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CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT FOR ENSEMBLES

Effective preparation, good teaching, and fair and consistent discipline can help teachers manage ensembles of any size. Here are some useful ideas for your classroom.

BY WILLIAM I. BAUER

Classroom management can be defined as “all of the things that a teacher does to organize students, space, time, and materials so that instruction in content and student learning can take place.”¹ In a well-managed musical ensemble, students are on-task and involved in the rehearsal. They know the teacher’s expectations for them and are successful in learning musical concepts and developing performance skills. The rehearsal is goal-oriented, and a relaxed classroom atmosphere allows students to feel secure. Time is used efficiently, and disruptions seldom occur.

There are some unique challenges in managing ensemble classes when compared to various other learning environments. Ensembles usually consist of many more students than are found in a traditional classroom. The physical setup of the rehearsal room is unlike most other classroom arrangements. In an ensemble rehearsal, there are no desks for students to sit behind, students are often spread throughout the room, and frequently some students are standing.



File photo

If teachers run the rehearsal like a concert, then students are expected to follow directions and quietly move from piece to piece.

In ensemble classes, students must be active participants, whereas in other classes they may be able to be more passive. Ensemble teachers encourage students to make sounds (music), while in traditional classes, students often need to maintain silence most of the time. Ensembles are often quite heterogeneous in terms of the age and academic and musical abilities of students. Other classes are commonly more homogeneous, made up of all one grade level of students with similar academic backgrounds. Although music ensembles may be significantly different from classes in other academic areas, effective management can be achieved through

proper planning, high-quality teaching practice, and the use of good communication skills.

The Proactive Educator

Teachers skilled in classroom management, regardless of the subject area, are proactive. They understand that a well-managed classroom is often the result of good planning and preparation. This planning takes the form of curricular, instructional, and procedural planning. Curricular planning begins with selecting literature and determining long-term learning outcomes; the National Standards for Music Education can provide guidance.² Literature chosen should be

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Techniques for Dealing with Common Discipline Problems

- Talking is perhaps the most common problem faced by ensemble teachers. Some strategies for alleviating excessive talking include the following:
 - Waiting for silence—don't proceed with the class until the individual(s) stop talking
 - Say "Everyone look right here." if you ask students to look at you, they will turn away from the people they are talking to and stop talking.
 - On-off podium technique—tell students they can talk when you are off the podium, but not while you are on it.
 - Rehearsal as concert—run the rehearsal as you would a concert. When a composition ends, students keep their instruments up until the conductor lowers his or her arms, and then they quietly get ready for the next piece.
 - Raising a hand—when the teacher raises his or her hand, students also raise their hands and stop talking. This visual reminder to stop talking and listen is especially effective with younger students.
- Learn and use students' names.
- Consult with administrators, guidance counselors, and other teachers to gain insight on students who are misbehaving in your class.
- Ignore minor problems, and they may cease.
- Use student leaders to exert positive peer pressure.
- Treat students politely ("please" and "thank you") and with respect.
- Reinforce positive behaviors—catch students being good, and praise them for it.
- Develop the "teacher's stare." A stern expression can often be all that's needed to stop an inappropriate behavior.
- Use proximity to your advantage. Move throughout the ensemble. When you are close to students, they will tend to be on their best behavior.
- Criticize the behavior, not the person.
- Maintain composure at all times. Do not yell.
- Never get into a confrontation with a student in front of an entire class. Say, "See me after class."
- Never set yourself up to lose. Don't threaten students with any sort of consequences that you can't or won't follow through on.
- Sometimes moving students within the classroom is helpful (changing their seats either temporarily or permanently).
- Be firm, fair, and consistent.
- Enforce rules consistently, quickly, and quietly.

representative of a variety of styles, genres, forms, and cultures. It needs to be selected with an eye to various long-term curricular objectives, including psychomotor, cognitive, and affective learning outcomes. The literature should provide appropriate musical and technical challenges to all students.

Mid-range and short-term curricular planning is also important for effective ensemble management. The teacher must plan carefully in order to sequence and build instruction prior to major performances. A well-thought-out instructional unit covering several weeks can help develop students' knowledge and skills about a particular composition, composer, or musical style. Success in learning leads to a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment and builds the motivation to do more of the same. Teachers need to develop daily lesson plans that indicate exactly what should be accomplished, detailing specific areas in the music to be rehearsed. Always starting to work on compositions at the beginning and merely reacting to students' playing or singing are not sufficient. Along with planning *what* is to be accomplished, the activities to be used to teach concepts and skills also need to be considered prior to each rehearsal. Several possible strategies using different learning modes should be planned to work out anticipated problem areas in the music or to address any particular musical concept.

Another major aspect of daily planning is score study. Effective teachers take time to examine the score carefully ahead of time so that they are not learning the music along with their students and so that their eyes and ears can be active, looking around and monitoring the room. Teachers who constantly "wing it" in teaching daily lessons will be disorganized and will not make productive use of rehearsal and teaching time. Furthermore, students may lose confidence in their teacher's leadership ability.

Procedural planning—deciding the process for accomplishing common tasks and routines—is equally important for achieving a well-managed classroom. Procedural planning begins

with arranging the classroom before students arrive. It will save time if chairs and stands are orderly and all materials are ready for the lesson. The tone and atmosphere of a class is established as soon as students begin to enter the room. It is important for the teacher to be in the room as students are arriving and preparing for the day's rehearsal. This is not the time to be returning phone calls, making copies, filing papers, or grabbing a quick cup of coffee. As students come into the rehearsal room, the teacher has a wonderful opportunity to build rapport through informal conversation with them. With younger students, this time can be used to reinforce proper instrument assembly and maintenance, along with proper individual warm-up procedures.

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Students need to be taught a standard procedure to follow each day between the time they enter the ensemble rehearsal room and the time the rehearsal begins. Initial procedures in the ensemble rehearsal may include such activities as getting and assembling instruments, picking up music folders from a storage cabinet, arranging music in the rehearsal order that is printed on the board, and warming up individually. There should be a specific clock time designated for students to be in their seats to begin the rehearsal. If it is possible for students to be in their seats with music and equipment ready by the time the tardy bell rings, then that should be the

goal. However, band and orchestra students may need a few minutes beyond the ringing of the tardy bell to get their instruments and music and make it to their seats.

When the designated time arrives for rehearsal to begin, the class should commence promptly. If the director does not adhere to the starting time, students will not feel that punctuality is important, and stragglers will become commonplace. A delay of only five minutes per day wastes twenty-five minutes per week of instructional time. Multiply this by 180 days in a school year, and you will find that fifteen hours have been lost. If an ensemble meets an hour per day, this is the equivalent of three weeks of school.

Place the rehearsal order on the board before students arrive so that they can put their music in the correct order prior to the beginning of class. This will save time moving between compositions in the rehearsal. If possible, start the rehearsal with music, not talking. Rather than making announcements at the beginning of the rehearsal, try placing them between selections or at the conclusion of class. Beginning with music reinforces the idea that the ensemble's most important priority is music.

Handle as many administrative functions as possible outside the rehearsal. For taking daily attendance, develop a system that is quick so that the flow of the rehearsal is not disrupted or the start delayed. A reliable student can often be given this responsibility. Such tasks as passing music in or out, fund-raising, and fitting for robes or uniforms are all necessary activities for most school ensembles. However, if procedures are devised that allow these types of items to be dealt with outside the rehearsal, they will not become disruptive to the ensemble's primary purpose: music teaching and learning. For instance, rather than taking class time to distribute music, a music folder cabinet can be used to arrange it ahead of time so that students can pick up everything they need as they enter the room. A teacher could have a locked safe with a slot in the top where students can place fund-raising money in

sealed envelopes before class, alleviating the need for the director to frantically collect money from students while trying not to waste too much rehearsal time. Parents can often be enlisted to help with fitting robes and uniforms. With parental or other volunteer assistance, class can continue while individual students or pairs of students work with an adult volunteer to get properly measured. Another option is to undertake these sorts of activities only with students during study halls or before and after school.

Certain procedures for the end of rehearsals are also important to a well-managed class. Students should be taught how to put away instruments, music, and equipment properly; they must also be given adequate time to do these things and still make it to their next class. Many teachers have students sit down again after putting their materials away and then dismiss them from their assigned seats. This alleviates students milling about the rehearsal room or crowding around the door waiting for the dismissal bell.

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parts: rules,
consequences, and
rewards.*

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Teaching Practice

Good teaching practice leads naturally to a smooth-running classroom. Start rehearsals with "minds-on" warm-ups such as those advocated by Edward Lisk.³ Warm-ups need to physically warm up instruments and voices, as well as focus students on the task at hand and help them develop and reinforce musical listening skills. Student motivation will increase if stu-

dents know the goals and objectives for the rehearsal. Prior to beginning work on each composition, briefly state what needs to be accomplished. Position students for success by sequencing instruction properly. Progress achieved as a result of good sequencing leads to a sense of satisfaction, making students feel that their efforts were worthwhile. Use complete teaching cycles by giving specific instructional directives and then providing specific feedback following each instructional episode.

Teachers also need to be aware of personal qualities that contribute to effective teaching. A teacher should look, act, and talk like a professional and should take special care to dress appropriately. A professional rapport with students is essential; however, students must understand that the teacher is not just “one of the gang.” The volume, clarity, and inflection of a teacher’s voice can contribute to the attentiveness of students and the effectiveness of the teacher’s presentation. During rehearsals, the conductor must

not become locked to the podium. Varying proximity to students by moving throughout the ensemble can help student motivation as well as deter off-task behavior. Good eye contact, varied facial expressions, use of appropriate gestures (including clear conducting gestures), projection of enthusiasm and energy, a sense of humor, and an overall positive orientation will contribute to effective teaching and, hence, effective classroom management.

One problem often experienced by less-experienced teachers is poor pacing of instruction. Lag time and inactivity can lead to student boredom, which may result in discipline problems. A quick pace helps to keep students involved so that there is no opportunity for them to wander off task. Using a variety of activities and varying the mode of instruction (aural, visual, kinesthetic, or tactile) within any single class period will help to maintain interest and facilitate the different learning styles of students. It is useful to pay attention to the ratio

between student activity (playing, singing, etc.) and the amount of teacher talk, being sure that students are “doing” much more than the teacher is “talking.” Through use of clear conducting gestures and teaching students to respond appropriately to these gestures, teachers can communicate with their ensembles nonverbally, helping to minimize excessive talking.

It is also important for the ensemble conductor not to spend too long rehearsing any one passage or individual section of the ensemble. When this occurs, the students not involved in that particular rehearsal episode may begin talking or engaging in other undesirable behaviors. Some directors find the use of a time line, where they indicate the clock time when they will be covering specific topics in their lesson, helpful in maintaining a quick classroom pace. One technique that is effective in keeping students involved is “silent practice,” during which students silently audiate their part to the music and practice their fingerings while another group of

Figure 1. Discipline Plan—Middle School Band

Rules:

1. Bring your instrument, music, and a pencil to class every day.
2. Be in your seat with instrument, music, and pencil no later than three minutes after the bell.
3. Raise your hand to be recognized before speaking.
4. Be respectful of your classmates. Keep your hands and feet to yourself.
5. Gum, candy, food, and soft drinks should be left outside the music room.

Consequences:

First Offense—Student is given a verbal reminder of the rule.

Second Offense—Student is given a verbal warning and his or her name is written down.

Third Offense—Student will stay forty-five seconds after the class is dismissed and discuss the problem with the teacher.

Fourth Offense—Student will have a thirty-minute detention after school, and parents will be contacted.

Fifth Offense—Student will pack up their instruments, put away their music, and move chairs in the rear of the rehearsal room.

Emergency Clause (invoked for chronic and/or severe problems)—Student is sent immediately to the principal’s office.

Rewards:

1. Students will receive daily positive feedback from the teacher.
2. “Section of the Week” award, will be awarded to the section that exhibits the best behavior and musical effort.
3. “Rave Reports” and positive phone calls to parents will be awarded to individuals on a daily basis.

I have read and discussed these discipline policies with my child. _____
(Signature of parent/guardian)

students rehearses with the director. Another technique useful in keeping students mentally involved in the rehearsal involves asking them appropriate questions. For instance, when working with the clarinets to achieve a desired articulation, the teacher might ask the trombone players to listen and assess the clarinetists' performance.

At the end of the rehearsal, proper closures must occur. In the ensemble rehearsal, both musical and psychological closures are important. Closure reminds students of what they have accomplished, which helps give them a feeling of achievement. It also prepares students to come back ready to work and make progress during the next rehearsal. Musical closure might consist of playing through a major section of music that has been rehearsed in detail, concluding at a logical point. Psychological closure can entail verbally reinforcing the objectives of the lesson and the progress made toward them during the rehearsal, along with giving assignments and expectations of what the next rehearsal will involve.

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Classroom Discipline

Although being proactive through planning and using good teaching practice will go a long way toward establishing and maintaining a smooth-running classroom, inappropriate student behavior may still occur. To be prepared for these situations, the teacher needs to develop a

discipline plan (see figure 1 for a discipline plan that might be used in a typical middle school band classroom). Rather than merely reacting to a disciplinary situation when it arises, the teacher can use a discipline plan to follow a procedure that was carefully thought out ahead of time. A classroom discipline plan needs to be consistent with schoolwide discipline policies and procedures. An effective discipline plan will include three parts: rules, consequences, and rewards.

The rules should clearly state expectations for student behavior in a positive manner. The number of rules should be relatively brief—around five is a good number. Classroom rules need to be consistent with school rules, but should deal only with behavior, not academic concerns. Once rules are developed, they should be discussed with students and then permanently posted in the classroom. Some teachers like to involve students or student leaders in the formation of rules. This can provide students with a sense of ownership in the conduct of the class.

If a rule is not followed, a consequence needs to occur. Many teachers feel that the best consequences are those that are logically related to the rule that was broken. For instance, if a student defaced a piece of music by writing all over it in pen, a logical consequence would be for the student to be required to purchase a replacement copy of the music. Consequences that are related to academics, such as deducting points from the student's grade for the day, should not be used. Maintaining a separation between behavior and academic achievement helps to keep music classes in the mainstream of curricular subjects. The goal of any consequence should be to help students to develop self-discipline. Consequences should be explained to students at the same time that the rules are introduced. Consequences should be administered quickly and in a way that does not interrupt the flow of the class. Making a "big deal" out of the violation of a rule may serve to reinforce the misbehavior by giving the student extra attention.

Rewards are an important aspect of

a discipline plan and are necessary to affirm good student behavior. Rewards can take many forms—a compliment, smile, special privilege, certificate, positive phone call or note sent to parents, or stickers. The rewards that a teacher chooses to use will depend on his or her philosophy about use of rewards, as well as the age level and maturity of the students. Obviously, the teacher will want to offer rewards that are appropriate, attractive, and motivational to a particular group of students.

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It is important to be consistent when administering the discipline plan. If a rule is only enforced part of the time, or for certain students, the plan will quickly become ineffective. For major or frequent discipline problems, a discipline file should be kept where discipline measures taken with students are documented. The date of each problem's occurrence, the behavior in question, and the action taken should be noted in this file. This information will be useful to the teacher when talking with parents or if there is a need to refer the student to the principal.

An effective discipline plan involves not only the teacher and students, but also the school administration and students' families. The principal should review and approve the discipline plan prior to its implementation. This will help to ensure that the classroom discipline plan is aligned with the schoolwide discipline plan and

that the consequences stated in the plan will be supported by the administration. Parents or guardians also need to have a copy of the discipline plan. One effective means for accomplishing this is to mail to each student's home two copies of the plan, one to keep and one for a responsible

adult to sign and return. When major concerns about a student arise, parents need to be informed by telephone immediately. Parents will generally be supportive of the teacher because they want their children to be successful. Most responsible adults understand that adhering to school

rules is necessary for this success. Another way to inform parents or guardians about a student's misbehavior is to have the student phone the adult caregiver in the teacher's presence, explaining why he or she is calling. After the student talks to the parent or guardian, the teacher should then speak to the person and enlist his or her assistance in alleviating the problem. The sidebar on Techniques for Dealing with Common Discipline Problems offers some additional specific suggestions.

Selected Resources for Effective Classroom Management

Collins, Donald L. *Teaching Choral Music*, 2d. ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1999.

Curwin, Richard L., and Allen N. Mendler. *Discipline with Dignity*, rev. ed. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1999.

Kohn, Alfie. *Beyond Discipline: From Compliance to Community*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1996.

Lehr, Marjorie R. *Getting Started with Elementary-Level Band*. Reston, VA: MENC, 1998.

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The Risks of Rewards. Located on the World Wide Web at www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed376990.html

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VanDerveer, Elizabeth. "Stopping Discipline Problems before They Start." *Music Educators Journal* 75, no. 9 (May 1989): 23–25.

Walker, Darwin E. *Teaching Music: Managing the Successful Music Program*, 2d. ed. New York: Schirmer Books, 1997.

Zerull, David S. *Getting Started with High School Band*. Reston, VA: MENC, 1994.

Summary

Effective management of an ensemble classroom can seem at the outset to be a complex process. Teachers desiring to develop their skills in this area can use resources such as audio/videotaping of classes for later self-critique, consulting master teachers, asking advice of administrators, reading books and professional journal articles on classroom management (see the Selected Resources for Effective Classroom Management sidebar for some of these), and participating in workshops, seminars, and in-service presentations. Through study, reflective practice, and experience in a variety of classroom situations, the teacher can develop the confidence and skills necessary to have a classroom that runs smoothly. Most important, through careful planning, sound teaching practice, and good communication with all those involved, teachers can take the necessary steps to establish and maintain good classroom management, allowing ensemble rehearsals to become environments where musical learning can take place for all students.

Notes

1. Harry K. Wong and Rosemary T. Wong, *The First Days of School* (Sunnyvale, CA: Harry K. Wong Publications, 1991), 35.
2. Consortium of National Arts Education Associations, *National Standards for Arts Education* (Reston, VA: MENC, 1994).
3. Edward S. Lisk, *The Creative Director: Alternative Rehearsal Techniques* (Ft. Lauderdale, FL: Meredith Music Publications, 1987). ■