

# **Achieving Good Ensemble Balance and Blend**

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## **Introduction**

The most primary concern of good ensemble playing is to achieve a good balance within the group. If good balance happens, blend and good intonation will be desired by-products. It goes without saying that a prerequisite to this is good, efficient tone production.

The primary rule to achieve good balance and intonation is to listen through the ensemble. Learn to identify the lowest voices. Are you able to discern the low clarinets, baritone saxophone, and bassoon, as well as the tuba? Do your best to attempt to get your sound into the sonority of the bass voices. As a performer, one should not cover up, or mask, the sound of the lower voices of the ensemble.

As a solo chair in a symphonic organization, I am in a unique position to experience a variety of expectations from the music director. Many times, I am a soloist and need to lead a body of other instrumentalists. To that end, I am dependent upon them to create the appropriate tapestry for me to weave the solo passage in a musically satisfying fashion.

My main role is the lead voice in a section that provides accompaniment and support for other sections. The horn section is often the most used wind section with composers effectively scoring it with strings, winds, and other brasses. Because of our accompanying nature, we have to be aware of balance and phrasing. For instance, if the music director wants more prominence from a particular voice, or section in the orchestra, the section will play the passage at a softer volume to allow the solo voice or line to be performed in a comfortable fashion.

Likewise, if a section is scored in homophonic texture, it should be incumbent on all performers to phrase identically with the melody. This includes breathing, stylistic approach and phrase shape. My job is to not only play my part, but to do what I can to make my colleagues sound better.

## **Be Aware of the Big Picture**

Younger players tend to be isolationists. That is to say that they only pay attention to the part that they are playing and are oblivious to surrounding parts and events within the ensemble. A competent performer must take off these musical blinders and realize the importance (or lack thereof) of their part within the ensemble at any particular moment. It is important to be aware of other instrumentalists that are doubling notes or parts. Become aware of the voices that surround you. Listen side to side and front to back.

As you listen, be aware of how you are fitting into the group. If you cannot hear yourself, you are playing too soft. Conversely, if you can only hear yourself, you are playing too loud. Play with enough presence so that your part is in balance with others that are playing around you. Thus, the accompanying parts must be performed as melodically as possible.

Section players need to play as musically as first chair players. The section player should ask himself what can be done to make the first part (or player) sound better. Just as good jazz players compliment ('comp') the soloist, likewise in art music all supporting parts must compliment the melody in order that the flow and balance of the music is musically satisfying. All parts need to be performed in a melodic fashion. Section musicians must be aware of the melodic line and musical phrasing so that these supporting parts are phrased accordingly.

### **A Question of Balance**

Musical perception of the audience drastically affects tenets of balance and blend within the ensemble. The way we audiate (hear) must be compensated by the performers in the ensemble. It is easier for the ear to distinguish higher pitch sounds than lower pitch sounds. Thus what the audience perceives in an ensemble blend is an inverted triangle:

Soprano (most clear)  
Alto (Somewhat less clear)  
Tenor (Becoming difficult to identify)  
Bass (Most difficult to identify)

What directors and ensemble members wish to project to the audience is an equal blend among top, middle, and lower voices within the ensemble. Thus, it is incumbent upon the director and players to boost the presence of the lowest voices in the ensemble. It will be easy to identify those top-most voices, or whoever has the melody line. However it is essential that the supporting voices in the bottom have enough sonority to make the ensemble sound rich and in-tune.

This same concept can be taken within sections divided into multiple parts. For instance, third clarinets need to play stronger in order to balance the sonority of the first clarinets. To that end, the staffing of larger sections should be pyramid shaped with few on the first part, about twice as many seconds, and again about twice as many thirds as there are people on second part.

### **The Beats Go On**

We hear correct intonation with regards to the natural laws of physics. Equal temperament is out of tune. Seasoned players are aware that it is much more difficult

playing in tune with a keyboard instrument than it is with either winds or strings. In addressing intonation, it is essential to eliminate intonation 'beats.' These beats are a result of a cancellation of vibration when two sounds of very near frequency cancel out one another. The more out of phase the notes are, the faster the 'beats' become.

To experience this, you need a colleague. Decide on a comfortable range note for both players and play in unison. One of the players needs to hold the pitch steady. The other player should bend the pitch slowly up and down. As the pitch is bent, can both musicians hear the beats? If so, can you notice how these beats slow down and speed up? If not, then try again or select another note. When the beats can be discerned, then have the two players switch roles.

These cancellations not only occur in unisons, but in intervals and chords as well. In relation to equal temperament, here are the intonation differences in natural intonation as governed by the laws of physics.

Perfect 5<sup>th</sup> - needs to be slightly raised

Perfect 4<sup>th</sup> - needs to be slightly narrowed

Major 3rds & 6ths - need to be lowered

Minor 3rds & 6ths - need to be raised

Major 7ths - need to be raised, especially if going to a tonic resolution

Minor 7ths - need to be lowered significantly to pull down to the resolution note

Practice intonation exercises with your concert group so those students can experience out-of-phase intonation beats. Have these players gain experience by playing individually and in small groups on unison and perfect interval tuning exercises. The golden rule of ensemble playing is 'always assume that you are wrong.' It is up to each individual musician to be flexible and adjust the intonation.

Another problem that musicians deal with is the peculiar intonation tendencies of the instruments. Brass players should be aware of how the overtone series and valve use affects intonation. Likewise all winds should be aware of common faults with their instruments. Knowledge is power. Being familiar with intonation tendencies on the instrument will give the musician a head start on figuring out how to adjust out-of-tune pitches.

A large band playing very out of tune will cause many sound wave cancellations. Thus this ensemble will have a much smaller resultant sound than a smaller ensemble that plays with superb intonation. In fact, superior intonation will add even more tones by sympathetic vibrations.

## **Loud Enough For You?**

Not all dynamics are created equal. A forte in a woodwind quintet is different that a forte in a brass quintet, or in a symphony orchestra. Likewise a forte in Beethoven is different that a forte in Haydn or Mahler. It is imperative that competent musicians temper dynamics according to the medium of performance, as well as expected style and sounds of the period literature that is being performed. Younger students should be aware of the various dynamic shades.

To that end, the student needs to understand the dynamic spectrum of their instrument and limits of the individual's control. The following exercise is very helpful and eye opening:

1. On a comfortable note, play a *mf* dynamic
2. Play the same note at *mf* and then again at *p*. Make sure that you are aware of a change of volume.
3. Play the note at *mf*, repeat at *p*, and then once more at *pp*. If there is lack of control or no difference in sound, then the opening *mf* dynamic must be too soft. Thus, the softest note that can be played with control and tone is *ppp*!
4. Once this lower spectrum of dynamic has been identified, it is time to build onto the topside of the dynamic range. Starting with the *mf* add one dynamic stronger and return, eventually ending at *fff*!
5. At the highest playing intensity, the player should experience an unforced and unencumbered air flow. High level playing is a matter of air intensity and depth rather than a pressurized or forced air column. Lips and reeds must be relaxed sufficiently to produce maximum vibration.
6. As a conclusion to the exercise have the student play repeated notes as follows (*ppp-pp-p-map-mf-f-ff-fff*) on quarter notes at mm-60. You may do this on a scale passage as well. Practice ascending scales with increasing volume. When this is accomplished, then play descending scales with increasing volume. Conversely, practice ascending and descending scales with decreasing volume. Have your students gain dynamic control in all parameters of playing.

As a caveat to playing with intensity, one should never play any louder than what a wonderful sound can be produced. Whether a person plays soft or loud, the basic sound is the same, only there is more (or less) of this sound. Blend, balance, and intonation are aided by the tonal integrity throughout one's dynamic range.

## **Conclusion**

Attention to balance and blend within the ensemble will automatically make superior intonation a byproduct. However, all this is contingent upon all instrumentalists having a characteristic sound on their instrument. If there are faulty problems in basic tone production, then blend, balance, and lastly intonation will not be successfully attained.

To this end, it is imperative that young students get good sounds in their ear. Develop a listening program for your concert group. Acquaint your young charges with major players on their individual instrument. Have them experience recordings by professional ensembles, both wind and orchestral. If possible, schedule field trips to hear live music. Area orchestras may even open up dress rehearsals for observers. Be creative in exposing your students to mature players. Often collegiate professors and ensembles may be able to schedule a visit at your school. Do not neglect to call on these valuable resources to aid you in developing your music program. I trust that these comments prove helpful. I wish you the best success in the education of the next generation of young artists.

Recommended Texts:

Colley, Steve. Tune-Up Boot Camp ([www.tuneupsystems.com](http://www.tuneupsystems.com))

McBeth, Francis. Effective Performance of Band Literature (Southern Music)

Reynolds, Verne. Intonation Exercises for Two Horns, Intonation Exercises for Brass Quintet