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Cover photo by Birk Herrath, taken at South Effingham High School, Savannah, Georgia.

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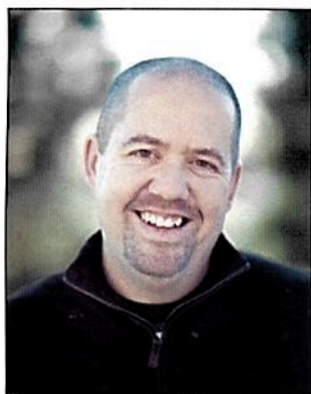
# Begin with the End in Mind

By Gerry Miller

*Editor's note: The Instrumentalist profiled Gerry Miller in April 2013. We asked him to follow up with more detail about how his program works throughout the year. This is the first installment.*

In our band hall, the quote of the month for January is from Stephen R. Covey's *Seven Habits*: "Begin with the end in mind." The foundation we build with our ensembles in January will ensure great musical performances in March, April, and May. Every ensemble presents a different set of challenges. As we think through each of our concert bands, we assess the strengths and weaknesses of every section, as well as the full ensemble. It's like preparing a great meal: there are the basic ingredients, but, as with most classic recipes, quantities are only suggestions. Each meal we make, just like each day, brings new surprises as we prepare for the long season ahead. We continually sample what is needed and what areas require greater attention. We hone our craft in the process and develop a rapport and a vocabulary with our ensemble that will extend through the spring and into the new year ahead.

*Gerry Miller is the director of bands and Fine Arts Department chairman at Wakeland High School in Frisco, Texas. Under his direction, the Wind Symphony is a three-time TMEA State Honor Band*



*Finalist and has performed at the 2011 Music for All National Concert Band Festival. The Marching Band is a three-time UIL AAAA State Marching Band Contest Finalist. In 2008, he was awarded the UIL Sponsor Excellence Award. Additionally, Miller is in his eighth year on the staff of The Cadets.*

*Gerry Miller received his bachelor's of music education at Loyola University. His primary teachers include Joseph Hebert, John Reeks, and Col. John Bourgeois.*

In our band program, there are three main types of foundation-building exercises that appear regularly in January rehearsal plans: building great individual, section, and ensemble tone qualities; working technical facility and comfort across the full range of the instruments; and tuning in the full ensemble – both through singing and playing.

## **Tone Builders**

I tell my students that if we all suddenly teleported to the base of Mount Everest, every one of us could easily conquer the first 100 steps up the mountain. But none of us could conquer the last 100 steps without a tremendous amount of preparation and training. This analogy defines how we approach tone building. Each ensemble, no matter the maturity level, starts with the basic tenets of tone production: breathing, embouchure, note starts/articulation, shape, air speed, and release.

As we reflect on the start of our ascent to great tone during the first year of band, it is a truly noble task – we are called to be diligent, patient, and supportive guides. As performers matriculate into our intermediate and advanced ensembles, we are tasked with molding great fundamental tones into a clear ensemble sound. Throughout this process, we stress that the sound of the individual must come first. If every clarinetist sounds exactly the same on open G, we are only around 1/40 of the way there when considering the full range of the instrument. Our goal should be for every student to produce fundamentally correct sounds across the instrument. This isn't a simple task – it takes years to master individual tone. As a result, we start with exercises that employ their first notes, staying in the most comfortable register of the instrument and gradually advancing up and down. We work on connecting their great sounds in the middle of their ranges to notes farther and farther away from their first notes.

At the start of each class in January, we often open with a few breathing exercises. In our opinion, *The Breathing Gym* (Pilafian and Sheridan) offers the best start to this process. After our breathing exercises, we prefer to use a Remington Exercise beginning on low B $\flat$  with whole notes

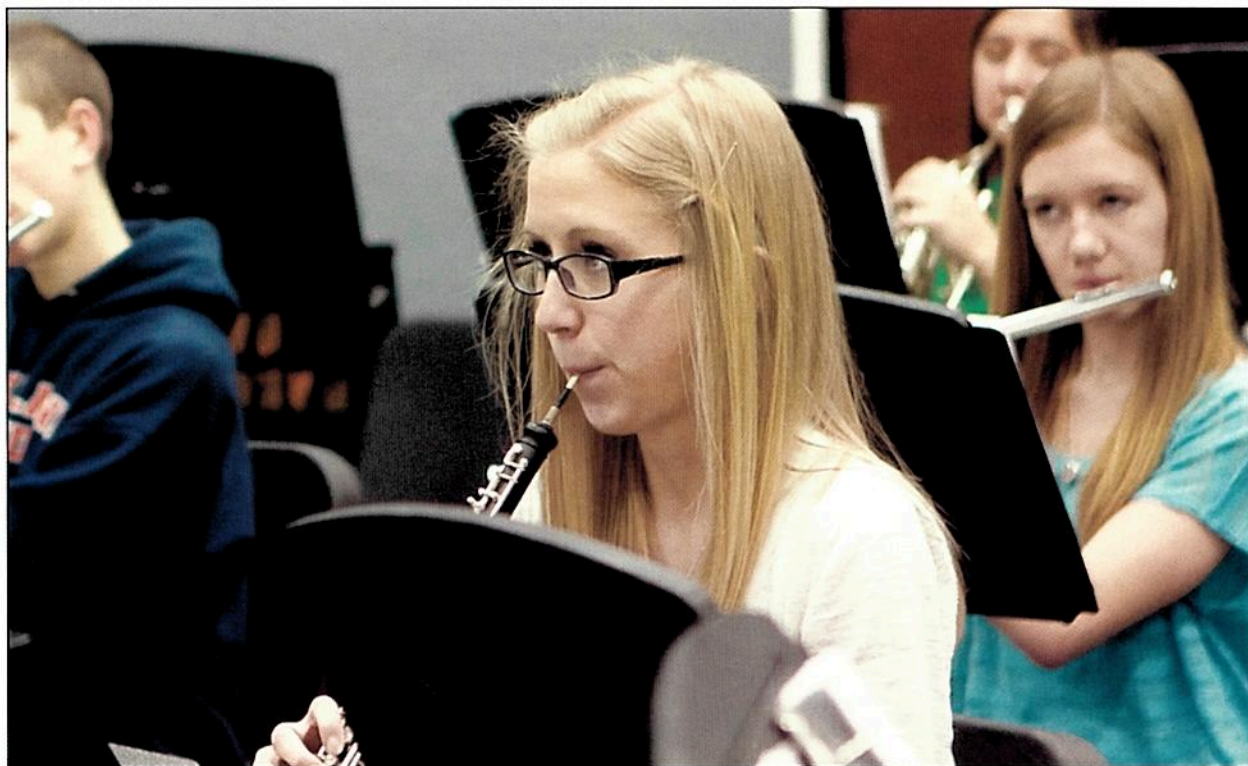
***“Working on all twelve major scales is a priority, but if a piece calls for harmonic minor, pentatonic, or whole tone scales, we construct technical exercises around these concepts. It is important that scale work is not simply procedural, but purposeful and based in the literature.”***

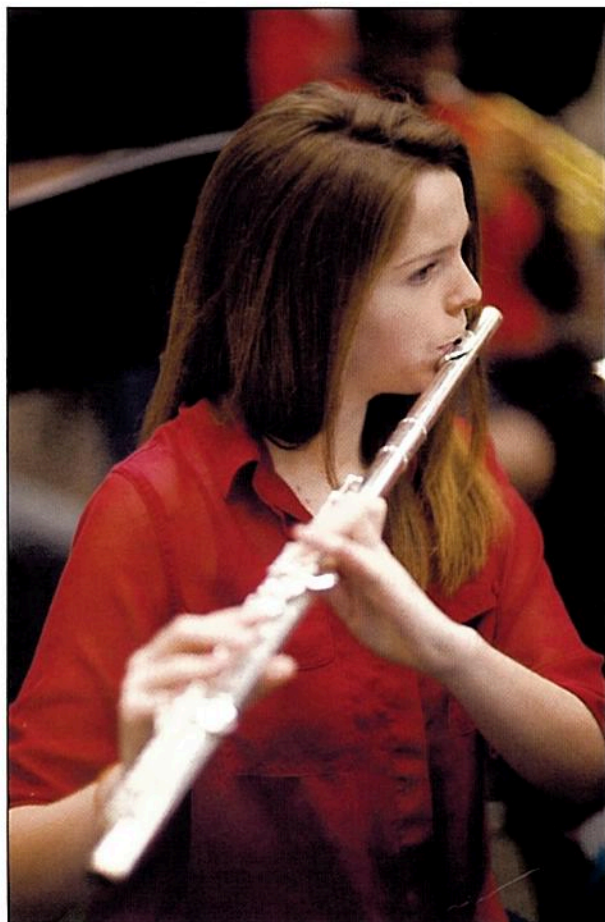
(three whole notes – B $\flat$ -A-B $\flat$  – with four counts of rest between each, continuing down the pattern). We discuss each exercise in terms of constants and variables. There are certain things that must take place in the rehearsal room for the exercise to have merit in building tone quality. The constants for low B $\flat$  Remington are the metronome at  $\text{♩} = 100$  and a drone B $\flat$  major chord (B $\flat$ -F-B $\flat$ -D-F) on the Yamaha Harmony Director. The variables on low B $\flat$  Remington include several layers of performance: we can allow individuals, sections, or the entire ensemble to perform on selected repetitions. As well, it is always interesting to pair the clarinets playing with the trumpets buzzing on BERPs, or the full brass section on their instruments with the woodwinds and percussion singing. Additionally, we sometimes move away from B $\flat$  Remington into other key centers that may apply to the pieces currently in the ensemble’s repertoire. It can be easy to work a B $\flat$  Remington to the point at which it sounds confident, but similar exercises based on C or D $\flat$  present new difficulties.

After B $\flat$  Remington, we move to the descending F major scale. Again, there are a few important

constants to ensure that the exercise improves the tone of the ensemble. The constants for F descending include the metronome at  $\text{♩} = 100$  and a drone chord on the Harmony Director (F-C-F-A-C, middle octave). The same variables from low B $\flat$  Remington are still used: sections playing, brass buzzing, and others singing on a *la* syllable. However, in F descending, the most important variable we add to the tone building process is the use of varied articulation patterns. While students may sound great on the long tones of low B $\flat$  Remington, we find that their tones aren’t always as clear once the tongue begins moving inside the mouth. Each student will need accommodations to hold their great tone in place as they articulate, and the more that we can allow them to perfect their craft, the better they will utilize varied articulations atop their best sound inside the repertoire.

So, in the framework of the F descending exercise, we work through a series of varied articulation patterns including half notes (a good long tone start), legato eighth-notes (full, connected), staccato eighth-notes (light, lifted, half-sound/half-silence), eighth-note triplets (slight separation, but





still light and lifted), and sixteenth-note permutations. We will even incorporate double-tonguing and triple-tonguing with the more experienced ensembles. Whenever the tone quality begins to sound fuzzy or unfocused, we return to half notes. We tell them it's like a camera – things appear clear and focused when the camera is still, but when we simultaneously walk and take pictures (8th notes), it becomes harder to stabilize and capture well-defined images. Once we start running and photographing (16th-notes), we have to be incredibly careful to keep our camera as still as possible to sustain the clarity we had back when we were standing still.

On the long tones, we aim for the ensemble to sound smooth and clear. As the tongue starts to divide the air stream, problems in clarity will arise, and returning to our divided groups (buzzing, singing with the correct articulation syllable for each instrument, and playing) will highlight areas for growth and development. Once F descending sounds good, we move into other key centers that complement the repertoire, including other major keys, minor keys, and non-traditional scales as needed.

After F descending, we have a set of flow studies arranged for full band (a PDF is available on our website). The flow studies work around a target pitch, beginning on the first notes discussed earlier.

The exercises move up and down through the range of the instrument, increasingly adding ascending notes to the pattern. This exercise tests air flow and consistency. The constants in the flow studies include the metronome at  $\text{♩} = 100$  and a drone chord (R-5-R-3-5) moving down chromatically through the lines (on the Yamaha device, press Transpose, then use the Minus Sign button under the wheel for each key change once the original chord is set up). Our youngest high school ensemble will play lines 1 through 4 on flow studies 1 through 4, while some of the older ensembles will use lines 1 through 5 and 1 through 6.

Tone building is the most important ingredient in our January rehearsals. Most of our ensembles have 90-minute rehearsals. With the youngest bands, the tone-building process will take around 20-25 minutes. The more mature ensembles will spend 15-20% of the rehearsal working on tone building.

### **Technique Exercises**

In our program, building a strong technical foundation is driven by literature. When we study the pieces in the program, we extrapolate scales and patterns that will best help our students perform successfully. Working on all twelve major scales is a priority, but if a piece calls for harmonic minor, pentatonic, or whole tone scales, we construct technical exercises around these concepts. It is important that scale work is not simply procedural, but purposeful and based in the literature.

After scales, we use variations on the *Clark Studies* for full band. These studies (available as a PDF on our website) take the full band through a Clark-style exercise program. If we are concerned about non-scalar technique, specifically brass lip slurs, these exercises address it beautifully. The constants in this portion of the rehearsal include the metronome at  $\text{♩} = 100-110$  and a drone (R-5-R-3-5) moving down chromatically with the exercise. We also have a simple chromatic exercise that varies articulation and chromaticism. It is a bit quicker ( $\text{♩} = 144$ ) and offers students an opportunity to build their chromatic technique in small spurts rather than on the full scale.

Our students actually find working on technique to be one of the most enjoyable things we do. I regularly remind myself to work things in small segments. We use the following analogy: imagine that you are required pull up a stool to an all-you-can-eat buffet counter and eat everything on the buffet at once – it's laughably impossible. Instead, we take one plate at a time. Now, considering the extension of this metaphor, there are many ways to approach buffet-style eating – perhaps we retrieve just a salad first, then go back for a mixed meal of an entree, a vegetable, and a starch; or maybe we just go straight for the good stuff and load up our plate with just one dish. In the end, every trip fills us up, and we're

adding fuel. As directors, we have to choose which approach best suits the ensemble and the repertoire we are working towards when beginning this process, and for the healthiest results, working technique in small portions will increase our ability to absorb everything on the plate.

In a recent article, Christine Carter, clarinet professor at the Manhattan School of Music, outlined a new approach to practicing. Her dissertation compares practicing musical excerpts in a random format rather than a blocked practice schedule. She compares this to how baseball players approach hitting. Some baseball players will enter the batting cages and hit ten fast balls, then five change-ups, then ten curve balls, etc (aaaaaaaa, bbbbb, cccccccc). This approach gives players a sense of accomplishment at the end of the aaa series, but it does not simulate game-time challenges. She advocates working on a series of excerpts – hit two fastballs, one change-up, one curveball, and one more fastball (aabca, aabca, aabca...). After all, on the concert, we do not get ten chances in a row to perfect a technical excerpt – it's all about performing the technique in stride as we approach it in the repertoire. So, when working on technique, consider using a more random approach, eschewing the aaaabbbbcccc approach, for the aabca method.

### **Ensemble Tuning**

To work on ensemble tuning, we must first have invested plenty of time in our tone building. To play in tune, we must play with a great tone. We have always written chorales that work around the key centers of the pieces we are programming. There are many factors to consider. Sometimes, a chorale can be excerpted directly from a piece, like Schuman's *Chester* or Zdechlik's *Chorale and Shaker Dance*. When programming Ticheli's *Apollo Unleashed* from his Second Symphony, we employed the Bach chorale contained in the movement (BWV 433), using Ticheli's voicings for the low reeds and brass, and adding another set of voicings for the upper woodwinds so that the chorale could be used daily to develop ensemble tuning.

Additionally, I think that the trios of traditional marches, when adapted well to the chorale style, can add to the musicality of our performances. Consider the trio from Sousa's *The Liberty Bell March* or Teike's *Old Comrades* – both adapt well to the chorale style. Not only will the tuning of the section improve, but the students will have a greater sense of the melody as a musical line rather than as a section of quick technique and oom-pahs.

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Our final consideration in chorale selection is voicing style. When performing works like Schuman's *George Washington Bridge* or Persichetti's *Masquerade for Band*, employ chorales that allow students' ears to accept compositional practices like bitonality and pandiatonicism. In the Persichetti, for example, there are masterful sections that, when performed slowly like a chorale, actually reveal two great chorales layered atop one another with a cool obbligato line (Letter X in *Masquerade*, if you're curious). The ensemble could learn both chorales and perform them separately, then use A/B pairing to switch off and hear how bitonality sounds from an ensemble tuning perspective.

Once a chorale is in place with the ensemble, we perform it daily with a few constants and variables. The main constant is the drone pitch. It's important that we program the performers' inner monologue to be a musical accompaniment track. Often when we perform, we fill our head with English words – things like “slower,” “don't rush,” “softer.” Sometimes, we find ourselves working in Italian – “crescendo,” “ritardando,” “meno mosso.” The level that is most difficult to acquire when programming the inner monologue of young musicians is one that is strictly musical – hearing a drone pitch and other lines to match with, as well as a consistent pulsing rhythm with subdivisions where required. By using the drone pitch and metronome in class each day, we are reprogramming our students' inner monologues during performances, and in doing so, allowing them to hear and react at an incredibly high level.

After teaching the notes and rhythms of the chorale, we begin singing. The students always stand to sing the chorale, and in doing so, increase their awareness of pitch away from the mechanics of the instrument. While students are not always comfortable singing, we have found that having them stand, open their mouth to the width of two fingers, and articulate with a *la* syllable, placing their tongue down on the floor of their mouth after the articulation of the note, yields the best overall approach. We avoid criticism about vocal tone – we want them to produce pitches in tune, and to focus on their musical line while hearing and blending or matching with other musical lines. It's also useful to have them hold one ear closed when singing – it increases

awareness of their own voice and pitch level while still allowing them to hear their neighbors.

After singing, we move to brass buzzing and woodwinds playing. For this, we also move the chordal accompaniment up one octave, so the pitch center is clearer to the woodwinds. We find that it makes brass buzzing easier to define. For buzzing, we advocate using BERPs on all the instruments, with the resistance sleeve set to whatever feels most natural for the player. If anything, adding just a bit more resistance to the feel of the mouthpiece is preferred. After the buzzing round, we move the chord back down to the original octave and have the full ensemble play with the chord sustained throughout. Finally, on the fourth repetition of the chorale, we remove the drone chord and just focus on the internal intonation of the ensemble. We find that, after three performances of the chorale (singing, buzzing, and playing) with the drone, fading it out right as the fourth round begins aids greatly in establishing a tonal center that is focused and round.

There are plenty of great chorale books available, but we have found that the ones we write best address our ensembles' challenges. Be creative. We don't have to perform these learning chorales on stage for an audience or judges.

### In Conclusion


After spending several weeks building these concepts into the ensemble, we begin to find our band sound. It is vitally important that students fall in love with their sound and insist upon the ensemble sounding its best every day. This is not something that comes from us on the podium – it has to be something that students insist upon in daily rehearsals. We compare it to the way one feels with a brand new car – it's sleek, shiny, and smells new. Over time, it's easy to let scratches, dents, and dirt become a part of our car. We don't notice them much at first, but over time, they build up. So, every once in a while, it is good to invest time in really cleaning the car, inside and out. We set a new standard for our vehicle. Hopefully, we fall in love with it all over again. That's how January should feel in our ensembles – a chance to rediscover our band sound, and make it something we love, a vehicle that carries us through to the end of the season.

Several printed and video resources are available on the Wakeland Band website. Stop by and see it in practice – [www.wakelandband.com/instrumentalist](http://www.wakelandband.com/instrumentalist).



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