

Chapter 2 - The Band Evaluation Checklist

Wind Section Student Ability Levels

First, make a list of the number of students in each section of the winds, breaking it down *not* by year in school, but by *ability level of the students*. For example:

CLARINETS: 6 novice ability 5 moderate ability 3 advanced ability 2 soloist ability

The six students of novice ability indicated above *may not all be freshmen*. Remember, this evaluation is determined based on *ability*, not age or experience. Granted, experience counts for something, but that is only a *part* of the assessment of ability, not all of it. Please note: keep this assessment confidential – I urge you, *do not* use it as a discussion point with students. It is for your information as an arranger *only*.

Most sections will probably not have *any* students of “soloist” ability. An excellent starting point to determine if a performer is of soloist ability is if you feel the student is of the caliber to be selected for All-State or a similar elite performing ensemble. Quite often students of lower ability are given solos because the arranger believes that more credit is received in a competitive environment for the use of a soloist and the resulting texture change. While a truly outstanding soloist *can* certainly provide a great deal of musical interest, if the performer is not “truly outstanding,” the performance environment can degrade his performance to the point where it is not an asset at all.

Some directors can make this kind of evaluation quickly and easily. Others will find it helpful to use audition scores, solo and ensemble contest results, and other performance data to help make the assessment. A young director may find it particularly difficult to assess instruments in which he or she has less experience. If you have staff members working with the band, or know a private teacher in the area, you could perhaps enlist help in making such assessments.

Percussion Section Student Ability Levels

Make a similar list of percussionists. The percussion section requires a more in-depth study of individuals because many performers from this year’s group may be reassigned to other instruments for the next school year. If the director is not a percussionist, I strongly encourage him to bring in a percussion teacher to help in not only the evaluation, but also in the assignment of instruments for the next season. An extensive discussion of how this assignment is accomplished is beyond the scope of this book,

but I present one opinion for your consideration: do not assign instruments based on seniority, but on *demonstrated ability*. This will most likely require you to hold auditions for the various positions.

I doubt that most directors would consider placing a student on a mallet instrument in the front ensemble based primarily on the fact that the student is a senior. The exposure of the individual part to the listeners is so great that a weak performer in this position would be immediately noticed. However, I have seen many bands that fill their percussion batteries by filling the snare and tenor parts first, then leaving the remaining students to fill the bass drum spots. Besides the low confidence level those students demonstrate on the bass drum parts, often they are smaller students, and they find playing and maneuvering with a large instrument very difficult. I've noticed a trend in recent years that even though bands field multiple bass drums, pitched, more than half the time they are playing in unison. The pitched effect is lost because the section is playing together so much.

I do not mean that the least experienced students should be placed on snare drum, of course! (Thirty years ago, single tenor drums and tenor duos provided excellent "training" marching instruments for these students. Time and development of the ensemble have passed this by.) However, in a similar way I would never recommend that all of the least-experienced clarinet players should be placed on third part in a concert band, because that part would *never* be in balance with the others. I also would not recommend that all the weakest performers be placed on the fundamental musical sound of the band...the bass drums. (I feel the tuba does not really serve as the fundamental musical sound of the band. The range of the tuba, being an octave above the range of the orchestral string bass, is simply too high to provide the same kind of overtone reinforcement for the brass as the basses do for the strings. Instead, the bass drums, concert bass drum in the front ensemble and the timpani provide a much stronger fundamental if used creatively.) As with most personnel issues, a compromise must be reached. I have heard bands in contests that derive their pulse and rhythmic drive almost entirely from the snare drum line. This can create a balance problem that interferes with the band's abilities to project sound to the fullest.

Back to the evaluation: prepare a chart similar to that you did for the winds:

SNARES:	0 novice ability	2 moderate ability	2 advanced ability	0 soloist ability
TENORS:	1 novice ability	2 moderate ability	0 advanced ability	1 soloist ability
BASSES:	2 novice ability	2 moderate ability	1 advanced ability	0 soloist ability
MALLETS:	1 novice ability	2 moderate ability	1 advanced ability	1 soloist ability

...and so forth, depending upon the expected instrumentation of the section. You may not know the exact instrumentation of the front ensemble at this time, but you can produce a “guesstimate” based on the number of available students capable of mallet parts, timpani, auxiliary percussion, and perhaps electronic instruments. Remember, this chart is for *your* benefit as an arranger, and you should keep it handy as you are writing. You may never need to refer to it again after you have created it, but the process of creating it will fix a better picture of the true abilities of the band in your mind.

Note: should you as a director or staff member work with an outside arranger or composer, I strongly recommend you provide him with a similar document. Additional annotations would be even more helpful, such as “trumpet soloist cannot play safely above B flat,” or “mallet players have experience in a winter percussion ensemble.”

You could put all of this down on paper, but I recommend using an excel spreadsheet or something similar. That way when your personnel changes, you can update it quickly. It can also be helpful when you talk to new staff or private teachers about the ability level of the sections.

Know The Effective Ranges Of Your Brass Players

There are a few sections where the range students are capable of playing is *very* important: the trumpet, horn (mellophone), and trombone parts. Writing trumpet parts in particular that are too high, or stay too high for too long, is one of the most common errors made by a novice arranger.

How high is too high? That depends on the abilities of your students and the *number of players in the section*. A small trumpet section – say, eight players – will most likely have three first part players. If the part is demanding and one of them must rest, there are only two performers left to carry the part. A section of twenty players may have seven or eight first trumpet players, and it is possible for such a section to set breathing points for individual players that will not be noticed by the listeners. This would be impossible for small sections.

This is one of those areas where “band director optimism” can hurt you. If you are writing the arrangement in March for performance in September and October, it seems logical to assume that your players will progress over the next six months and be stronger by the fall. Frankly, in real life, *this is a roll of the dice*. For every student I have seen who has come back to band camp stronger than when he left school in June I have seen

three or four who need to get their chops back! Again, you know your situation best, and you must plan accordingly.

Weather conditions can have a profound effect on brass player range. If you regularly perform in the northern climates of the US, you know that the air temperature as your group performs can vary 50 degrees or more from the beginning of the season to the end.

I guarantee that if you write the highest note your first trumpet player can reach into your show you will hear it only rarely in performance. *Never underestimate the effect of nervousness in high school students.* If you really need a higher part, make sure you have an alternate lower part for the upper trumpet players to play. They can then take turns playing the upper notes and they will not tire as quickly.

It is also important for you to know how many clarinet players have difficulty going over the break. Such students are best served by writing them a separate part that does not go above the break, or does so very rarely. This will provide them with the ability to play with confidence and still challenge them enough to help with their musical development.

Balancing Multi-Part Sections

How should you balance multi-part sections? I will discuss the advantages of two- and three-part clarinet and trumpet sections later, but here are my recommendations:

Trumpet, trombone and horn parts – and *especially* trumpet parts – need to have the first (or top) notes brought out on the field. On the other hand, the “balance pyramid” taught by many conducting teachers (and is described in W. Francis McBeth’s *Effective Performance of Band Music*, Southern Music Co., 1972) is, to some degree, as valid for the field as for the stage, particularly for Romantic Era orchestral literature. If I had twenty trumpets, all of somewhat equal ability, I would place seven on first, six on second, and seven on third part. I “loaded” the first part a little heavier primarily so those players can rest when possible, giving the band effectively six full-time trumpet players on the part.

What if my section had eight inexperienced players? I would *never* place them all on third – the part would never be heard on the field. It is already difficult to hear this part in full ensemble situations because of the acoustical peculiarities of its location in prac-

tically any chord voicing. I recommend dividing them up between second and third, and do the same with the more experienced players who do not have the range and/or stamina to play the first part. The “pyramid” theory, taken to its illogical extreme, would load the third part more, and reduce the first part to perhaps three players. Please be aware that this pyramid does not work as well for sections as it does for full ensemble, playing block chords. Even then, it is used primarily as a means to make sure the upper parts do not overbalance the bass. Numerically, most bands have far more upper-part players than low reeds, low brass and especially tubas. I will discuss the role of the bass voice in the ensemble in greater detail later in this book.

Armed with the above information, the arranger may now *finally* proceed to selecting a piece of music!

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