The Rehearsal Toolkit

Listed Alphabetically

**Backwards Counting for Long Rests:** Instruct the ensemble to count multi-measure rests backwards, thus simulating a “countdown” to the entrance (e.g. 4 – 2 – 3 – 4, 3 – 2 -3 – 4, 2 – 2 – 3 – 4, 1 – 2 – 3 – 4.).

*Use to improve:*
- Entrances
- Rhythmic clarity

**Be a Conformist or a Maverick:** For passages in which soft or blended playing is necessary, challenge students to play so they hear mostly the sound around them, rather than their own individual tone. For passages in which bold, “to-the-fore” playing is necessary, challenge students to make their sound more prominent.

*Use to improve:*
- Dynamics
- Blend

**Bopping:** Instruct the group to reduce all notes down to just the onset of its rhythmic value. (e.g., whole, half, quarter, and eighth notes will all be played as a single sixteenth note. This technique emphasizes precision in note attacks.

*Use to improve:*
- Timing
- Articulation

**Bowing for Wind Players:** Teach wind and percussion players the basics of bowing and how it is the string player’s counterpart to breathing. Then, use bowing terms and gestures (e.g., full bow, off the string, etc.) as a visual representation of what the wind player’s air should do.

*Use to improve:*
- Phrasing
- Breath support

**Breathing for String and Percussion Players:** Teach string and percussion players how bowing is merely an externalized version of breathing. Since everyone breathes, the concept of “more air equals more sound” will resonate with string players. Use breathing terms as physical analogies to bowing (e.g., “use the entire bow, as if you are using all of your breath,” “stop the bow between notes, as if you are breathing in short spurts”).

*Use to improve:*
- Bowing technique
- Articulation
- Phrasing
**Building Chords:** Instead of begging students to "Listen!," systematically break down troublesome chords. Have voices enter in the following order: Root, Fifth, Third, Seventh, Second, Sixth. Speak in terms of concert pitch ("All E♭'s, please join us.") or chord tone ("All thirds, please join us.") Chords should build cumulatively—once the root enters it keeps sounding.

*Use to improve:*
- Intonation
- Chord balance

**Changing Colors:** To help students hear and appreciate the interaction of balance and tone color, rehearse a section several times and alter the balance between instruments each time. For example, if a trumpet, clarinet, and violin play a melody in unison, isolate those three voices and try four different variations: (1) trumpet as strongest voice; (2) clarinet as strongest; (3) violin as strongest; (4) all voices equal. After each play-through engage the ensemble in a brief dialogue about how each version altered one's perception of tone color. For example: Which is the warmest version? Which is the most focused? Which instrument dominates most easily? Which instrument blends most easily?

*Use to improve:*
- Tone color
- Balance
- Listening skills

**Clapping Rests:** Another technique for passages in which students are having difficulty entering after rests, have students clap/stomp the rests and perform the rhythm.

- **Variation 1.** Clap just the rests while counting the rhythm aloud. Then sing the rhythm on a “doo” syllable.
- **Variation 2.** Clap only the rests while tapping the beat with the foot.
- **Variation 3.** Clap the rhythm and stomp on the rests.
- **Variation 4.** Sing the rhythm on a “doo” syllable and stomp the foot on the rests.
- **Variation 5.** Half the ensemble claps the rests while the rest of the ensemble plays their regular parts on their instruments.

*Use to improve:*
- Rhythmic accuracy
- Precision/Timing

**Clarity through Space:** Placing space after tied and dotted rhythms improves clarity when the style requires notes to be separated (e.g., for a quarter note tied to an eighth note followed by an eighth rest, instruct students to “Drop the tie” by crossing out the eighth note.)

*Use to improve:*
- Rhythmic accuracy
Style—especially for faster music

Conduct and Sing: Teach students the basic conducting patterns and have them count and sing rhythms while conducting. This helps them feel the pulse and meter.

Use to improve:
- Rhythmic precision
- Pulse

De-emphasize to Emphasize: For passages with accented and unaccented notes, help the accents stand out by asking students to de-emphasize the non-accented notes. This technique also helps lighten the overall style by encouraging students not to over-attack each note.

Use to improve:
- Articulation
- Style

Dynamics through Bell Direction: To aid brass players in playing softly while still supporting their sound, instruct them to aim their bells into the stand or at the feet of the row in front of them. Conversely, to energize forte passages, instruct them to raise their bells (à la “bells up” for the horns). With both of these techniques, consistent tone quality across the section is crucial.

Use to improve:
- Dynamics
- Blend

Externalize the Subdivision: Often we tell our students to “Subdivide!” Unfortunately, we generally receive little feedback about whether they actually do it (i.e., we cannot hear what is happening in their mind’s ear). As a solution, instruct the students to play the subdivision of a difficult rhythm. For example: \( \text{\texttt{\textbackslash. \textbackslash.}} \) would be performed as \( \text{\texttt{\textbackslash\textbackslash\textbackslash\textbackslash}} \). Once the students have mastered the rhythm using this method, instruct them to play the music as printed while still hearing the subdivided version in their mind’s ear.

Use to improve:
- Rhythmic accuracy—effective for both simple and challenging rhythms
- Timing
- Tonguing practice—Another way to use this exercise is to practice speed and endurance of articulation.

Externalize the Subdivision to Make Decrescendos and Crescendos Even: Similar to the process above, but ask students to use the subdivision to evenly and gradually perform
the crescendo or decrescendo. Also, use a larger subdivision when appropriate (e.g., quarter notes to subdivide a whole note).

Use to improve:
- Dynamics

Find the "Thing": Balance issues are often caused because students do not know what the important material is. This is especially true if the texture is contrapuntal, layered, or ad hoc (separate voices filling in each other's empty spaces). In other words, as Matthew McClure, Assistant Director of Bands at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill suggests, ensembles need to know the answer to the question, "What's the thing here?"—especially if “the thing” changes frequently. Challenge them to identify it for themselves, and have them notate reminders in their parts.

Use to improve:
- Balance
- Dynamics

Finger & Sing: Have the ensemble sing on a “toooo” syllable while everyone follows their part with their finger. This allows the students to solely focus on their technique without having to worry about embouchure or bowing issues.

Use to improve:
- Note accuracy
- Rhythmic accuracy

Five or Ten Times-in-a-Row: If we move to a new section after students play something correctly only one time, there is a decent chance they will regress at the next rehearsal. Instead, make a game out of quality repetition. Challenge students to perform something several times in a row (3–10, depending on its length) before moving on to another topic.

Use to improve:
- Nearly anything that is rehearsed!

Fixing Ties: To improve the accuracy of tied rhythms, first instruct students to play the rhythm without the tie. Once they have mastered it this way, re-insert the tie and ask them to play it as-written while hearing the untied version in their mind’s ear.

Use to improve:
- Tied rhythms
- Timing
Hum to Jump-Start Singing: If students are shy about vocalizing at pitch, begin by having the ensemble play a passage and then hum the same thing. During the humming have several members play softly as a reference. Repeat, but now sing with mouths open.

Use to improve:
- Style
- Intonation

The Human Metronome: Have a snare drummer accent downbeats or subdivisions while the ensemble plays. For loud passages it's essential that the percussionist plays strongly enough so the group easily hears the subdivision. For softer passages have members of the ensemble keep the pulse by clapping, snapping, or "sizzling" with a “tsz” sound. In all cases insist that the pulse-giver follow the conductor at all costs. (Often they will naturally follow the tendency of the players.)

Here's the process:
1. Start the human metronome before the group begins playing
2. Metronome should subdivide the prevailing pulse of the piece
3. After the metronome has run for a few measures, bring the group in on the passage
4. Evaluate and repeat!

Use to improve:
- Rhythmic accuracy
- Tempo changes
- Phasing (Timing)

Imaginary Slurs: For tenuto or legato passages that are not slurred, ask students to perform it once with slurs. Then, remove the imaginary slurs and ask the group to imitate the sound they just created, using their tongue only to gently begin each note.

Use to improve:
- Articulation
- Style

Improving the Tone to Improve the Intonation: (Changing tone quality will affect the pitch of a note.) If the instrument is played with a full resonant tone the instrument will naturally play in tune with itself (i.e., best tone quality → maximum resonance → better pitch)

Use to improve:
- Pitch/Intonation
- Tone Quality

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**The Inner Decrescendo of FP and Marcato:** To achieve a more musical FP and marcato, slow the passage down and ask students to substitute a forte followed by a quick decrescendo (instead of over-accenting the note.) When playing *a tempo*, encourage the group to consider FP and marcato articulations as ultra-fast decrescendos.

*Use to improve:*
- Articulation
- Dynamics

**Kinesthetic Subdivision:** For students who learn kinesthetically, conducting patterns may not be enough. Instead, large physical movements can help them feel the subdivision. While performing the subdivisions, have students count the rhythm using rhythm syllables or perform it on a neutral syllable.

- For duple: Keep the hands clasped. Move hands down on the downbeats and up on the upbeats
- For triple: Pat lap on the downbeat, clap hands on the second subdivision; tap shoulders on the third subdivision

*Use to improve:*
- Rhythmic precision
- Pulse

**Low Notes Ring Longer:** For a rich effect on cutoffs, ask the bass voices, especially string bass and tuba, to linger a few milliseconds longer than the rest of the ensemble. This lingering should be extremely subtle but still audible. Encourage upper voices, especially flutes, to cutoff a millisecond earlier than they think necessary.

*Use to improve:*
- Balance
- Tone color

**The Massive Metronome:** Despite what we say in rehearsal, students are not always aware of their tempo tendencies. But if we expect them to use a metronome during their individual practice there is no shame in also using it during group practice. Plug a metronome into decent speakers and have the group play the troublesome passage a few times with it. Students will often be amazed about how certain passages rush or drag. Having a definitive, audible click makes the difference. (Avoid the distraction of a metronome that uses a voice to count aloud.)

*Use to improve:*
- Tempo
- Rhythmic accuracy
Mouthpiece Buzzing: Have the brass players buzz a passage in the music with just their mouthpieces. This exercise places the focus on pitch. If players can buzz the correct frequency they will ultimately play the correct pitch with the horn.

*Use to improve:*
- Pitch accuracy
- Intonation—A prerequisite for playing in tune and with good tone is being able to buzz each pitch accurately. For example, if the player is trying to play the note “F” but buzzes the note “E”, the note will be played flat and with poor tone quality when the horn is added.

Moving Notes Forte, Sustained Notes Piano: Directors often instruct students, “Bring out the moving lines.” A step beyond this is to ask students to play all moving notes *forte* and all sustained notes *piano*. Reinforce this technique so individuals are literally toggling between *forte* and *piano* depending on their rhythm. Eventually ask students to smooth out the exaggeration.

*Use to improve:*
- Balance
- Dynamics

Numeric Dynamics: Instruct students to add numbers next to their dynamic markings (e.g., 1=pp, 2=p, 3=mp, 4=mf, 5=f 6=ff). This provides a quantitative scale to which students can gage their dynamics.

*Use to improve:*
- Dynamics
- Phrasing

Octave Drops: Many intonation and balance problems in upper strings, woodwinds, and trumpets are easily fixed simply by dropping one or more players down an octave. In other words, instead of having five flutes attempt a double-high G, ask one or more of the weaker players play the lower G. Is this cheating? Perhaps, but consider that most professional bands do not have multiple players on the upper parts.

Or, to help passages with intonation issues temporarily practice playing the line an octave lower. Practicing in an easier tessitura allows players to internalize the correct pitches without endurance and fingering struggles.

*Use to improve:*
- Balance
- Intonation

One Ensemble, One Pulse: To create a unified pulse throughout the ensemble, have each person tap an adjacent person’s shoulder in a continuous link. Sing rhythm exercises or ensemble music while the group continues to tap the beat. In addition to singing the music accurately, the goal is for each student to make sure their tapping lines up with the tapping they are receiving.
Use to improve:
- Ensemble pulse
- Rhythmic precision

The Parody/Satire Technique: Ask students to exaggerate all aspects of a passage—especially dynamics, articulations and expressive markings—nearly to the point of making a joke of them. In other words, play piano dynamics ridiculously soft. Specify one rule: students must only make good sounds (i.e., no crass blatting for accents, etc.)

Use to improve:
- Articulations
- Style
- Dynamics

Percentage Dynamics: Similar to “Numeric dynamics,” this provides a quantitative reference for students. For example, ask the group to play at 95 percent full power, and then ask them to play 20 percent more softly. As preparation for this, use the warm-up/skill-building time to explore what 100 percent and 1 percent feel and sound like. (Variation: Miles per hour—Play 10 mph, 30 mph, 75 mph, etc.)

Use to improve:
- Dynamics
- Phrasing

Play Moving Notes Only: A mental exercise as much as a listening one, this is an excellent way to reveal the composite melody of a piece. Instruct students to only play moving notes as they come into their part. All other notes should be tacit. This may take a bit of practice as students sort out which notes they should play, but it will train their ears to prioritize which parts are the most important.

Use to improve:
- Balance
- Precision of entrances
- Timing

Play the Opposite: Sometimes it is useful have the ensemble model the opposite sound from what is desired. This brings the desired sound into relief. In other words, teach students what something is by first showing them what it is not (e.g., play slurred instead of staccato).

Use to improve:
- Articulation
- Style
- Dynamics

Play Softer to Hear Others: When balance issues plague the entire ensemble, instead of micromanaging how loud each section plays or exhorting everybody to "Listen!," simply ask...
everyone to play softer. This automatically fixes some problems by lightening the texture and focuses each student to listen to parts other than their own.

*Use to improve:*
- Balance
- Tone quality

**Pre-set Dynamics:** Often, during a crescendo or decrescendo, the ensemble falls short of the dynamic goal—i.e., they are not strong or soft enough by the time they reach their goal note. As a solution, play the last note of the decrescendo or crescendo by itself so the students understand where they are aiming.

*Use to improve:*
- Dynamics
- Phrasing

**Quick Rhythm Fixes:** Work on rhythm problems by removing pitch and fingering issues.

*Step 1:*
- Have the group clap the pulse and count the rhythm
  OR
- Tap the pulse and whisper the rhythm
  OR
- Air clap the pulse and audiate the rhythm

*Step 2:*
- Half the group plays while the other half claps (then flip-flop the groups).

*Use to improve:*
- Rhythmic accuracy
- Precision / Timing

**Rest Fillers:** If students have difficulty entering after rests, temporarily replace the rest with a note of the same rhythmic value. (Use either the previous pitch or the one that follows.) This works particularly well when students are late on up-beat entrances, or with *repeated* upbeats, as with horn parts in Sousa marches.

*Use to improve:*
- Rhythmic accuracy
- Precision / Timing

**The Ringer Technique:** When your second or third part players are having a difficulties ask your first chair player to play along with them on their part.

*Use to improve:*
- Rhythmic accuracy
- Articulation
• Dynamics
• Pitch accuracy

Sing the Skeleton/Sing the Lead Sheet: Clarify textures by isolating the melody and bass line (e.g., inner lines and accompaniments do not play). Once students hear how the identity of a piece is largely dictated by the soprano and bass, they can properly balance the other voices. (Try saying something like, "Does everyone hear how the piece works pretty well with all those other parts missing? Now let's add them back in—but don't obscure the main skeleton of the piece!" OR “Don't obscure the lead sheet—the melody and the bass are what define the piece.")

Use to improve:
• Balance
• Demonstrating outer and inner parts

Singing with Audio Anchors: Usually we ask groups to sing melodies or short sections of a piece, but we can also have them sing large chunks. To periodically re-establish pitch and keep the group on their toes, ask the group to play the downbeat of every rehearsal letter (it's fun, too!)

Use to improve:
• Running a piece without fatiguing the ensemble's chops
• Concentration on style and precision for large segments of music

Slow Motion Staccato (Slow Tempo Bopping): When rehearsing staccato passages under tempo, instruct students to play notes the same length as they would at regular speed (i.e., at the slower tempo there will be more time between notes but the notes themselves will now be ultra-separated.) This will help maintain the length of articulation when performing a tempo.

Use to improve:
• Articulation—When rehearsing staccato/marcato/separated passages under tempo, use this technique to maintain separation between notes when played a tempo.

Small Groups through Creative Repetition: To disguise repetition, or for a clever way to hear students in smaller groups, use fun, fast, and varied ways to form mini-ensembles. For example, "Let's have all 10th-graders play at letter B." "Now let's have everybody who's wearing jeans." "Now only people who play the 2nd part." "Now, only Yankees fans." The possibilities are endless.

Use to improve:
• Nearly anything that requires repetition

Student Modeling: Identify students who are performing the passage well and ask them to demonstrate for the entire ensemble. This provides a model for which other students can strive and provides an excellent opportunity to praise individuals.
Use to improve:
- Nearly anything

Temporarily Miniaturize the Band or Orchestra: A method of last resort is to temporarily reduce the number of players on a part. For example, to achieve soft dynamics, explain to the ensemble that misbalanced instrumentation or orchestration problems sometimes makes it necessary to reduce the number of players on a passage.

Use to improve:
- Dynamics
- Balance
- Intonation

The Third of the Chord as Ammonia: Beyond its pitch tendencies, most young players do not understand the balance implications of the chordal third. Though in some ways it is the most satisfying to play, a little goes a long way! Build a tutti triad with only root and fifth, and then invite one student to play the third. Amazingly, the chord will sound balanced (or nearly so) with that one lone voice on the third. Impress upon students the importance of a balance hierarchy: root, fifth, third.

Use to improve:
- Intonation
- Chord balance

Vocalizing: The removal of instruments allows students to focus on musical issues without worrying about the physical challenges of their instruments. Further, by singing accurately—even if just with style, dynamics, and articulation—they create a personal reference to imitate on their instruments. Perhaps most importantly, vocalizing develops musical ears.

Use to improve:
- Rhythm and Articulations: Example: for two eighth-notes slurred followed by two tongued notes, have students sing the rhythm on the syllables “dee-yat-dut-dut.”
- Intonation: Most students can sing in tune (or nearly in tune) simply by allowing their inner ear to guide them.
- Tuning the Ensemble: Have the students sing the tuning note on a neutral syllable (e.g., “ah”). This allows them to internalize the pitch.
- Changing Tempos: By singing the parts students can better focus on the conductor for tempo changes and other transitions.
- Improving Note Fingering Errors: Have students make a popping sound by decisively pushing down their fingers or moving the slide while singing on a neutral syllable or using the letter names of the notes.
- Phrasing: Encourage students to sing with along the contour of the phrase and then amplify the shape through their instruments while playing.
Note: When singing to improve rhythm, articulation, style, tempo, and note errors, it is obviously useful to sing the exact pitch, though sometimes the important issue is singing with style and musicality.

Zip and Unzip: By reducing the number of variables students need to concentrate on, we help them focus on those giving them difficulty. For difficult passages, isolate one aspect—notes, rhythm, dynamics, etc.—and "zip" the other aspects into a repeated note. For example, concentrate on the rhythm of a passage by "zipping" the notes down to a concert B♭ and playing the rhythm on that pitch. Or practice the dynamics by playing only the rhythm on a repeated pitch.

Use to improve:
- Rhythm
- Dynamics
- Articulation