

30 Performance Tips for Concert Bands

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➤ EXPRESSIVE PLAYING AND PHRASING are skills we need to teach our students, but not all music is the same and not everyone will (or should) interpret every piece in the same way, The following concepts can be used as a way to think about how to approach this using some common sense performance techniques.

1) Musicians should be encouraged to use their imaginations to create a sense of what the music represents, and find a way to bring that vision to the audience.

2) Music seldom is static, so it is helpful to determine if you are “going to” or “coming from” at nearly all times in the performance of the music.

3) When playing a melodic line, often the player can use the contour of the line to shape the phrase, GOING TO higher notes, and COMING FROM when moving to lower notes. But obviously, not always...

4) When a melodic line has the same note on either side of a bar line, the player should go TO the second note.

5) Whenever there is a sequence (either rhythmic or melodic) it should either get louder or get softer, but should not stay the same. Usually it gets louder unless otherwise indicated.

6) Musicians must always consider is 1) how long is this phrase? And 2) where is the most important note in the phrase?

7) The most important note in the phrase is typically either the highest note, or the lowest note, or the LONGEST note, or a note with a specific marking (dynamic or articulation), or a repeated note.

8) Choosing where to breathe is as much a part of phrasing as it is sound support. Breathing in style and in tempo on tied notes and dotted half notes can provide a more stable rhythmic impulse and allow the music to speak more clearly.

9) When playing measures that are identical in all ways except that the pitch of the entire measure changes, an increase in volume can enhance a rise in pitch, and a decrease in volume can enhance a lowering in the pitch.

10) Accents are best played with more air and more space (rather than too much tongue).

11) Timpani ruffs are more clearly heard using alternating sticking (R-L-R) rather than playing a one-handed ruff (L-L-R).

12) It helps to scan the entire page of music and find anything that is DIFFERENT, such as a rhythm not before seen in the piece, or an accidental, or a theme not previously heard in the piece. Those places should be emphasized.

13) Allowing the players to move when they play can help them achieve more secure entrances and more unified phrasing.

➤ ACOUSTICS play a big part in our ability to play expressively. Here are a few examples of how we should consider the acoustical properties of the sounds we make and how that can inform our ability to express the music we perform:

14) When playing a dotted 8th/16th rhythm, putting space between the notes allows the 16th note to be heard.

- 15) Professional players often emphasize shorter notes by playing them a bit louder to be sure they are clearly heard.
- 16) When playing a crescendo, it helps to use the PYRAMID, and have the lower half of the pyramid provide the bulk of the crescendo, while the upper half of the pyramid provide the "attitude" of the crescendo.
- 17) When playing short notes, it helps to use the pyramid of DURATION, and have the upper half of the pyramid play shorter notes and the lower half play their "short" notes longer than the players in the upper half. (Tubas twice as long as flutes, but still with separation)
- 18) On releases, have the bottom of the pyramid release last to provide a warm and full sound.
- 19) Percussionists who are playing "toys" (triangle, tambourine, etc.) should consider the height at which the instrument is held. Holding it higher will allow it to speak more clearly and will also be louder.
- 20) Bell players can use vibrato on long notes to help the sound blend and alleviate intonation problems. This is done by cupping one hand and quickly waving it up and down over the bell note. This technique can also work on triangle.
- 21) Crash cymbal players should never hold the cymbals by placing their hands through the straps as it can cause wrist injuries and will dampen the cymbal tone. If there is time between crashes, suspending the cymbals in a horizontal position to the floor after the crash will allow the floor to enhance the ring of the cymbals.
- 22) Avoid placing the bass drum too close to the timpani as the overtones in the bass drum can affect the clarity of the timpani tone and pitch.
- 23) Be cognizant of the performance space and any acoustical issues such as curtains that can soak up sound or hard surfaces that can cause a projection of volume.
- 24) The proximity of the front of the ensemble to the proscenium can affect balance as those in front may be heard as playing louder than those behind it.
- 25) Risers will affect balance as those who are higher up will be perceived as playing louder than those on the floor.
- 26) Instrument positions in directional brass instruments can change balance, which means it is important that all players within each section keep their bells at the same height.
- 27) Instrument positions can be changed in order to achieve a more prominent sound by holding the bell up higher, or by aiming the bell at the music to help take the volume and edge off of notes when needed.
- 28) Horns can often benefit from having a hard surface behind them in order to assist with projection. One way to do this is to purchase clear sheets of Plexiglas (2x3 feet), and suspend it from the music stands of the players who sit behind them.
- 29) Consider the placement of the players in the seating plan. It can be helpful to place the principal trumpet and trombone players next to each other in the middle of the back row to make it easier for brass entrances to be precise, and to allow the bells of all (or most) of the players in those sections to have their bells pointed toward the audience. Placing those players on the sides of the ensemble could mean that the conductor is hearing something that the audience may not.
- 30) Place chimes at the front of the stage since the immediacy of the attack is usually very important for this instrument. Vibraphone and marimba should be closer to the front of the stage than bells or xylophone as they are harder to hear.)