Nurturing Artistry: Exploring the Influence of Performer Expertise on Ensemble Pedagogy

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Ensemble Radar

Birch Browning, Cleveland State University

My study:

The purpose of this study is to investigate the critical thinking processes employed by performers during the act of rehearsal or performance. I interviewed instrumental orchestral musicians who make a significant portion of their income performing with professional ensembles.

Ensemble Radar

Dobson, M. C., & Gaunt, H. F. (2015). Musical and social communication in expert orchestral performance. *Psychology of Music, 43*(1), 24-42.

> *Musical Radar: "listening to, communicating with, and adapting to other members of the ensemble at all times during rehearsal and performance."*

Study Findings

This study's findings largely confirm and extend the findings by Dobson & Gaunt (2015).

- Expert performers have exceptional knowledge of the vertical and horizontal structure of the repertoire, which yields highly specific self-selected listening targets.
- Their approach to performance problem solving is context-specific depending on their role in the ensemble and the texture of the piece.
- None of the performers ever received deliberate instruction on how to play in an ensemble.
- Opinions about ensemble radar varied between subjects.

Knowledge of repertoire

Knowledge of the repertoire is essential to anticipate radar targets.

- The subjects have often performed the repertoire on multiple occasions with a variety of conductors.
- They study the score of new works.
- Some engage in deliberate listening to recordings.
- Others practice with recordings.

Ensemble role

Heuristic approach:

- Principal players essentially ignore the section; they listen to other principals for balance and style, and to a common pitch center.
- Depending on the design of the piece, one principal may take the lead in any given section of a piece.
- Section players generally listen to the section principal for balance and style; they use the same common ensemble pitch but will abandon the ensemble pitch to play with the principal if there is a discrepancy.

Flexible approach:

- Ensemble role is secondary to musical role.
- They are aware of or seek to discover other player's tendencies and make adjustments to serve the music.
- Their radar targets shift rapidly.
- Radar targets may shift from first rehearsal to last, especially for new repertoire or when new to an ensemble.
- Familiarity leads to non-verbal communication to prevent and react to performance errors.

Percussionist radar:

- Significant use of visual cues compared to the wind players. They all watch the concertmaster, but the percussionist also watches the upstroke of colleagues in the percussion section.
- The percussionist will attempt to match the timbre and articulation of whichever wind players they are with, either in unison or dialog.

Learning Ensemble Radar

Implications for ensemble instruction:

- Assuming technical facility, students should be taught generic rules to selecting listening targets.
- When that fails, students should be instructed on where to listen, what to listen to, and why that should be their listening target in this instance.
- These approaches can be reinforced during chamber ensemble rehearsals, sectionals, and studio class.

Browning's Rules for Expert Wind Band Performance

Your primary job is to make everyone else in the ensemble sound better.

Intonation

1. Balance – match volume. You can't hear if you're in-tune unless you and your pitch target play the same volume.
2. Blend – match your tone color (timbre) to the other players. If you play with your best characteristic tone, it's easier for you and your colleagues to match sound, even if they play a different instrument.
3. Tune – now you can eliminate the beats by matching overtones and merging your sound into the target.

Ensemble Sound

1. Merge your sound (balance, blend, tune) with the members of your section playing the same part.
2. All parts within a section should produce the same resonance. Lower parts will have to play stronger to be heard.
3. If your line matches players from another section rather than yours, merge your sound with theirs.
4. Unless otherwise marked, all parts of the texture should be clearly heard.
5. Low notes have to be played twice as strong as high notes. If your musical line changes register, play stronger lower and lighter higher.

Ensemble Dynamics

1. If you consider *ff* to be the maximum volume the ensemble can create with a balanced, beautiful sound, i.e., 100%, then…
2. Forte (*f)* is only 50% of your available horsepower. Forte is <u>not</u> a loud dynamic[1].
3. *mf* = 25%; *mp* = 12.5%; *p* = 7.25%, and *pp* = 3.625%.
4. Fortissimo and pianissimo dynamic levels should be saved for important moments in the performance. Bands should play *mezzo* dynamic levels for the majority of the performance.

Note Style

Note style has to do with the length and shape of each note. There is no absolute relationship between note length and note shape.

Note Length

Notes length is described as the % of time that the note sounds during its written duration.

1. By default, staccato notes are 50% sound and 50% silence, e.g., a staccato quarter note is equivalent to a tenuto eighth note. To achieve the desired effect, a staccato note can be modified, e.g., a staccatissimo note might be only 25% sound and 75% silence. If the note needs more length, it could be redefined as 60% sound and 40% silence.
2. A tenuto is not equal to a slur; even tenuto notes have to have some space (silence) between them. A default length might be 90%.
3. At fast tempi, repeated staccato notes can be achieved by using a 'T' articulation but <u>not</u> clipping the end of the note.
4. Just because a note is staccato doesn't mean the it has to be accented.

Accents

1. Accents are written like and should sound like decrescendo on one note.
2. In general, there must be space (silence) prior to an accented note, which is achieved by shortening the previous note, if necessary.

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[1] Tim Reynish

3. To achieve the right amount of accent, a default rule is to play the beginning of the note ½ dynamic louder than the written dynamic.
4. If you are playing a series of notes and only some of them are accented, start the accented note just noticeably louder than the others and decay back to the written dynamic level.
5. Just because the note is accented doesn't mean It has to be shortened.

Marcato

Think of marcato notes as being both staccato and accented. Each variable (length and shape) can be adjusted independently to achieve the desired musical effect.

Musical Style

Phrasing

1. Phrasing is all about deciding which notes go together, like words in a clause or sentence.
2. Full phrases, like sentences, have a longer separation at the end—like the pause after a period at the end of a sentence.
3. Subphrases have shorter separations, like a comma in the middle of a sentence.
4. To communicate the phrase, players usually speed up or crescendo at the beginning of the phrase and then slow down and decrescendo to communicate the end.
5. If the composer or arranger specifically marks the phrase or subphrase, make sure to lift off of the last note of the group and leave a little space (silence) between the groups.
6. Even as you leave space between note groups, do not clip or accent the last note.

Legato Style

1. Young players will tend to 'football' notes to make them sound smooth. Don't.
2. To achieve a smooth legato, blow steady air and more the fingers quickly so there is no time or space between the notes.
3. Make sure last note is played full length.

Other Style issues:

1. When a long note is tied to a short note, release the short note unless the pitch changes.
2. When playing dotted rhythms is a separated style, think of the dot as a rest.

Musical Communication within the ensemble

1. Principal players should listen to other principal players to balance and match style.
2. Section players should listen primarily to the principal players if the section is playing together.
3. If you are a section player but your part aligns more with a player in another section, one player in the group needs to be the 'principal.' This responsibility usually falls to the members farther back in the ensemble, as they are less able hear players toward the front of the ensemble.
4. If you have a solo, you're in-charge. All other players need to balance and match style to the soloist.

How to Practice:

1. Make it easier until you can play it even if that means just one note.
2. Play it slower and easier: play shorter excerpts, play just the notes or just the rhythms, or leave out details, such as articulations, dynamics, etc.
3. Engage in successive approximation: systematically add back the details you previously ignored except velocity.
4. Once you can play the detail right every time, play it in context…slowly, then work it up to tempo.

Incorporating Classical and Romantic Period Practices into the Modern Wind Ensemble

Chris Chapman, Central Michigan University

Rhythmic Practices

- Count singing w/ Bach Chorales
- Basic note-grouping from Leopold Mozart (4,1,2,3)
- Downbeat is the end of most phrases – this helps with not pulsing beats
- Find sequences and give them a direction
- Find the pickup notes to each phrase

Melodic Practices

- Find the outline of the chord when playing fast passages (it's either a scale or arpeggio)
- Protect upper and lower notes of passages
- Pronunciation of upbeats – think the bowing
- Bring out the non-chord passing tones and give them direction
- Ties across the bar need some sort of direction and the release should resonate
- Linger a little longer on chromatic passing tones because these notes lead the listener

Ensemble Practices

- Be the last person to play downbeats
- Chords in root position= 1-5-3, then color tones
- How many sixteenths are in that release?
- To get a downbeat to actually sound at the same time, think the V7 chord on the breath
- Improvise to learn phrasing: play in the style of the composition, use the actual notes (either forward or backward), and create new rhythms. This helps them get in the head of the composer faster
- Wind and percussion students think about the kind of bowing they'd use, and put that in their breath
- How much bow should be used?
- How much pressure should be on the string here?

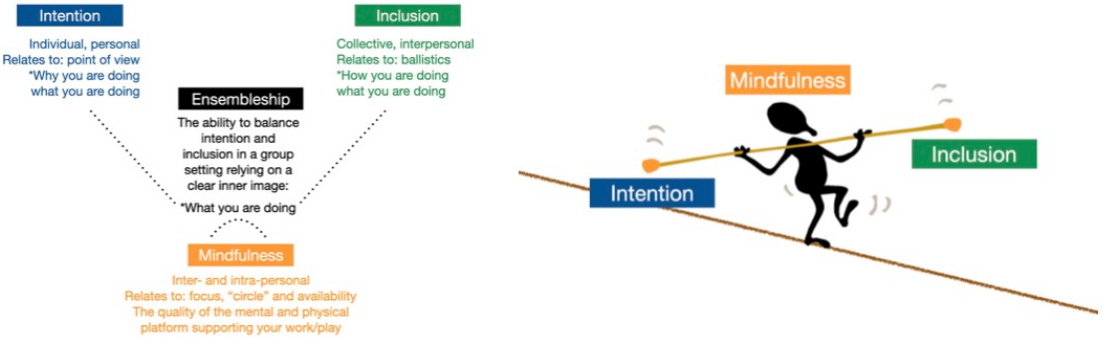
Research – Classical and Romantic Period Practices

1. *Sound in Motion* by David McGill
2. *Marcel Tabuteau* by Laila Storch
3. *Casals and the Art of Interpretation* – David Blum
4. *A Treatise on the Fundamentals of Violin Playing* – Leopold Mozart
5. Count Singing by Robert Shaw (YouTube video)
6. *Classical and Romantic Performing Practice: 1750-1900* by Clive Brown

Reimagining Fundamentals

Carolyn Barber, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

When an ensemble is working, every musician is balancing elements within the three large categories using the skills native to the concept of mindfulness as researched and defined by Ellen Langer (2014). In the Lab, we enrich Langer's fundamentals with insight from others including: Csikzentmihalyi (1990), Gray (2013), Rodenburg (2008), and Schwiebert (2012).



Navigation is three dimensional and players' actions are an expression of four simple guidelines:

- Separation: avoid crowding neighbors (divergence of point of view and perspective)
- Cohesion: steer towards the average position of neighbors (convergence within compositional parameters, "surfing" within intonation, pulse, and form)
- Alignment: steer toward the average heading of neighbors (shared musical context or frame to enable the simultaneous presence of the first two)
- Marginal opacity: get as close as you can to others but be sure you can see out of the "flock" in many directions (soften focus to include multiple streams of information, other trends and currents, listen for patterns rather than one-to-one matches)

These guidelines derive from insights found in systems theory, cognitive psychology, and theories of motivation gleaned from a host of studies. A small sampling of the studies are included in the bibliography below.

Reimagining Rehearsal and Performance

In the Lab, time is invested in experimentation and exploration to develop a complete, three-dimensional realization of a composer's intentions. To do this the ensemble must engage in a process of

conversation and debate through their playing rather than attempting to calibrate their performance to one pre-determined target. Problems are solved differently depending on who is in the room and what insights they have to offer in a given moment. As the players' strategies change their perspective changes and new interpretive possibilities emerge. As new possibilities emerge, the shape of the "flock" shifts revealing what Stuart Kaufman (2003) refers to as "the adjacent possible." The result is proof of Langer's research (2009) in which two studies were designed to test the hypothesis that actively creating novel distinctions and sonically portraying them during the performance of orchestral music is preferable to attempting to re-create a past performance. Individual attention to novel distinctions and subtle nuances appears to alter the process of creative ensemble performance and lead to music that is more enjoyable to perform and hear. Three-dimensional interpretation requires as many different perspectives as are available to create as complete a model of the composer's intention as possible. When three-dimensions are achieved the listeners' experience is transformed from witness to participant. This relates to current work in the Lab connected to hermeneutics and the philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer (2013), e.g. hermeneutic circle. When many perspectives are in play, the conductor's role changes dramatically. More on this another time sonically portraying them during the performance of orchestral music is preferable to attempting to re- create a past performance. Individual attention to novel distinctions and subtle nuances appears to alter the process of creative ensemble performance and lead to music that is more enjoyable to perform and hear. Three-dimensional interpretation requires as many different perspectives as are available to create as complete a model of the composer's intention as possible. When three-dimensions are achieved the listeners' experience is transformed from witness to participant. This relates to current work in the Lab connected to hermeneutics and the philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer (2013), e.g. hermeneutic circle. When many perspectives are in play, the conductor's role changes dramatically. More on this another time.

(Re)Inventing the Pedagogy of Ensembleship

Selected Games & Exercises

Flock to A & Find the Rhythm
JPP's Noonies
Duck Duck Goose Sequence
ABCDE
Portraits
Boom Ding Oooh Zap Crunch – thanks to Peter Haberman for the conducting exercise on which this is based!
Duck Duck Scale 2.0
Algonquin Round Table
Bears
Patent Applications
Marian Librarian
Hidden Mickeys
Trading Fours (*The Trip*, Tom Hanks at the Oxford Union, Ian McKellen's *Merchant of Venice*)
Treasury of Scales Multi-Tool
Tiers/Three Little Pigs
Diplomacy

Selected Concepts & Tools

Be the Baby
Availability
Ballistics
Air Marshalling
Triangulation
Sea Sponge v Scrub Daddy
Still-faced Mommy
Ruby and the Rainbow Infinity Toy
Junior the Pitbull
Flowers (The Fail Pail)
Storyboarding
Tennis Balls (Perry Como and friends)
Pilot Mode, Coach Mode
Full Scramble
Modified Rosie
Training Partners
Question of the Day

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