



Sue Arney's Top 25 Tips for Working with Young Ensembles ANBOC 2024 Presentation

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Preamble

Young people need to be active participators in their music learning, using their bodies, voices and newly acquired/developing instrument skills to perform with others.

Working with young ensembles requires strong pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning; it is an educative process - it is not merely a transfer of knowledge, nor is the sole purpose to prepare repertoire for performance.

Young people have often demonstrated strong leadership skills elsewhere in the school and often relish opportunities to have a specific responsibility.

Music is an abstract concept that needs many different approaches to help learners unpack, relate to and understand.

The key concepts underpinning music education: listening, composing and performing – should all be present in the ensemble rehearsal room.

1. Before the Rehearsal

Be in the rehearsal room well before students, so that you can welcome them in and show that you are ready and prepared. Try to talk individually to as many as possible at this point, again to acknowledge them and make them feel valued.

For 7.30am rehearsals, in particular, Try to create an atmosphere of energy (like they're entering my 'middle of the day') by playing recorded music and having your own gear set up.

2. Rehearsal Schedule on the Whiteboard

Writing the rehearsal schedule on the whiteboard prior to the rehearsal let's everyone know what is expected in today's rehearsal/ how much more we need to get through; it also informs the percussionists what is needed so they can get the gear out in time.

Writing the times up is even better. For example:

7.30	Warm-ups
7.35	Anthem
7.50	Rum-Bah
8.10	Mark the roll
8.15	New World
8.30	Pack up

3. Starting the Rehearsal

Always start on time. No exceptions. If playing music as students enter the space, turn off the recorded music two minutes before starting time and give a two-minute warning. Downbeat is always when the big hand is at the o'clock (or designated starting time). The students who are in place get the benefit of the teaching being offered at that time, and students will not start to think that they can arrive two minutes after the starting time because the rehearsal often starts late. Once you've started, the late ones will hurry.

4. Starting to Play

- Posture, posture, posture
- Music stand height
- First note/sound/phrase together
- Follow my conducting
- Sound

5. Clapping, Sizzling, Singing and Silent Practice

To learn a new piece:

Clap a phrase

Clap whilst **sizzling**

Silent practice

Silent practice whilst **sizzling**

Sing

These steps provide you with the opportunity to work on one element at a time – the rhythm, the phrasing, the fingering and so on.

Silent practice is good because:

- Not everyone can concentrate on the notation whilst there's a lot of noise going on
- It gives students the chance to think about their own part without distraction
- It provides quiet time in the rehearsal
- It allows you bring them out of silent practice and back to the rehearsal using your *quiet voice*, thus changing the level/tone of the rehearsal
- It means that many students have to stick their instrument in/on their mouth

Ways to use silent practice can include:

- Play through a section of a band piece with you counting in/through
- Give students two minutes to silent practice a section of the music
- Ask sections to silent practice while you work with one particular section (apart from keeping them quiet, they can start to think about how their parts fits with the one you're working on)

Work on one phrase or section, and then continue to the next.

Have students find a place where that phrase happens again and play it.

Put two sections together.

Learn a third section, add it to the first and second, and so on

6. Choose Three Words/Elements to Focus on

Question the band: 'What Do We Need to Do to Make this Piece Sound Better?' and list answers on the board. These may include:

- Play together/in time
- Play phrases more smoothly/connectedly
- Warm sound
- Excitement
- Staccato

Choose one element and a time.

- Play a section focussing on that element
- Play that section trying to demonstrate *the opposite* of that element
- Then play it again with that element in place

7. Ratings out of 10

Do the same as above, choosing one element at a time. Play a section focussing on that element and give it a rating out of 10. Either a) you give it a rating, or b) the students give it a rating. Ask what needs to happen for it to improve then play it again. Keep rating it till it improves. You'll probably find that it will actually be better when you do it the second week.

8. Use Recordings

Play a professional recording of a piece that the band is working on. Ask students to identify things that they like about that recording and write them on the board. They may include things like:

- Could hear the melody
- Strong connected bass notes
- Dynamic contrast
- Accents
- Energy/spirit/entertainment value

Then get students to choose one at a time from this list and work on that. For example, just work on the melody being heard in a particular section. Then choose another and so on.

9. Record the Ensemble

If possible, record the ensemble and have them listen back to their sound. Collect their feedback on the whiteboard in two columns: 1. *Things That Sound Good* 2. *Things That Need Improvement*

Where possible avoid negative comments, choose constructive terms instead, for example: 'Needs Improvement' rather than 'What Was Bad'.

10. On and Off the Podium

When you stand on the podium that's working time, when you step off that's talking/relaxing time. This can become a game – on/off/on/off etc.

11. 'Talking time'

Students need to talk, so allocate time randomly when you've finished working on one piece and the ensemble is changing to the next piece. Set a time limit, for example: 'you can two minutes of Talking Time while you get the next piece out'.

12. Talking Schedule on the Whiteboard

In extreme situations use the above rehearsal/time schedule and inserted 'talking time' for one/two minutes after a piece, or even a section of a piece – for example:

Rum-Bah
Start – bar 28
1 min Talking Time
Bars 28 – 36
1 min Talking Time

Then you can just point to the board to remind everyone what we're working on at that time. No need to talk/yell/reprimand, just point to the playing or talking bit and they can see.

13. Stand Up and Stretch

Be sure to let the students stand up and stretch at one point in the rehearsal, particularly if it's in the morning, and make them yawn! It's easy – just tell them and pretend yawn yourself (I'm doing it now as I'm writing!).

To do an ensemble stretch – have everyone stand up and hold their instrument in the left hand, then stretch their right hand in the air. Swap their instrument to their right hand and stretch left. Roll shoulders. Yawn. Imaginary star jumps are always good too.

14. Everybody Has A Job

Allocate a responsibility to every member of the ensemble so that they feel an affiliation to the group. With large groups it is often difficult to acknowledge the presence of each person at every rehearsal, so knowing that they are part of both small teams, and the ensemble as whole helps with connectedness.

Some suggestions are: Ensemble Leader, Ensemble Manager, Section Leaders, Librarian, Percussion Crew, Music Stand Crew, Chair Crew, Pencil Points Manager.

The appointment of responsibilities varies depending on the ensemble and may include election, appointment and volunteering.

This is closely related to **Everybody Has Number** for excursions and you need to check everyone off quickly.

15. Section Leaders Take Responsibility for Their Section

If one section is particularly talkative, ask the Section Leader how their section's going. After the Section Leader is used to this responsibility, when a section or individual acts up just look at the Section Leader. They will soon learn that misbehaving will not attract your attention. It's also good if you find that you're continually dealing with one student (in a negative way) and you need to break the cycle. Once they're quiet/behaving, quickly find something to praise them for.

16. Hands Up

When you want the whole ensemble's attention or quiet just raise your hand in the air. Students will be familiar with this signal from camps, assemblies etc. Remember that the rule is: if your hand is in the air your mouth does not work, so be sure not to start talking whilst your hand is up.

This is good because:

- You're not creating *more* noise by talking loudly or yelling
- You are creating a *visual* focus together with the quiet
- You're not hurting your own voice by talking over the top of other noise

When this is working well, putting your hand up to stop the band whilst they are playing also becomes easy.

17. Guest Conductors

So that students start to understand what your role as the conductor is, have them take it in turns to guest conduct particular elements, including

- Stopping and starting
- Fast and slow
- Loud and soft
- Short and long

Once they've had a go at that, get them to conduct a section of a band piece and alter one of the elements above. (This is also good for us as conductors to practice – to see if what we're doing is effective and clear).

18. Tell Them When It's Good

If you've been working on a passage for a while and they suddenly play it well, tell them and tell them why (for example: it was legato, the notes were connected, the balance was great, we could hear the melody with the other parts supporting well etc), and then have them play it again immediately and ask them to listen for the things you've said.

Sometimes we forget to tell students when they did well and what, in particular, they did well. Sometimes they won't know the difference (in the sound or in what they did), so it's important to recognise it and have them do it again straight away so they can recognise it.

19. Use Music Festival Feedback/Adjudication Categories

Use music festival adjudication categories as the basis for your vocabulary and use in any of the above ways.

20. Listening Chair

Choose two students at a time to sit out of the rehearsal in 'Listening Chairs'. It's great if you can find two stools or raise the chairs up somehow, and place them at the front of the rehearsal, facing the band.

This is fantastic because:

- Students never get to see the other students playing
- Students never get to hear what the band sounds like
- Students never get to hear other instruments playing

Ask the two in the Listening Chairs to listen for three things, and comment on these when you stop:

- Find at least one sound that they've never heard before
- Comment on something that sounds a lot better than they thought/just sounds great
- Comment on an area that needs improvement

They can sit for five or ten minutes. You may only get through six/eight in each rehearsal, but over the year a lot will get to come up and give feedback.

21. To Fix Playing Together

To get students to play together at the same time try:

- Clapping their parts
- Clapping their parts at a slower tempo
- Clapping their parts at a faster tempo
- Clapping accenting particular beats (even irrelevant ones)
- The section whose rhythm it is claps it, the rest of the band claps it back
- Sing and clap
- Clap it with you conducting
- Clap it without you conducting
- If the section is getting faster, encourage students to play/clap it *but don't be the first one to play your sound*
- If the section is slowing down, encourage students to play/clap it *but don't be the last one to play your sound*

22. To Fix Dynamic Changes

- Everyone play a concert Bb at their normal, comfortable, not too much effort level – that's *mf*
- Now try a bit softer – that's *mp*, and a bit softer – *p*
- Back to *mf* and do the same to *f* and *ff*
- Identify the section with the dynamic changes, play the softest note in the phrase, play the loudest, now play through filling in the gaps

23. To Fix Accents

Jazz musicians do this the best because they're used to singing/saying articulations. Speak/sing through phrases using articulation language. Verbal echo, echo using instruments. Either explain it and write it on the board first, or just say it and have students say it back. Have them exaggerate it to the point where it's hilarious, then play, then sing, then play, then sing, then play.

24. To Fix Spirit

Sing through pieces. When you can't work any harder on the notes or the dynamics or everyone's heads have just had enough, sing through the pieces. Also good just before a gig or near the end of camp etc when their lips/arms/fingers are dying.

25. Just Play

Acknowledgement: young students just want to play. They may talk if they're not playing, so just play. It's tempting to talk too much in rehearsal. When you have to stop, stop for a short time, give short instructions, and then keep playing.

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To cite: Arney, S. (2024, July). *Sue Arney's 50 Ways to Get Support for What You Do* [paper presentation]. Australian National Band and Orchestra Conference, Melb, Australia. DOI: 10.26188/25928503