of beginning band. It is used to play musical introductions for the exercises, to give pitches helping students, etc. Often you only have to learn a few chords to play along with any piece in the first method book. **Practice these pieces so that you can play them standing up, without looking at the book.**

Other very important equipment which should be within an arm's reach of the piano at all times during the first year:

- * sanitizing spray
- * cleaning rag
- * valve oil
- * slide grease
- * a few assorted reeds
- * mouthpiece puller
- * mouthpiece truing tool

The percussionists

Certainly the most neglected members of many beginning bands, the percussionists have to be an integrated part of the ensemble right away. This will not happen if they are allowed to only play

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one instrument or to only play drums. They will be able to progress through most method books much faster on drums than other students on wind instruments. At this stage, they may become bored and quit (or stay and make your life miserable.)

Bells

All percussionists should learn to play bells right from the start. You could set up a time or place in the book where, if they are keeping up on bells, then they are allowed to begin drum pad.

If possible, have a small set of bells that the students may take with them for home practice. If this is not possible, have special times where they can come in to the band room and practice.

Drums

Each beginner should have a practice pad to work on at home and should bring this to school for band. The ones shaped like a drum have a much better natural bounce than the hard rubber pads but are more expensive; this is an excellent investment for students who do not have the expense of owning a wind instrument.

Once the drums are introduced, rotation of students on the different drums and mallet instruments is very important. Under no circumstances should a student play only bass drum, or only mallets.

In a beginning band having 4 percussionists, a good rotation would be: 1 person on snare, 1 person on bass drum, 1 person on bells, and 1 person on drum pad. They could rotate between each song.

Tapping the toe

Music educators certainly have a difference of opinion about the value of toe-tapping. I firmly believe that, at the beginning level, there is far more to be gained than to be worried about losing from this system. Students in beginning band have a lot to think about (which fingers to push down, how to sit up, how to breathe, how to form their embouchure, if their neighbor will squeak and squawk today, etc.) and should not have to worry about finding the beat. In a nutshell, I believe that, at least for the first semester:

1. The conductor should rarely conduct in the traditional way (See [Conducting the Beginning Band](#))
2. The percussionists should always count the beats out loud, or at least loudly whisper the counting.
3. Absolutely everyone should tap his/her toe at all times.

I have found the following to be the most beneficial method of toe-tapping:

1. Put the right or left foot slightly forward so that the calf muscles are not strained when tapping.
2. Emphasize tapping only the toe in the shoe silently, not the entire foot loudly.

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3. Divide the beat equally. In simple time do Down-Up exactly in 8th notes. In compound time do Down-Up-Up with the second up being higher than the first up.

Advantages of this system, besides internalizing the basic beat:

1. You can see in an instant who is having problem
2. Eight notes, dotted quarters, and compound meter can be felt easily
3. You can help students (after getting permission from them) by simply putting your foot over theirs and helping them go down and up exactly right. Make sure they keep the foot on the floor the entire time until they need to snap it up for the "and" of the beat Another alternative is to put your foot on the floor and have them put theirs on top of yours.
4. You can get them started or back on track by using both of your arms in a down-up manner. They can readily see this and synchronize their tap with it
5. You can make sure everyone is tapping correctly before playing. Then count off with down-up-down-up-breathe-and-play while using your arms to show them down-up