

Teaching Music Fundamentals Through Marching Band

Joseph Lapka
Center Grove High School
Greenwood, Indiana
lapkaj@centergrove.k12.in.us

Marching band should be a place where high school musicians learn solid music fundamentals. Unfortunately, many students, parents, and directors feel that marching band music is mostly about volume and speed. Time and care are never really spent teaching students how to produce music on a large stage (a football field) without sacrificing tone quality, intonation, and musicality. Because of this, students develop bad habits and never learn how to play fundamentally well on their instrument. The tragic part of all this is that marching band season is usually the BEST time to teach music fundamentals.

This presentation is divided into two parts. The first part contains information to consider before you begin the fundamentals program. There is a large amount of “setting the stage” for this type of material. The second part will outline a fundamentals program that has worked for me. Please keep in mind that this is just information I have picked up from other clinicians, directors, musicians, and my own experiences. It is not really earth shattering (sorry). It will not magically cure a band of any musical disease. It is simply a PROCESS that has worked for me, at small schools and large schools, with a wide variety of talent level.

Why marching band is the best time to teach fundamentals...

1. The marching band usually practices in larger chunks of time, allowing for more built-in warm-up and fundamental training time.
2. Marching band meets on a regular basis, allowing for plenty of reinforcement of solid fundamentals.
3. Marching band receives more feedback than any other ensemble. It usually has the most performance opportunities. Many of these are adjudicated by qualified musicians (usually).
4. Marching band is a competitive activity for many schools. This means that there is an additional extrinsic motivation for students (even if we try to deemphasize the competitive aspect of the activity). This motivation means that students are usually more willing to focus on fundamental building exercises than they are sitting in a classroom during the school day.

There is no trick or quick fix to sounding good

1. It takes TIME and PERSISTANCE.
2. Building solid music fundamentals is a PROCESS.
3. It is not the exercise itself that makes your group sound good. It is how you USE the exercise and then apply it to the next step in the process.

Find what works for YOU

1. Surround yourself with resources.
 - books and articles
 - conferences and clinics
 - watch other people teach
 - ask questions

2. You cannot teach anyone else's system.
 - Beg, borrow, and steal concepts from other directors – but just going through the same motions will not get you the same result.
3. You must be confident in your process.
 - Your patience and dedication to building stronger fundamentals will be tested frequently by the students, heat, cold, and fatigue.

You must get the students to “buy in” to your process

1. The students need to develop a sense of pride in their fundamentals
 - Create an environment where they care just as much about tone quality and intonation as they do wrong notes and rhythms
 - Emphasize the need for a greater sense of individual ownership in the entire band's sound.
2. The students need to push each other to raise the level of expectation.
 - The drive can't come just from you
3. Teach the students to have passion for excellence in music.
 - What other bands do they respect?
 - What other bands or drum corps do you show them?
 - Are these groups modeling the sound you want in your ensemble?
 - Do your students recognize quality from junk?
4. The students have to be patient.
 - They need to understand that working on fundamentals will make the music better, even before you ever play the music
 - ...and yes, it will take longer to actually get to playing the music, but have confidence that the final product will be better

What is IN your music?

1. Is your marching band music going allow the students to GROW musically?
 - Is there variety of styles and genres?
 - Is it worth their time learning it?
 - Do the compositions provide the students the opportunity to USE the fundamentals you are teaching them?
2. Develop your fundamentals around the content of your music.
Consider...
 - Instrument range
 - Technique
 - Key areas
 - Rhythmic problems
 - Dynamic vocabulary
 - Tempos

Focus on the most BASIC fundamentals

In my experience, high school students struggle the most with quality tone production. This includes intonation, tone quality, blend, and their role in ensemble balance. The majority of my focus is in these areas. Even when I add articulations and any technique exercises, the importance is still first and foremost placed on tone production and how the articulation or technique affects their tone.

I prefer NOT to have written warm-up exercises for students. Reading music takes some of the focus away from just listening. I'm always amazed at the fact that students will stare at their music, even if it is just half notes and whole notes. The goal is to provide something that allows the student to just relax and listen.

The following process is a systematic way to lead the students from the first breath to the first note of the music without skipping a step. This process can take hours or minutes, depending on what you need. In the interest of time and space, I will not get too in depth on the specific workings of breathing, tonguing, embouchure, etc. I am merely outlining an example of a process that could use to organize and present fundamentals.

I have broken this process into three large sections:

1. Air
2. Mouthpiece
3. Instrument

Within each of these three sections, there is a very similar break down into:

- a. Long, sustained tones
- b. Tuning
- c. Metered tones
- d. Articulations

So the overall format looks like this:

1a, 1b, 1c, 1d 2a, 2b, 2c, 2d 3a, 3b, 3c, 3d

Notice that the student is learning to apply the most basic fundamentals in very small increments of change. This makes it easier to get from one concept to another, without losing the quality of what the students just achieved.

After 3d, it is usually good to add any additional exercises that focus on technique, range building, etc.

Air

Most directors and musicians understand the importance of air in achieving a good sound, but few are patient enough to regularly implement air exercises into their warm-up process.

1. Air...just in and out - stretching the lungs

Do this without the instrument.

- relaxation of throat and shoulders
- try to take in more and more air with each breath
- avoid any tension
- try placing the hand perpendicular to the mouth to make sure there isn't a raising of the pitch of the breath
- use hands placed on chest, stomach, or shoulders to check for proper breathing
- use a buddy system to learn from each other

2. Air - with the instrument

Make sure adding the instrument doesn't change anything about how they breath

- Sometimes you need to clarify the obvious (don't breath through nose or instrument)
- Keep monitoring fundamentals of the breath. Keep giving reminders.
- Add stagger breathing so there is one sustained note (of air)

- Focus on quality and consistency of air from beginning to end of note
- Match quality and air volume of neighbor
- Ask - "what would you sound like if you were producing a note?"
- Add metered tones - address how timing effects the breath
- Grow slightly in energy throughout the note
- Woodwinds - all fingers down

3. Air - with instrument - with articulations

(It is usually best to not jump right into articulations at the beginning of the season)

Articulations can be broken down into three styles:

Legato
Long-lifted
Staccato

(It usually works well to clearly define the percentage of note length, but that can vary depending on the director)

- Create 9 or 12 count exercises that consist of 9 quarters, or 8 quarters and a whole notes
- Begin with legato
- As to you move to shorter note lengths, don't let the attacks get harder
- Continue to think of the tongue as merely a valve, not a weapon!
- LISTEN, LISTEN, LISTEN
- Instead of telling individuals or sections they are too long or short, just instruct them to match the person next them...then match the ensemble
- Add variations on this exercise by adding 8th notes, 16th notes, or any combination of rhythms.
- ALWAYS focus on quality of sound and no distortion of tone

Mouthpiece

Buzzing and playing on the mouthpiece is one of the most beneficial, yet underused ways to identify areas of concern in producing a good tone. If possible, have at least one sectional with every instrument to address specific concerns.

As you proceed, always remind them of the correct breathing process!!! Tie it together.

1. Warm-up on your own

- Give them the opportunity to get the reed and embouchures warmed up and ready to go for the mouthpiece exercises.
- Always insist they reinforce correct breathing

2. Sustained, staggered long tones

- Assign a pitch for the brass
- Woodwinds should match pitch within their section
- It is much easier to hear distorted attacks and releases on the mouthpiece.
- Focus on not scooping or falling into the pitch
- Focus on sustaining the pitch without waivering
- Can you get a bigger sound, without distorting the sound?
- Create simple exercises that develop flexibility of pitch, both WW and brass

3. Metered long tones

- Lining up entrances
- Growing in energy through the note – give it direction
- Clarify style of release

4. Articulations

- Scooping is very obvious
- Distortion of the tone is obvious
- Match note lengths

Instrument

Sometimes I vary the moment they play the instrument for the first time. It often works well to go from long tones and metered tones on the mouthpiece directly to long tones and metered tones on the instrument. Then go back to just air articulations on the instrument, articulations on the mouthpiece, and then articulations on the instrument.

1. Warm-up on your own

- Instruct them on how to warm up properly
- Long tones in low and mid range of instrument
- Reinforce breathing, air, and mouthpiece fundamentals

2. Sustained, staggered long tones

- Use concert F or concert B-flat
- Keep reminding them of breath and air quality
- Create a variety of long tone exercises (change this constantly so they don't space out or get bored)

3. Metered long tones

- Remind them of mouthpiece fundamentals
- Create exercises that also vary dynamics
- Add harmonies

4. Articulations

- Always work to achieve a warm sound, never harsh
- Remind them of air and mouthpiece fundamentals
- Add dynamics to your exercises
- Add rhythms
- Add different notes or scale patterns

Tuning, Tone, Blend, and Balance

It is at this point in the process that I tune. That is NOT to say I haven't addressed intonation throughout the entire process. Even when they are just doing air, I will frequently ask, "would you be matching your neighbor and the ensemble right now?" When they are doing long tones, I will continually ask them to match each other. When we get the actual tuning part of the rehearsal, it is meant to allow for a moment to fine tune.

Tuning incorporates balance, blend, tone, not just intonation.

If you break it down, there are primarily **three reasons why one person will stick out** in an ensemble or section.

1. Volume

2. Tone

3. Intonation

Also, there are basically **three levels of listening**:

Level 1 = Listening only to themselves. Listening to their own tone quality.

Level 2 = Listening to themselves and their neighbors or section. Consider how their volume, tone, and intonation match the section's.

Level 3 = Listening to themselves, the section, and the whole ensemble. Consider how their volume, tone, and intonation match the ensemble.

Tuning

Take the time to carefully explain and demonstrate the tuning process to your students. Explain how combinations of sound waves produce "beats". Demonstrate how getting more in tune makes the "beats" go away. Outline an easy process for figuring out if they are sharp or flat. Do whatever you can to eliminate the mystery of tuning.

- Don't be afraid to tune out of your comfort range. Your music isn't always in the middle range of the horn.
- Use tuners outside of rehearsal to learn instrument tendencies
- Consider using tuning charts
- Be patient. Give the students time to find the pitch center. Don't go on until it's in tune...no matter how long it takes. It will go faster eventually.
- Add and take away sections to allow students to hear blend between different instruments.
- SING - as much as possible!!!!

Tone

- Model good tone quality as much as possible. Use your stronger musicians as examples.
- Discuss and clarify the traits of a good sound.

Blend and Balance

- Clarify proper balance
- Pyramid of sound
- Demonstrate and listen to good balance and bad balance
- Balance to your low brass and low reeds, no matter how small.

There are very few marching bands that have the patience to learn to play on a football field with a great balanced sound. Many directors use concert band as the tool to teach fundamentals that make the marching band better, but consider doing the opposite. After doing intensive music fundamentals during marching band, you will probably find that the concert band sounds better...and the awkward transition from marching band to concert band is gone. Learn everything you can about the details of music fundamentals and then trust the PROCESS of teaching them.