



TOUCHPOINT

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Keeping Students Engaged

By Dr. Matthew Arau

As educators, we want our rehearsals to be engaging to the students. However, this is easier said than done. Too often, when a conductor works for a period of time with one section of an ensemble, the rest of the group patiently, or impatiently, waits for the next time they will be involved. In my experience at the middle school, high school, and university level, students appreciate being actively engaged during rehearsals. My experience has been similar to Benjamin Zander's realization, cited in *The Art of Possibility*:

"I had been conducting for nearly twenty years when it suddenly dawned on me that the conductor of an orchestra does not make a sound. His picture may appear on the cover of the CD in various dramatic poses, but his true power derives from his ability to make other people powerful. I began to ask myself questions like 'What makes a group lively and engaged?'" 1

I have found that combining leadership, empowerment, and engagement in a rehearsal exponentially increases the commitment level and musical growth for everyone involved. I have compiled a brief list of possible strategies that effectively increase engagement at all levels of teaching when:

- Students are asked to be active listeners even if they are not playing a particular section. They should listen for phrase shape, dynamics, balance, tone color, blend, intonation, etc.
- Students are asked to subdivide eighth notes on the syllable "ch" and asked to subdivide verbally 1 + 2 + 3 +, etc.
- Students clap and count their rhythm.
- Students are asked to perform with "air and fingers and articulation" but no sound.
- Students are asked to "sing and finger" their music.
- Students are asked to conduct in place.
- Students are asked to paint the phrase shape in the air with their hand.
- Students are asked to listen to and then critique a performance.
- Students are asked for suggestions on how to improve a performance.
- Students are asked to practice a difficult passage silently.
- Students are asked to visualize a story based on a performance and then share.
- Students are asked to think about what emotion the music is expressing.
- Students are given copies of the full conductor score and asked to make musical comments. (This is particularly helpful for percussionists who may not play on a piece.)
- One or two students are selected to come to the front of the ensemble and listen critically to the group and then make musical suggestions.
- Percussionists are asked to become a human metronome – snare drummer plays quarter or eighth notes.
- Perform without a conductor. Use listening skills and visual communication to work together.
- Brass buzz on mouthpieces, while woodwinds play or sing.
- Percussion plays while winds sing or "air and finger their music."
- Sections perform for each other in a competition to see who can be the most musical and expressive.
- Students sing or play their music over a tuning CD drone paying particular attention to just intonation.
- Students sing their music with solfège syllables. (With or without Curwen hand-signs)
- Students break into mixed instrumentation chamber groups to rehearse the music on their own and then perform for the other students.

- Students “bop” their music by playing just the attacks of the notes in rhythm. (Turn all the notes into staccatos.)
- Students subdivide their music by playing all of the eighth note or sixteenth note subdivisions in the music.
- Students listen to a recording of their rehearsal or performance and critically evaluate their personal performance, the section’s performance, and the full ensemble’s performance.

The above engagement strategies are particularly effective to continue the learning process and involve students who would otherwise feel left out or bored when another section is receiving focus. However, the same strategies can be used in a full group setting as well because the strategies offer varied and multiple ways to teach one or more concepts. Sometimes, it may be effective to combine multiple strategies simultaneously. Of course, it is important to remember that a fast-paced rehearsal with minimum talking from the conductor (and students) and maximum amount of playing leads to an engaging rehearsal.

1. Benjamin Zander, *The Art of Possibility*, (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2002), 68-69.



About the Author

Dr. Matthew Ramón Arau is an Assistant Professor of Music, Chair of the Music Education Department and Associate Director of Bands at the Lawrence University Conservatory of Music. He conducts the Lawrence Symphonic Band and student and faculty chamber groups, guest conducts the Lawrence Wind Ensemble, supervises instrumental student teachers, and teaches Instrumental Methods and Rehearsal Techniques I & II.

Arau has presented clinics on student leadership at the International Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic in Chicago, the Western International Band Clinic in Seattle, the Conn-Selmer Institute in Indiana, the Colorado Music Educators Association, Midwest Music Seminars, and universities and high schools around the country. He teaches student leadership at the Metro-Capitol Leadership Academy in Sherwood, Oregon and the CSU Band Leadership Academy in Ft. Collins, Colorado. He guest conducts honor bands and honor jazz bands of all levels, is an active concert band, jazz band and marching band adjudicator, and has continued to be an active jazz and classical saxophonist throughout his teaching and academic career.