

# THE Instrumentalist

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# Braving Transition

By Gerry Miller

One year ago, I took on the most challenging assignment of my teaching career: replacing one of my mentors at a storied band program in North Texas. Throughout the transition, I questioned whether I was doing the right thing, from how we entered the band hall each day to our performance interpretation of the most minute details. I constantly searched for signs that the transition was going well, and that we were all finding consensus in an ever-changing musical environment. I assessed our progress on a daily basis. As I drove home each day, I asked myself if we had accomplished our goals. While sometimes I answered with an emphatic yes, many other days were filled with obstacles that we had not yet overcome.

At the end of each week, usually on Sunday evening, I reflected on the past week. There were small victories and defeats. There were times I

needed to reassess how we were teaching a particular concept based on my students' experiences. We were working each week to build a rehearsal vocabulary and to understand one another's expectations. At the end of each month, I was able to take a 30,000-foot view of how we had grown and progressed. I set aside some time to listen to a recording or review emails over the past month to see how we were handling the day-to-day operations of the program, both musically and administratively.

I have always believed strongly in the importance of rigor, relevance, and relationships. I often asked if I was providing enough rigor: were my literature selections appropriate for the ensemble? Did I respond to an obstacle with enough pressure, but without appearing overbearing? In terms of relevance, was I able to relate our struggles – both our musical impediments as well as our personal and



photo by Susan Edgley



# Transition Questions to Consider

Transition	Daily	Weekly	Monthly
<b>Students</b>	How is the general climate of the ensemble? Do students enjoy coming to rehearsal each day? Are we making progress?	Is there a difference between how we performed a week ago and how we perform now? What setbacks have we experienced together? How did we overcome those setbacks?	Are we moving towards a more autonomous ensemble? Are the performers doing what is needed without being prompted? How are the leaders within the ensemble reacting to change?
<b>Repertoire</b>	What can we practice today that can help the ensemble grow? What items are we still struggling with?	Are we working on literature that is challenging but not overwhelming for the performers? When we begin working on a new piece, is there excitement/intrigue?	Does each subsequent performance improve? What major setbacks have we encountered? Where are there gaps in the performers' knowledge and experience?
<b>Rehearsal</b>	Did today's rehearsal start as intended? Were we able to maintain focus throughout the process? Did we end rehearsal performing noticeably better on at least one phrase?	Is our rehearsal process improving? Are we able to improve quickly because systems are being set in motion that aid in our autonomous growth? Are we beginning to see higher degrees of retention from rehearsal to rehearsal?	What is the students' overall approach to rehearsal? Are the rehearsals beginning with more ease/comfort? Are we finding our best sounds sooner? Are the performers secure and expressive?
<b>Me</b>	What one small task do I hope to accomplish today with the ensemble? What student should I try to make a stronger connection with? Have I clearly explained my expectations to the ensemble for today's rehearsal?	Is the ensemble moving toward self-reliance, or do I still need to say and model every expectation? When we encountered obstacles, have I handled them with grace and patience?	Is this month easier than last month? Have I found myself explaining less and expecting more without prompting? Am I finding happiness on and off of the podium? Is this feeling more like home?

transitional experiences – to real life? Most importantly, had I actively built relationships with my administration, colleagues, parents, and students to ensure a successful future? As I reflected each week, I adapted a management paradigm I had read that divided transition into three time periods: daily, weekly, and monthly. Inside of these benchmark time frames, I asked myself questions about the progress of my students, how my choice of repertoire was affecting change, how our daily rehearsals were paced and designed, and how I was emotionally managing the change.

## Students

Throughout the transition, everyone on our instructional team has worked diligently to ensure that the needs of our students are the primary motivation behind our decision-making. We view each rehearsal as a miniature time capsule. We like to see how the performers handle adversity. When we have a stellar musical moment in rehearsal, are the students able to maintain that level of clarity and artistry, or do we falter back to older ways? While it is easier to make progress early in the marching or concert band processes, when we neared the end, and the victories were both smaller and more challenging, we assessed their ability to persevere through the tiny details.

This was one of the toughest aspects of the transition. Everyone approaches the early days of learning a new piece similarly: we seek right notes, correct rhythms, and to establish comfort with the work. As we delve into the finer points of the performance, we often find interpretative differences, and the transition that was taking place – that had thus far been going smoothly – would suddenly grind to a halt. At these moments, we left rehearsals feeling as if we hadn't made any significant gains. I offered the analogy to our performers that if we were able to be instantly transported to the base of Mount Everest in the clothes we wore to school and with the lunch we brought, we could probably climb the first mile of the mountain with little difficulty. However, as we neared the summit – the end of our musical goal – we would eventually find that we are ill-equipped to reach the peak together (or if we made it together, chances are a few were dragged there kicking and screaming). This later part of the rehearsal process is where conflicts arose. Students returned to survival mode, and the primary concern shifted from caring for the growth of the ensemble to focusing solely on oneself – avoiding sticking out, playing it safe, and going back to the old way.

Over the weeks and months, we began to see a more autonomous ensemble. The performers and I made decisions about how we wanted certain moments to sound, and when we found the balance, blend, and interpretation we were seeking, we paused for a short moment in celebration. When

we were unable to make a phrase aesthetically beautiful, we moved to another section of the repertoire, coming back to the problem a day or two later. Making great music, especially in times of transition, is not unlike the process of making a diamond – it takes time and pressure. It was essential for both the ensemble and me to understand that we would not accomplish every musical goal in each rehearsal. In fact, there were days when it felt like we finished the rehearsal in a worse place than where we had begun. Ultimately, I wanted to help students feel secure in their role musically, creatively, and emotionally. There was no yelling, nor were there times when I showed signs of frustration to the ensemble. The ensemble was of the highest quality, and like a team of sculptors working with marble, we each chipped away the unnecessary bits of our daily performances to reveal an eventual masterpiece that was just beneath the surface.

## Repertoire

Whether entering a highly competitive program or revitalizing a struggling ensemble, choosing repertoire can be problematic. I began with the mantra of “challenging but not overwhelming.” There are times when, after many years, tackling an overwhelming work with an ensemble can be incredibly rewarding. In our first year together, I wanted to offer our performers some degree of challenge without placing them in harm's way, musically speaking.

With the younger concert bands, the staff and I sought literature that was enjoyable, accessible, and appropriately challenging. Where we found gaps in their prior experience, such as compound meter and the key of D<sup>b</sup> major, we found literature that addressed these in enjoyable ways (in our case, it was Frank Ticheli's *Vesuvius* and David Holsinger's *On a Hymnson of Philip Bliss*).

At the early stages of planning our concerts, we began with twice as much literature as we needed. If the third band needed three works for a February concert, we sightread six. We even began rehearsing a few as if we were going to perform them. Some proved too much for our current skill level. We liked other works, but decided to save them for concerts in April and May. A few were instant hits. Eventually, we grew to learn our ensembles' likes and dislikes, as well as their musical needs and wants. From here, we were able to program more effectively as the year progressed.

I faced an additional struggle on post-concert reviews. At our school, recording concerts was rarely done, so we began talking about self-assessment after performances. We listened to the performances and offered respectful commentary on everything from the quality of our ensemble sounds to the depth and breadth of expression from phrase to phrase. When we experienced a golden moment, we again celebrated this achievement. When we



fell short of our goal, we talked about how to approach things differently for our next concert.

By the May concert, we started with more focus and found success more often than we had in the winter. The performers began to trust me to choose pieces that would challenge but not overwhelm them, and we were able to find more and more golden moments in later concerts.

## Rehearsal

I often refer to the first moments of a rehearsal as our musical handshake. We talk with our performers about how we greet one another each day, and how that greeting indicates how our conversation will flow. When we see our family, friends, and colleagues in the mornings, we can often tell, just by the look on their faces, if they are having a good day or a bad day. In fact, just by one simple gesture, we can often tell a tremendous amount about what's going on in their lives. Our rehearsals are no different. From how the ensemble enters the room, to how the performers warm up on their own, to how we begin the first notes of a B $\flat$  Remington exercise, we can instantly tell what kind of rehearsal we are about to have.

During my year of transition, I used these first moments to solidify the rehearsal plan I had on the board. Each day, I tried to anticipate which order we could tackle the day's assignments. One day, we might plan to start with a technical section from the march, then move on to something more lyrical in nature, then back to a section feature in a programmatic work. However, if the ensemble came in all abuzz about whatever had happened in the hallway on the way to band, we might switch the order to start with something slow and lyrical to help the performers settle in to the period. Other times, particularly on sleepy Monday mornings in the winter, we might opt for an up-tempo start to the repertoire to ensure everyone's attention for the full time we had together. As the year wore on, I became better at predicting the needs of the performers. Some days, we might start by listening to a short recording, or talking about a concept in music theory that would help us later. To that end, we were always seeking to expand our musical horizons and improve our performance level of the given repertoire.

At the end of each rehearsal, I would allow for one or two minutes of reflection. We would assess how the rehearsal had flowed. I often asked if the pace was quick and efficient (but not frantic), or if we had moved too slowly. We talked about the moments in rehearsal where their focus seemed to drop, or where one individual's comment had caused us to veer off track. We were transparent in our communications with one another. This required both the performers and me to be vulnerable. Students eventually felt comfortable sharing that it would help if I slowed down on certain tech-

nical passages, as they were all overwhelmed with their science fair projects in the evenings and dealing with limited practice time. Other times, they asked me to play more examples of what I felt an ideal ensemble should sound like so that we could all move closer to our goal at a quicker pace. In the end, vulnerability became an important buzzword for us as we grew to know one another. Once the ensemble saw me taking the lead and allowing myself to be criticized, they were much more open to allow me to shape their rehearsal techniques into a process that maximized efficiency and encouraged artistic expression.

Perhaps the most telling aspect of our growth over the weeks and months of transition came through rehearsal retention. If we fixed the clarinet pitch from measure 17 to measure 25 in our lyrical piece, would it be fixed when we visited it later in the week, or did we return to our old ways? I often found this to be a helpful measure of our focus and attention to detail during rehearsals.

Often, in transitions, our students aren't sure about a conductor's pet peeves – the things that really irk us on the podium. While some conductors allow the occasional errant pitch level in the trumpets, others may stop an otherwise stellar run to reset and try again. It was important that I allowed the students to test me to see if I would stop for a missed dynamic level or an incorrect accidental. Where my predecessor might have halted the entire rehearsal for a trombonist sticking out, I sometimes allowed it at the early stages of learning a piece.

I described this to the ensemble as a process of filters. In the early stages of learning a new work, my first filter is often set on rhythm. I can bypass the occasional wrong note, but a wrong rhythm will cause the ensemble to stop. After this process is complete, I add my melody filter. We move on from there as we tackle harmonic/background clarity, form and consistency, tone color/timbre, and expressive nuance. This is especially challenging during times of transition, because I feel that if we asked 100 conductors for their process, there would be a wide range of subtle differences. Allowing the students to learn who we are as conductors fosters a rehearsal atmosphere of predictability, structure, and mutual respect.

## Me

As ensemble conductors, we are often lacking when it comes to taking care of ourselves in times of transition. I am thankful to have an amazing wife who frequently reminded me to take a step back and not expect perfection too soon. I was fortunate to lead a wonderful program for ten years before this transition, and the decision to step away from the community I had come to know so well was incredibly challenging. Expecting my new

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role to feel like home in the first few months was unrealistic. In fact, if I felt at home too quickly, I reminded myself that it was just infatuation and not yet love.

The most rewarding growth for me as an educator came in making connections with new students and families. Some performers were forthcoming; they had questions about my family, my background, my past musical experiences, and more. Other students shied away from connection. Learning nearly 400 students' names was already a challenge, but learning both students' names as well as each one's needs and wants was daunting.

I made it my goal to know why each performer was in band. I have often said that approximately 10% of students enroll in our programs because they want to study music for the rest of their lives. They are future composers, music educators, and performers, and they are often some of our most-valuable assets. The other 90% of the students in the ensemble can be separated into three distinct groups, although in talking with colleagues around the country, I find that the exact division differs from campus to campus, region to region, and state to state.

At my current school, about 40% of this remaining 90% are in band because they love the competitive aspects of our program. They like performing in Finals at Bands of America competitions and advancing to the State Marching Band Contest. Interestingly, many of these students have a background in athletics, and they channel that same inner desire to be their very best into the music they perform. Some of these students enter collegiate programs (mostly marching bands), and while they may not major in music, they will be leaders for arts education in our communities for years to come.

The next 30% are students who join band for the friendships. These performers practice enough to ensure that they earn placement in the same bands as their friends, but the competitions aren't really their prime motivation for enrollment in the program. They arrive at school and look forward to having a class without note-taking, written quizzes, or timed writing assignments. They like band because it is unique and because they identify with our core beliefs and values. These students may not continue on into collegiate band programs as they fracture with their friends and head off in different directions, but they'll raise another genera-

tion of student-musicians. They will be excited for the opportunities to chair a band booster committee or offer a lesson scholarship to someone in need, because band is what connected them to their high school.

The final group was the most difficult for me to reach. I felt that these students needed band more than band needed them. While that may sound harsh, I mean that these students needed the structure and consistency of band because their life at home lacked stability. Many of these students were unsure how to connect with me through the transition. After a year, some chose different paths. The changing face of the band program proved too varied for them, and while I hated to see them leave, I understood. Other students have grown to be our most valued success stories. They were students that were, in the past, effectively written off when it comes to no-pass/no-play in Texas. They struggled with classwork, grades, and relationships with trusted adults. In seeking out connections with them, we built a small community inside of our larger band program that placed equal value on the All-State performers as on the academically ineligible clarinetist in the bottom band. We respected the dignity of each performer in our care, and to honor them as if each one was a superstar in their own way. In doing so, I was able to find a wellspring of joy in my daily connections with the learners in my care. This sense of joy carried me through many dark days when it seemed that the rehearsals and repertoire were struggling. When I focused on the students and my connections with them, I found a greater sense of peace in trying times.

## Summary

Someone recently asked me if I would go through a transition like this again, and I answered an emphatic no. It will remain the most difficult task I have ever taken on in my teaching career. I have reaped the rewards of the work of my predecessors with humility while slowly turning the program towards our vision for the future.

It would be an understatement to say that the transition is complete or even nearing its logical end. Transitions into great band programs take time. I will be forever thankful to my predecessor, Scott Mason, for the 25 years of exemplary leadership he provided to the Coppell High School Band. After his retirement in May, Scott lost his battle with cancer in September of 2016. His

memory will always live on in the hearts and minds of our community, and his presence will forever be felt when you enter our band hall. He handed me one of the most challenging but infinitely rewarding experiences of my life. I will remain eternally grateful. □

*Gerry Miller is Director of Instrumental Music at Coppell ISD. Previously he was the founding Director of Bands and Fine Arts Department Chairman at Wakeland High School in Frisco ISD. Miller was on the staff of The Cadets for 10 seasons and is currently an adjudicator for Drum Corps International. He is the TMEA Area B Band Chairman, having served as the Region 24 Band Chair for the past six years. Miller received his Bachelors of Music Education at Loyola University-New Orleans. He is in the process of completing his Masters of Music Education.*

## Pepper Introduces Cut Time

J.W. Pepper launched Cut Time, an online group management tool for music directors and parent booster groups. Cut Time helps directors manage their music programs and reduce the time to complete administrative tasks. Features of the Cut Time platform include a system for managing the students, parents, staff, and volunteers in music programs; easy communication via email and text; document and inventory tools; financial tracking of obligations and payments; calendar management; and student assignments and grading. Pepper has partnered with Trigon Road, an experienced developer of group management software for the performing arts. Additional information about Cut Time is available at [www.cuttime.net](http://www.cuttime.net).

## Illinois Music and Computer Degree

The University of Illinois School of Music announced an undergraduate degree program that combines the study of music and computer science. Illinois is the first institution in the Midwest to offer a Bachelor of Science degree in Music and Computer Science. Students will have equal training as musicians and as computer scientists, and several courses in the new curriculum have been specifically designed to integrate core principles from both disciplines. Graduates from the new degree program will be well positioned to pursue careers in music or computer research or to enter the 16-billion dollar global music industry, which is now almost exclusively digital in content and delivery.