

Stage Band Tips

These tips and suggestions will be useful for the secondary school band seeking stylistic improvement.

Some ideas are borne from my experience as a jazz ensemble director, but many come from experts in the field that I have been fortunate enough to collaborate with over the years. I have always listened closely to the musings of experts, and working with James Morrison, Don Burrows, Bobby Shew, Robbie Chenoweth, Hal Hall, Mike Stewart, Nick Blake and Ross Irwin provided me and my bands with plenty of stimulation on how we might improve our musical style.

Michael Griffin

www.musiceducationworld.com

- Watch the conductor
- School bands are generally too loud. They play *f* like *ff*.
- Sing the long notes, don't make them boring. Support the soloist.
- Sections should start a crescendo earlier than it is written, and start softly.
- Quavers are often rushed by school bands. Be careful.
- Trumpets, a harmon mute will send your trumpet about $\frac{1}{4}$ tone higher. Make an adjustment by pulling out your slide when you use this mute, and then adjust back. You should practice this.
- Trumpets place a plunger mute about 3 inches away; otherwise you'll trap the sound. Don't point your horn in the music stand, unless for muting effect.
- Trumpet 1 should relax more. Don't force and don't play too loud. Think musically.
- Sax soli: Alto 1 must lead for the saxes to make quavers more musical. Sax soli must be note perfect. It only takes one non-commitment for this to be compromised. If the playing is too much on the beat, jazz phrasing will suffer. It only takes one person to do it the 'wrong way' and it ruins the passage. Soli sections always need forward momentum. Don't drag.
- Drums, listen and react to the volume level of the band
- Bass must be assertive. You set the tempo, don't let *them* push you around. Bass and drums drive the chart, don't let the band get too comfortable.

Ross Irwin emphasised that most school bands try and blow too hard to achieve great volume in this style of music. It was pointed out that concentrating on intonation, good technique and a focused tone would do much more for the sound of the band.

Within the band, each ensemble must strive for balance. Ross noted that within our trombone section, the 4th chair was too strong and 1st and 2nd needed to project much more. The two most important positions of the band are lead trumpet and drums. The job of lead trumpet is to make the band sound good. Our trumpet one must carefully construct solos within his capabilities. He cannot afford to become a spent force for the sake of the band. Other members of the trumpet section should not play up the octave unless they can get these high notes 100%. The drummer must change his dynamics with the rest of the band.

From U.S.A trumpeter **Bobby Shew**

- The idea of playing without music; engaging the right side of the brain more. Try this in stage band rehearsal.
- Useful practice as opposed to routine. What counts; Maintenance and problem solving. Practice what is being listened to. The concept of improvement.
- Ideokinetics – internal muscle memory. John Coltrane used to do this a lot. Inner practice.
- Ear work. Call and response, playing difficult keys, nursery rhymes.
- Projection: playing a scale with sorrow, anger, joy.
- Theory class: write an improvisation, but don't make it great (too much pressure). Rhythmic reading, scatting.
- Bass and drums must watch each other. Sight is faster than sound.
- Sammy Nestico writes very good arrangements and his purple series is worth exploring. John Berry and J Mantooth are also good arrangers for school bands.
- Playing charts by memory a useful exercise.
- Most swing pieces divided into quavers, work on exercises involving 4+
- Adjust score dynamics pragmatically. Really, only p, mp and f count in this genre
- When learning a new chart, exaggerate the articulation

For more general practice advice, download 'The Keys to Effective Practice' elsewhere on this site, or the podcast at <http://www.musiceducationworld.com/choralmusicmp3s?q=workshopsforstudents>.