

Benjamin Russell High School
Band Program Assessment 2014-2015
March 2, 2015
Dr. Frank Buck
Organizational/Administrative Topics

Facility

The band room rehearsal area is adequate for concert band rehearsals. Having an entrance/exit to the outdoors and bathrooms within the facility allows rehearsals to take place without having to open other parts of the school.

The re-designed library, with its shelving around the perimeter of the room, large workspace in the center, and two copiers, make assembling music for distribution efficient.

Because of the transfer of sound, the practice rooms cannot be used during a rehearsal, but provide needed storage.

One recommendation is to install acoustical treatment on the walls in the rehearsal area to help with sound absorption. When the room is “live,” diagnosing and correcting problems becomes difficult.

A second recommendation would be to look into making the large ensemble room behind the band room as sound-proof as possible. If accomplished, one director could take a small group into this area while the rest of the band rehearses in the band room.

Materials

There was no evidence of the band lacking for instruments at present. A replacement plan should be in place so that as instruments reach the end of their useful lives, money will have been set aside for replacement.

Class Management

Classroom management seems excellent. The students are responsive to their directors and seem to enjoy rehearsals. Classroom control seemed effortless. The long periods (75 minutes) allow for a great of work to be accomplished.

Scope and Sequence of Class Offerings

Being able to offer a band class strictly for freshmen is a plus for the program. The group is large enough to stand on its own in public performance and small enough for individual attention to be supplied to students.

A balanced band program offers concert band, marching band, jazz band, ensemble playing, and a method for building individual skills. The schedule offers a 1st period jazz band, three concert bands, and a competitive marching band. The ensemble aspect of the program was not observed today.

The area for growth here seems to be a systematic method for building individual skills starting in beginning band and building through 12th grade. Home practice should center around working through a method book written specifically for that instrument with each student practicing material at his or her level.

Program Communication

The band program maintains a significant web presence with a website, Facebook page, and Twitter account. The band maintains a database in “Charms” and uses it to send mass emails to students.

Technology Integration

The 1-to-1 iPad Initiative opens a number of possibilities. Intonation is a critical, and often elusive, aspect of ensemble playing. Inexpensive and free tuning apps are available for download from the iTunes Store. “Tonal Energy” is a highly-regarded example. With the app installed on the already-available iPad, students are able to check intonation in real time as they play. They can watch pitch tendencies as they change dynamic levels and identify adjustments they must make on the characteristically out-of-tune notes which exist on every instrument.

Technology makes available to students audio and video recordings of professional players who play their instruments, providing a model after which they may copy. Many instructional videos exist on YouTube and are free. Recordings of band performances are also available, allowing students to listen to pieces they are playing in band being played by other groups of all performance levels.

Suggestions for Growth

Consider starting Beginning Band in 6th grade

The 6th grade is the most common year to start beginning band, as this is the starting grade in most middle schools. Offering 6th grade Beginning Band would

give Alexander City students the same opportunity as other students. Students are sufficiently mature to have good success in 5th grade. Such an arrangement allows for a more advanced 8th Grade Band, as students will have been playing for two years instead of one. Bands in 6th grade tend to attract a larger number of students.

The considerations would be time and space. Daily, or almost daily, class meeting time is essential for students to progress. Having a consistent place to meet that requires minimal setup is necessary.

Provide additional focus on the development of individual musicianship

Encourage participation in honor bands, Solo & Ensemble Festival, and All-State, starting at the middle school level. These activities promote home practice and provide incentives for students to grow. Establish relationships with Auburn University to offer master classes and/or private lessons to students.

Develop a plan to switch students to double-reeds

The Freshman Band provides a prime opportunity to evaluate potential double-reed players and make transfers. Starting an oboe player at least every other year and a bassoon at least every other year would assure at least one of each instrument in the Symphonic Band. The band program has done an outstanding job of starting and retaining sufficient numbers of clarinets. Clarinet, saxophone, or flute players would all be good candidates for double reeds.

Ideally, select students could be started on double reeds in middle school, with the option to change students over in Freshman Band as a back-up if the younger students moved away or dropped out of the band program.

MPA-Level Evaluation of On-Stage Performance

Freshman Band

The Capitol March

5—Bring out baritone/tuba more to balance the off-beat rhythm. The two parts together form the “heartbeat” that supports the melody. We are hearing from the percussion much more than the winds that have that rhythm.

Flutes—Can you play out more through this section? You have the melody with the trumpet.

Trumpets—Be careful to only slur the notes marked to be slurred. Some are slurring all of measure 5 & 6 and 13 & 14.

Very important to put space on both sides of accented notes. Spacing the accented notes will make it sound like you are doing more accent than you really are.

In a march, play the notes that are a beat or longer full value. Notes shorter than a beat should be played about $\frac{1}{2}$ their written value. (This concept is one that applies throughout the march.)

Percussion—Be careful not to rush through the 1st and 2nd endings.

23—Trombones—Check the length of 2nd position (tends to be long) and 3rd position. Check Eb on the downbeat of 23, for example. Sounds like a wrong note. Use your iPad with an electronic tuning device to find out.

For the band as a whole, the last note of the phrase should usually be softer than what has gone before it. Just before the first ending, you have an accented quarter note slurred to a non-accented eighth note. Put the weight on the accented note and think about “lifting” off of the eighth note.

45—Check notes during those first 4 measures. Many are not getting the accidentals. Everyone should have a fingering chart handy so that if you are not sure about a fingering, you can look it up.

Upper woodwinds, this is your time to shine. Since these notes are a beat or longer, hold each one full value. Go as long as you can in one breath and “sneak” a breath in the middle of the measure. (One rule of thumb is avoid breathing on a bar line.)

Mallet (bells) is doing a nice job of balancing on melody.

64—Nice job on the dotted-eighth-sixteenth rhythm. Again, separate the accents.

The band plays out with good volume. Spacing the notes gives a march the “crispness” you want. Space between accents makes everything easier.

Tempo is steady. Good job of watching and staying with the director.

I noticed most students had their own stand and music. That makes it so much easier to watch the director.

The Water is Wide

1—Very nice mallet work. It's good to see this many percussionists who can perform mallet parts.

Winds—Focus on keeping a steady stream of air moving through the instrument. If you have to take a breath, sneak it in the middle of the measure and come back in so gently nobody knows you were gone. Let the notes touch each other. Let the tongue “dent” the air stream.

6—Clarinets, going into measure 6, play the tenuto notes...no space. This section is your opportunity to demonstrate a beautiful sound. Take plenty of mouthpiece, so much that any more would cause a squeak. Firm the corners of the mouth. Push up with your right thumb. If you were to take just the barrel and mouthpiece and play a note, it should match top-line F#. If you are below the pitch, push up with your hand. When you put the entire instrument together, push up the same amount with the right thumb.

Accompaniment—Keep the line moving so there are no “holes” in the sound. Stagger breathe so that the line is never broken.

Every whole note is an opportunity to make music. Whole notes can grow. Whole notes can diminish. Whole notes can do both. Whole notes can never stay at the same volume for 4 beats. Generally, you will crescendo during the beginning of the phrase and decrescendo towards the end. The last note of the phrase is the softest. That way, it's not so obvious when you take a breath.

Trombones—In legato playing, the slide has to move faster. You want to avoid a “smear” between notes. The only way to do that is to make the slide changes instantaneous.

22—The tenuto eighth notes must be tongued much lighter. Let them “touch” each other, and let the tongue simply dent the air stream.

The most important element of your playing is tone quality. When working for a mature sound, air is everything. The proper amount of air makes everything easier. It makes reed vibrate better, so that clarinet and saxophone players don't “bite” and can take more mouthpiece in the mouth. Air allows brass players to open the aperture more without the note dropping to a lower partial. In this piece, concentrate on taking a deep breath, one from the very bottom of your lungs. (You can't really do that, but it helps to think about it that way.) Think about using “warm air” (which opens your throat) as you play. This piece is a tone contest. If you are playing a whole tone, your goal should be for the person in front of you to want to turn around and tell you what a beautiful tone quality you have.

I would recommend having flute players use the thumb Bb as the primary fingering and encourage this practice to extend to beginning band at the middle school level. The thumb Bb eliminates the “cross fingering” students experience when going to and from the Bb. Students

should know they can leave the thumb on the Bb thumb key for all notes except B natural and the very high F# (neither note they experience often in band music).

Doppler Effect

1—As you make the crescendos and decrescendos, the air pressure remains constant even though the amount of air changes. The lip opening for flute becomes larger as you crescendo and the embouchure a little more like a smile. As you get softer, the lip opening is smaller and the embouchure more like a pucker. For reed instruments, as you crescendo, the embouchure must be even firmer to control the larger amplitude of reed vibration.

21—Back off the non-accented notes so that the accents stand out more.

30—Flutes did a very nice job with this line. In time, you will want to learn how to use vibrato. Nice balance; accompaniment parts got underneath the flute part.

38—Nice trumpet balance. Work to move the valves quickly. Doc Severinsen always said, “Slam the valves down hard.” It has a big effect on the quality of sound when playing legato passages.

54—The clarion-register clarinet part requires the corner to be firm and a good amount of right-thumb pressure. Try pushing the lower jaw forward some. Bring out the 2nd clarinet much more. Counter melody must count so you are changing all notes together.

61—Play the non-accented notes softer. Play all of the eighth-notes shorter. The accents will stand out more.

75—Check notes two measures before 75 (Db for flute).

91—4th line D is a note every trumpet player need to know about. It’s flat. Lip it up OR play it 1st and 3rd valves.

Didn’t really comment on percussion. They balance well with the winds, never too heavy.

Timpani pitches are quite good. Cymbal is just the right amount. Nice attention to accents.

Daily practice on the right literature is the key to becoming a good player. YouTube is full of short videos that demonstrate good tone quality. Search YouTube, and when you find a really good one, share the URL with the other people in your section. When you hear a professional sound and start trying to copy it, your sound will improve. Use a method book that has a CD with the material being played by a professional player. You quickly gain a concept of the tone quality you are after.

Concert Band

Plaza de Toros

1—Trumpets—Space the accented notes, as well as the other notes which are shorter than a beat. Watch the D and Eb in the first trumpet. These 5th-partial notes are flat. Check to be sure flutes are fingering the tremolos correctly. Hold the F fingering and move the left-hand pinky for F to Ab. Finger G but put the thumb on the Bb thumb key and move the 2nd and 3rd fingers of the left hand for the G to Bb.

4—Trombones—Space the notes. Get the teeth more apart and the aperture open.

6—Trombones count. Someone moved to Gb a beat early.

9—Trumpets have a nice style and are projecting the melody without overblowing.

11—Trombones check slide positions.

13—Trombones check slide positions throughout this section. C, G, Db, Ab, and Db all return a real “crunch.”

29—Trumpets—Put much more space between notes. The section sounds unsure of how the rhythm fits with the beat. Trombones continue to have problems with slide accuracy. Trombones are late changing notes coming off of the dotted-half notes. Release just a little sooner on the dotted-half notes.

36—Check fingering of low F# in the clarinet.

55—Hold downbeat of 55 and check notes. Many wrong notes here.

61—Nice energy on the Coda. Prepare more for the last note. Give it a little length and strive for a good, resonant sound.

Nice energy throughout and nice concept of balance. Percussion section played well throughout. Percussion balanced the winds just right. Attention to detail is evident. The areas for attention are spacing short notes and accents in the brass section and accuracy of slide positions in the trombones.

Mechanism

1—Very nice percussion work.

7 & 11—Bells—Bring out of the notes from G and below. The upper notes are projecting well.

15—Flute—This section is a good example of how fingering Bb using the Bb thumb key (and no right-hand 1st finger) comes in handy. As you go back and forth between G and Bb, you are moving 2 fingers of the left hand (and they both go up and down at the same time.) Fingering Bb the other way, you are having to pick up two fingers and put down another finger, all at the same time.

15—1st Clarinet—If you are not already doing so, leave the right hand down the whole time you are going back and forth between A and C.

15-41—Space all of the eighth note more. Trombones are doing a nice job on the glissandos.

40—Since all winds rest on the downbeat of the next measure, I would hold beat 4 until the downbeat of 1. It would become the one long note in a series of short ones.

45—Release the whole note from the last measure on beat 1. (It is stopping early.)

47-50 Beautiful job. This is exactly what we want to hear in terms of shortness of notes, good precision, and proper balance.

51—Trumpets-Watch pitch on D and E-flat. Upper G and F# tend to be sharp. Trombones-Open the aperture and separate the teeth. Nice balance between trumpet and trombone.

57-65—Trombones-Work out the notes. Many wrong notes.

65-77—Clarinets-Keep the corner firm. Push the lower jaw forward some. Tone quality in the clarion register is not as good here.

75—Nice job in saxophones.

85—Did not hear timpani.

91—Work for much more space between eighth notes. The higher the pitch, the shorter the notes. Flute notes will be very short. On flute, you can do some stopping of the note with the tongue. Single reeds can put the tongue back on the reed to stop the sound yet continue to blow air through the instrument. This section is giving percussion problems. Woodblock precision is off. Continue to count carefully and watch.

111—Continue to work for shorter eighth notes. Lighten up on the volume. Flutes-The higher you go, the more you push the lower jaw forward and let the embouchure resemble a pucker.

115—Timpani-Some notes late leading into this section. Started to get apart from the group here. Notes in 120 were a couple of beats late. Bring out the timpani much more.

119—Balance the whole note from the bottom. Softer upper winds. At the upper dynamics, flutes and brass tend to go sharp while single reeds go flat. Tune 1st clarinet and 1st alto sax.

122-123 Percussion-What we should have heard here came in a measure early. Trombones did a nice job of watching and coming in at the right time.

134-Needed two more notes on the high-hat.

Much of the work consists of short notes. Those short notes need as much attention in terms of tone, intonation, and balance as long notes. Take a few of the tutti passages and sustain beat 1. Listen for a beautiful, balanced sound. When you shorten the notes, you will retain that same quality of sound.

Three Czech Folk Songs

I. Walking at Night

2-Hold half note until beat 1 of the next measure.

9-Need a much gentler attack.

Need to hear more “Part 2” from beginning to 9.

Throughout this entire first section, avoid taking a breath on the bar lines. The first of every 4 sounds as if the first note is accented.

12—Any time the band has a long note that stops together, be sure the release is together. In addition, listen for a hint of the low voices at the end. The tuba should be the last sound we hear. This effect gives the band a much darker sound.

13—I can’t hear the difference between what is accented and what is not. Play the non-accented notes shorter.

30—Wrong notes on the half note. Check key signature.

32—Wrong notes on the quarter notes. Hold the quarter note on beat 4 all the way to the rest on the downbeat of 1.

33—Much gentler attack on the downbeat of 1.

45—Space the accents. Same idea as before...back off of the non-accented notes so that the accents stand out.

II. Meadows Green

Hold all notes full value throughout the movement. When a note is followed by a rest, the note does not end until the rest begins.

If the entire band is going to take a breath together, round off the phrase. Decrescendo the last several notes before the breath. Let the tuba be the last sound to stop. The fewer times you do this, the better. Alternate pushing through a long note onto the next measure with no breath juxtaposed to the band breathing together. It adds more variety and interest. Look for places to sneak a breath in the middle of the measure.

You can take these concepts and apply them throughout the movement. Notes and rhythms are in good shape. Phrasing is the area for growth.

III. Spring, the Madcap

5—Trumpets-Check key signature-B natural and F#.

Percussion work is very tasteful. Snare drum can be heard without overpowering. Xylophone is very precise, and balance is excellent.

Stylistically, longer notes receive more weight than shorter notes. When you have the eight-quarter-eighth syncopation, place the emphasis on the quarter note and lighten up on the eighth notes.

Symphonic Band

Army of the Nile

1—In a march, space the notes shorter than a beat. On the dotted-eighth-sixteenth, think of the dot as being a rest. Shorten the first notes of measures 2 and 4.

5 & 6—Bring out the tenor line.

7—Bring out low, descending line and shorten the notes.

8—A little more length on the downbeat by the people who had been playing descending eighth notes.

9—The baritone counter melody is so important. Sing that out more. The composer's wife was a cello player, and the tenor-voice counter melodies in his marches are written with her in mind.

9—At this slower tempo, you have an opportunity to build and taper the half notes. Taper half notes followed by a rest. Build half notes which lead into another note.

20 & 21—Lean into beat 2 and round off beat 1 of the next measure, making it quite short and softer than the dotted-eighth sixteenths before it.

8-41 Wait longer to play the sixteenth pickup to beat 2 in upper voices. Make the sixteenth softer than the eighth notes which follow it.

23—Make a big difference in the emphasis on beat 1 (short, round off) and beat 2 (full value, accented).

36 & 37—Lean into beat 2 and round off beat 1 of the next measure, making it quite short and softer than the dotted-eighth sixteenths before it.

37&38—Snare is a little late on beat 1

49 going into 50—Snare drum-Even though there is a crescendo through the measure, make the next downbeat soft. Winds are going to "lift off" of the half note. You will want to make beat 1 light as well each time this happens.

All the Pretty Little Horses

1—Percussion-Nice beginning

5—Flute-a little under the pitch. In the low register, bring the lower jaw back and let the embouchure become more like a smile to direct the air more down into the flute.

13—Make the first attack gentler. Reeds can have the air going ahead of time and have the tongue on the reed to dampen the sound. Remove the tongue when it's time for the note to sound.

17—Nobody takes a breath at 17. Sneak the breath somewhere else. Nice sound through this section.

20—Be careful to release together. Tuba should be the last sound to stop.

25—Horns and Baritones-Nice job on the moving eighth notes.

27—Nice trumpet solo. Can you add vibrato on the long notes?

34—Be careful not to accent the downbeat. E in 1st trumpet will tend to be flat.

35—Horns and Alto Saxophones-Very nice job on the melody.

42—Be careful not to accent beat 1. Balance the fermata from bottom to top. Don't crescendo that fermata or stop with the tongue. Be sure the tuba is the last sound to stop.

43—Bring out flute solo with some edge in the lower register. Can you add vibrato? Nice clarinet solo.

49—Vocal parts are well-done.

Fantastic Journey

7—Bring out the moving line.

8-11—Timpani-Bring out this part. Check precision of rhythms.

13—Clarinets-Nice sound. Nice trumpet solo. Could bring the trumpet solo out more and add vibrato.

48-52—Clarinets-Work out the notes and play out on the sixteenths.

75—Trombone & Baritone-Nice job on the melody line.

79—2nd Trombone-Check length of 5th position Gb.

93—Euphonium & 1st Clarinet-very nice work.

140-143—Brass-Be sure to put the weight on the front-part of the note. Don't "slide" into them.

The band is solid overall. One area for growth is the fullness of the flute sound. There are many examples on YouTube. Here is a good, 4-minute video on embouchure: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQg0vScnQ8E>

Here is a YouTube channel of someone about the age of these students that could be used as a model for sound:

<https://www.youtube.com/user/GeoRockMin>

Once the amount and quality of sound is in place, work on adding vibrato. I think the students would enjoy this video on learning vibrato: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IjPTG7xiYy8>

I just found that one, and it turns out she has a whole YouTube channel, and she's pretty entertaining.

Continue to working on the clarion register clarinet sound. I am sure there are plenty of things on YouTube, and the students might enjoy searching for the good videos and sharing those.

Pitch separates good bands from outstanding bands. Having a 1-to-1 iPad initiative opens good possibilities. With a very inexpensive (or free) tuning app, every student has access to a free tuner during practice.