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*it's a simple (and **B**asic) equation...*

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BAND

If your instrumentation is ideal, lucky you!
If the skills of each section are perfectly matched,
even better.

If the first statement is not true, take steps to fix it as soon as possible. Some suggestions...

- If your numbers support it, have ALL of the instruments in your band. This may mean switching second or even third year students to another instrument. This can be a HUGE positive for the student as well as your instrumentation.
- To the best of your ability, balance your numbers FROM THE START. Limit numbers in some sections through educated guidance and education (often of the parents) when the students select instruments.
- Put smart kids on EVERY instrument. This will help tremendously with ensuring the SECOND statement is attainable.

Instrument switches that work well (this is certainly not an all-inclusive list!)

Flute -> Oboe

Clarinet -> Bass Clarinet, Bassoon, Saxophone

Saxophone -> Bassoon

Alto Saxophone -> Tenor and Baritone Saxophone

Trumpet -> Horn, Euphonium, Tuba

Horn -> Euphonium, Tuba, Trumpet

Trombone -> Euphonium, Tuba

Of course, “unusual” switches such as Flute -> Tuba are not out of the question!

Some may only start the four basics (flute, clarinet, trumpet, and trombone). Plan your instrument switches when the students are big enough to handle the larger instruments.

The goal is to achieve the most balanced band possible so the music is able to sound as the composer intended.

If you are unable to make instrument switches because your numbers prohibit it, or because you do not have the instruments, then we will look at ways to “adjust” the music so that the best balance possible is achieved.

BALANCE

There are as many “concepts” of balance as there are people in this room.

There are a lot of ways to approach and achieve balance in the ensemble.

Achieving CLARITY in the ensemble has become a major factor in achieving good balance.

- Balance concepts have evolved over the years.
- Music writing, scoring, and arranging has also evolved over the years.
- It can be tricky performing music that was written for a band with 18 clarinets with a band of 8 clarinets and maintaining proper balance. (You can substitute tuba or percussion or most other instruments for clarinet.)

There are lots of ways to approach and achieve balance and clarity in the ensemble. Here are a few suggestions that work well with successful ensembles.

Color Groups

Different Configurations/Names

(From Aledo)

Group 1 - Trumpet/Trombone/Clarinet

Group 2 - Euphonium/Horn/Flute/Alto Sax/Oboe

Group 3 - Tuba/Bass Trombone/Bassoon/Bass Clarinet/Tenor & Bari Sax

(From Brian Beck)

Centaur - Trumpet/Trombone

Dark Woodland Creatures - Clarinet/Horn/Low Reeds/Euphonium/Tuba

Fairies - Flute/Oboe/Alto Sax/Bassoon/Horn

(Notice that Bassoon/Horn is in two different groups)

(From Ryan Johnstone)

Left Side - flute, alto sax, horn, euphonium

Right Side - trumpet, trombone, clarinet

Goal is to “adjust the dials” so that Left plays stronger and

Right plays calmer until they match

Balance these groups on top of tuba/low reeds

(From me!)

Woodwinds = Color

Brass = Power

Percussion = Heartbeat

If the Color is louder than the Power, the ensemble sounds nasal and bright

If the Power is louder than the Color, the ensemble sounds like a Brass Band and loses all of the unique tone qualities that are only found in those instruments

If the Heartbeat is louder than everything? Heart attack for directors and audience alike! And, if the Heartbeat is too soft, there is literally no pulse

Achieving maximum clarity

Having students play short sections in small groups is absolutely the best way to “check for understanding” but, for our purposes, to help them realize and HEAR that every individual is important to the success of the group.

It also allows YOU to hear individuals that are contributing or detracting from the clarity of the group.

“Expose and fix” - it works!

Here are some suggestions:

Isolation groups

Each group has all parts represented. Make them small enough to expose but not so small as to be uncomfortable. Not all first chairs in the same group. Can be combined with student-led assessment (this technique was developed by Melodianne Malow and Gary Williams, formerly of Cockrill Middle School and now at McKinney North High School) Percussion is in every group

One on a part and down the row

1 first clarinet, 1 second clarinet, etc. Singletons (bari sax) should be in every group. Percussion is in every group

ABC Band

Three tubas? ABC Band

Four tubas? ABCD Band

Percussion is in all group

Play small sections then peer feedback

“Battle of the Bands”

If too much exposure is too intimidating, start with two bands (odds/evens) and make it a competition. Keep score!

Brains

If the ensemble is still out of balance (for whatever reason), here are some suggestions for re-scoring music to make sure all parts are covered and the music is able to maintain the sounds and integrity that the composer intended.

Woodwinds

Flute - nearly impossible to substitute because of range, clarinet/oboe when range permits, bells (mallet choice is critical!)

Oboe - flute or clarinet, saxophone (especially soprano sax if you have a good player/instrument - this is critical!), Just Say No to muted trumpet

Bassoon - bass clarinet (alto or tenor depending on range), baritone sax, euphonium

Clarinet - saxophone, low range clarinet can be supported with horn or euphonium

Bass Clarinet - bassoon, tenor sax, clarinet down an octave

Alto Sax - clarinet

Tenor Sax - bassoon, bass clarinet

Bari Sax - bass clarinet, bassoon, euphonium

Brass

Trumpet - support with clarinet or alto sax, lower range can be supported with horn

Horn - trombone/euphonium (depending on range), alto sax

Trombone - euphonium, horn (if range permits), support with low reeds

Euphonium - trombone, horn, low reeds in certain settings

Tuba - nearly impossible to substitute because of range, very bass marimba, some timpani, low reeds written down an octave when feasible, euphonium down an octave when feasible

Percussion

Often most ignored section unless you are a percussionist. Bands can be negatively affected by lack of attention to the percussion section.

Select music that you can effectively cover the percussion parts - in other words, don't program Standridge if you don't intend to cover the parts

Cover essential parts

If you cannot cover essential parts with percussion students...

Put percussionists on "skilled" parts that require percussion techniques

Put rhythmic students on non-skilled parts - chose students for one piece only so they also play their primary instrument

Learn who plays piano - cover mallet parts as needed

Don't hesitate to allow students to play the part and then return to their section if the music allows (or even play small percussion instruments from their section)

My "Rules" of Balance...
things I have learned over the years

Woodwind

- Flute 8va higher than Clarinet - Clarinet is stronger
- Flute/Clarinet same 8va - Flute is stronger
- Oboe is a color instrument, not a dominant sound UNLESS it is a solo passage. In the full ensemble, oboe must be able to hear the trumpet
- Clarinet/Sax - Clarinet stronger
- Low Reeds - if all three are present then equal parts of each. Never too much baritone sax
- Listen to WW Choir just as you would listen to the full ensemble - MUST hear the lowest voices

Brass

- Trumpet/Trombone have same line - equal parts of both
- Trumpet/Upper woodwinds have same line - trumpet should lead the line
- Trumpet/Euphonium melody - equal part OR even more euphonium

- Trombone/Euphonium same line - euphonium should color the line
- Euphonium/Tuba - balance to the lower 8va
- Tuba volume is contingent on low reed presence
- Balance “cylinders” and “cones” - too much “cylinder” is TOO BRIGHT and covers everything else. Too much “cone” is heavy and tubby and covers melodic lines
- Horn plays many roles:
 - tonal heartbeat in a march (same as snare but with pitches)
 - part of harmonic lines - same role as trombone/euphonium
 - strong melodic and counter/melodic lines
 - special effect - almost overpowering

Percussion

- The only time the percussion section is louder than the wind section is when the winds ARE NOT PLAYING
- Treat percussion balance within the section as you would in a percussion ensemble - balance the parts
- With percussion, less is more - as performance venues are different from rehearsal venues, you have to go with less

rather than more (young students CANNOT make changes one the spot)

Beautiful (Band Sounds)

Music is written for ideally instrumented bands. If your band is not so “ideal”, then it is your job to make adjustments to fit your group. The goal is to make your band sound BEAUTIFUL so that it is a joy to listen to.

Below are some examples of problems encountered and solved:

Whether due to eligibility issues or pandemic problems, you may find yourself without a section entirely or the section is nearly depleted. Be smart in your music selection and find a way to make the piece work using your brains and your musical “smarts”.

Sometimes pieces are written to strictly adhere to a certain grade level (the standard used on many prescribed music lists). At times, the range may make the melodic line sound awkward (oboe/horn are notorious in easier grade levels). If your students have skills that allow them to play what SHOULD be written (and will sound better musically), make the change

Pieces that were written in a time when ensembles were usually a different size OR when standard ensemble sound expectations were different, make adjustments

Marches, to sound right, need to adhere to a few simple rules:

- Woodwind fits inside the brass

- WW technique should come out of the texture
- Yield to euphonium when they have the melody
- Equal parts trumpet/trombone when they have a unison melody
- Controversial statement!!! Bass drummer needs to be the strongest player in the section

In conclusion...

Work hard at achieving YOUR concept of good BALANCE in your ensemble.

It is your responsibility to take the instrumentation that you have, do the best job you can to create the “perfect” instrumentation, whatever that means to you.

Then, use your BRAINS to make reasonable adjustments and use techniques for achieving transparency in the ensemble. Work hard at making the music sound as close as you can to what you think the composer intended.

The results will be BEAUTIFUL music that is pleasing to the ear and a pleasure to perform.