

A Comparative Study of Best Teaching Practices across Three High School Music Ensembles: Band, Chorus, and Orchestra

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Abstract

This study was a look inside a Long Island High School's band, chorus, and orchestra in order to glean perspective on what teaching practices, rehearsal techniques, methods of planning, philosophies of music education, priorities within the elements of musicianship, etc. are most utilized and incorporated into their daily routines. Since there is an established and recognized level of success throughout this Department of Music, it is clear that these teachers are effectively educating their students and achieving a high quality of musicianship. This study sought to discover the methods of *how* these teachers continuously succeed. Time has been spent observing each ensemble, speaking with each teacher, and delving into what they each consider to be their keys to success, greatest practices, most effective ways in which they inspire, motivate, and engage their students, and more.

This study focused on how these teachers create a cognitive awareness of music and its qualities to their students, and how the teachers build and shape their students' knowledge, skills and attitudes in the rehearsal setting. The teachers' methods to achieve specific components of exemplary ensemble sounds were compared and contrasted in order to explore the many qualities of music making, both definitive through intonation and rhythm, and non-definitive through concepts like tone quality and expression. Through assessing and surveying these highly effective teachers, this research provides insight to methods of success in a real-life high school music setting.

Background

There are countless resources about the best teaching practices for various music ensemble settings, filled with suggestions of how to be a more effective teacher-conductor and how to help one's students achieve the highest possible level of musicianship. These articles, books, and studies all bring important topics to light and are useful resources for current music educators and those of the future. However, putting these concepts into practice is not always as seamless and simple as it may seem in a theoretical piece of writing. This is especially true in the public school setting, where requirements are constantly seeping in from outside of the music department, and students are often involved in all sorts of activities with widely varied levels of ability and commitment to their instrument. These "real-life" factors present a copious number of variables that greatly impact music ensemble directors' rehearsal time and force them to be malleable in order to create and maintain high-achieving groups.

With these concepts in mind, the researcher felt that a look inside a Long Island high school music department that has an established, consistently high level of success from year-to-year could bring forth practical and valuable insight to the Music Education field. By analyzing the practices and methods of this exemplary music department, this master's thesis could provide tangible tactics that bring these teachers and their ensembles success in the practical and relatable setting of a public high school. Since the band, choir, and orchestra at this school are all equally reputable and admired, the researcher felt it would be most impactful to delve into the practices of each of the three teachers, and compare and contrast their methods of success across these mediums.

Methods

This research consisted of many hours observing on-site at this high school. The researcher immersed herself in the atmosphere and environment of the school on a weekly basis for approximately three months. Throughout this time, she observed multiple ensemble rehearsals and group lessons, in addition to speaking with the Fine Arts Director about the district's music department and to the teachers about their daily routines and practices. This study also entailed formal interviews with each of the three teachers during which their backgrounds, philosophies of music education, rehearsal methods, classroom beliefs, and more were discussed at length.

When observing, the researcher took detailed notes in addition to audio recordings of lessons and rehearsals in order to be as accurate as possible when assessing, reflecting, and comparing and contrasting the teachers' practices to one another. The researcher honed in on all aspects of effective ensemble music making throughout her research, especially focusing on the teachers' methods of achieving expressive playing and musicianship from their students.

Results

Most Commonly Addressed Variables Across All Mediums:

- Intonation
- Rhythm
- Expression
- Phrasing
- Dynamics
- Articulation/Diction
- Posture/Playing or Singing Position
- Scales and their relationship to the music
- Thinking ahead/remaining engaged
- Constantly putting forth best possible effort
- Singing/playing tests in order to hold students accountable

Band Specific Variables Addressed Most Frequently:

- Breath/Air usage
- Embouchure
- Tonguing

Chorus Specific Variables Addressed Most Frequently:

- Enunciation
- Emotional understanding and conveying of text
 - Breath/moving air through the phrase
- Openness in sound and longer vowels – no pinching
 - Being emotionally engaging to audience
 - Solfege

Orchestra Specific Variables Addressed Most Frequently:

- Bow usage
- Bow placement
- Pizzicato/string techniques

Conclusions/Summary

Although these three educators all teach music in the same district at the high school level, teaching band, chorus, and orchestra are seemingly very different jobs. However, this study brought forth conclusions demonstrating that although the ensemble mediums differ, the methods for success are quite similar.

The most obviously similar factor between these three teachers was their superior musicianship and dedication to their job and their craft. For each of these three teachers, the students and the music are their main priorities. Along with their obvious talent and superior teaching skills, the researcher feels that the teachers' dedication and passion play a huge part in their consistent success. If a teacher is a superior musician herself, that talent, knowledge, and overall mastery certainly impact her ability to teach music; if a teacher can demonstrate the best possible example for students on her voice/instrument, then students are that much more likely to find such success themselves. Similarly, if a teacher holds herself to a high standard, always puts forth her best effort, and does not settle for mediocrity by any means, then students who come in contact with that teacher are certainly highly likely to adapt those habits and conduct themselves by those principles.

Teachers who exude discipline, devotion, passion, and enthusiasm towards any subject bring out the best in their students. These three teachers certainly showed these qualities throughout this study, never ceasing to give the greatest possible effort and push students to meet and then exceed expectations both musically, and as human beings.

In addition to their personal musicality, passion, and drive, each of these three teachers demonstrates effective rehearsal planning routines in order to make the most of the time that they have with their students. They each choose challenging repertoire for their ensembles, but plan well in order to achieve a strong end product. They use clear, concise verbal directions throughout rehearsal, and try to make as much music with as little interruption/talking as possible. These teachers utilize demonstrative techniques and give directions as the ensemble is playing in order to avoid wasting any rehearsal time. Not only is this smart in the sense of conserving time, but it also allows students to remain engaged throughout the rehearsal's entirety.

The three teachers all demonstrate emotionally and musically engaging conducting techniques, and although they have very different personalities and some differing concepts in their philosophies, they certainly have more qualities/aspects of themselves in common than in which they differ.

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