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Using Questions to Teach the National Standards in Rehearsal

By Kevin Tuttt

The National Standards for Arts Education¹ are widely promoted as appropriate guidelines for developing comprehensive musicianship in school performing ensembles. Unfortunately, most music educators' employers expect that student ensembles will perform well and often. As a result, many music educators are frustrated that they must constantly be preparing for performance at the expense of incorporating National Standards other than Standards 1 (singing), 2 (playing), and 5 (reading and notating music). They may believe that to meet the other Standards, students must put down their instruments and pick up pencils.

Take Standards 6 and 7, for example. Many authors who have suggested techniques for teaching comprehensive musicianship have focused on paper-and-pencil approaches.² To teach Standard 6 (listening to, analyzing, and describing music), for example, the teacher might (a) write "ABA" on the board, (b) play a recording of a piece in ABA form while verbally identifying the form, and then (c) have the students listen to a new recording and identify the form. Content Standard 7 (evaluating music and music performances) might be met through similar techniques. A teacher might play a recording and ask students to write down or verbally articulate their evaluation of the music or the performance quality.

the right questions during rehearsal can help students become better musicians as well as better performers.

My students and I found these approaches frustrating, however, because we spent too much time talking and writing in a class that we believed was for active music-making. I began to search for rehearsal techniques that would teach the content outlined in the Standards and improve performance at the same time.

Traditionally, good ensemble rehearsal technique involves a conductor able to make quick and insightful evaluations of the students' playing and then provide concise, direct corrections.³ For example, if the ensemble is playing a march and the trumpets are rushing, the conductor might state: "Trumpets, don't rush. Watch!" This is an accurate evaluation followed by a concise instruction. We would have a complete and effective teaching cycle if the trumpets *did* watch and play without rushing, then the conductor responded in some way to their improvement. In this case, the trumpets might have performed their part better, but the conductor's method probably did not increase their individual or comprehensive musicianship.

It's possible, however, to teach the National Standards in a manner that will not only produce better ensembles and performances, but will also help our students become more independent and comprehensive musicians—and provide a more fulfilling musical experience for students and teachers alike. Adopting this viewpoint required me to carefully examine my teaching techniques and develop a more holistic approach that continued to emphasize excellence in performance while focusing on students' musical independence and their complete musicianship.

Meeting the Standards through Rehearsal Technique

To meet Standards 6 and 7 through rehearsal, students should be empowered to listen to, analyze, and describe both the quality of the composition they are rehearsing and the technical and musical accuracy of their own performance. Many students might not immediately be able to complete those tasks, but a primary focus of our instruction should be to assist our students in becoming better musicians, not just in executing music notation accurately. These two goals need not be in conflict; good

rehearsal technique can increase both musicianship and performance accuracy.

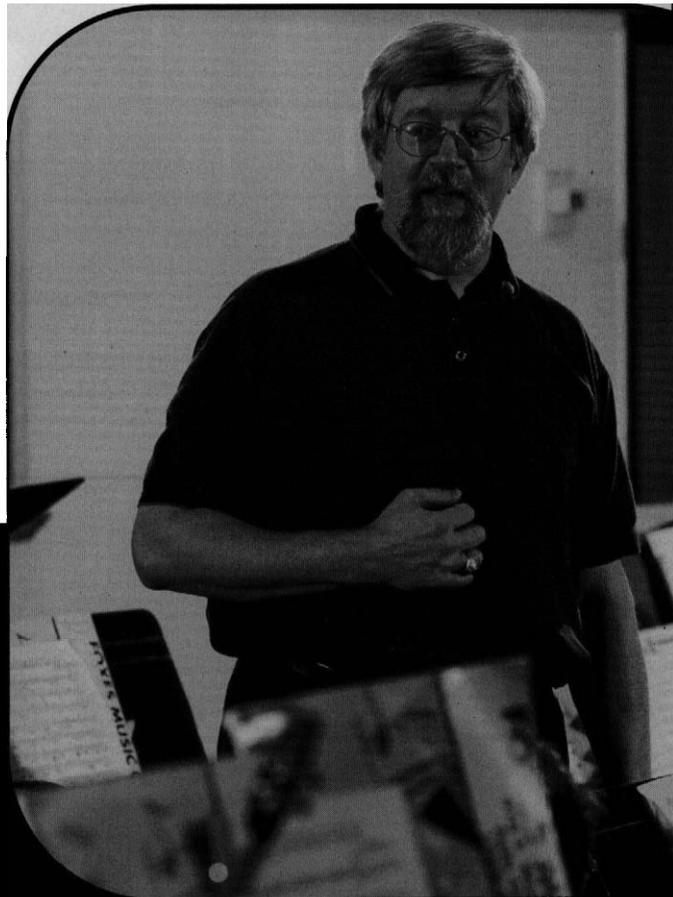
Let's return to the example of the rushing trumpets. If the trumpet line were composed of both quarter and eighth notes while an accompaniment part in the trombones had steady eighth notes, the conductor might increase the students' musical understanding and performance level by asking the trumpets, "What does the accompaniment line have at this point?" The trumpets would be expected to (a) listen to the music, (b) analyze who had the accompaniment, (c) realize the accompaniment had steady eighth notes, and then (d) adjust their performance to the steady eighth notes. The performance would improve *and* the students would also have listened to, analyzed, and perhaps described music (Standard 6) and analyzed music performances (Standard 7).

Focusing the players' attention directly or indirectly ("Trumpets, who is playing the accompaniment and what do they have?") not only empowers students to improve their own performance, but also can help them articulate their decision process so they can act on that knowledge the next time. Through this process, they become increasingly responsible for their own learning.

As I suggested earlier, many of our students might not be ready to answer the question posed to our hypothetical trumpets. A major component of our rehearsal technique needs to be increasing our students' listening and analytical skills, and one way to do that is to ask questions appropriate for the context. What makes a good question can depend on your understanding of a number of variables⁴ that include, but are not limited to, the following factors:

- The cognitive level of your students (their ability to understand the concepts being presented).

- The technical level of your students in relation to the music's difficulty (if they are struggling with the technique required to play the part, little energy will be left to think about or listen to what is going on).



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The director's rehearsal technique should help increase students' listening and analytical skills.

■ The proximity of the performance (if the performance is in 30 minutes, I would not ask many questions).

How to Ask Questions

There are some basic guidelines to help you decide what questions to ask. A basic rule of asking questions is that teachers should attempt to vary their question types so all students can participate.⁵ Many teachers are probably familiar with Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy⁶ and the idea that we can vary our question types to get at the same subject matter. The following is a review of introductory questioning technique,⁷ with some examples applied to the music rehearsal.

One example is the use of low-level and high-level questions to address the same subject matter. Low-level questions are the "who, what, when, where" questions exemplified by asking students, "Are you sharp or flat?" Even a seemingly advanced question—"Which chord tone are you playing?"—can be low-level because it asks for a simple analysis.

High-level questions might be of similar nature but require students to infer or do a more in-depth analysis of the music. In the case of chord tones, you might ask a singer if the dissonance she is performing serves a specific harmonic purpose or is for color only. Then, with that knowledge, how would she perform that chord tone differently? Low-level and high-level questions do not necessarily define the level of difficulty in answering, but rather the difference in how the student is required to think. Asking students who have never adjusted their pitch to determine if they are sharp or flat may turn out to be a very challenging experience, for students and teacher alike!

Teachers may also use close-ended and open-ended questions. A close-ended question requires a definite answer: "Are you melody or accompaniment?" An open-ended question gives more freedom in the answer: "How should this phrase be shaped?" The students' answers to these questions do not always need to be verbal. For example, you might select a section of music that contains a solo line with accompaniment. You have the

ensemble play the section three times with the student soloist having the opportunity to shape the phrase two different ways and then choose the most appropriate phrasing for the third time through the section. The possibilities are endless, and are shaped by your own and your students' musical understandings.

We should be careful, however, to ask questions that encourage students to give thoughtful responses, and we should make it clear that we value their responses. We should avoid rhetorical questions ("Trombones, why are you always so loud?") and statements posed as questions ("If you are not the melody, should you be louder or softer than the melody?"). There are circumstances when these questions, appropriately and thoughtfully phrased, are good questions. Most of the time, however, we ask these questions without really wanting an answer, or we include the answer in our question. This allows students to avoid taking responsibility for acquiring knowledge.

The method by which we respond to students' answers is as important, if not more so, as how we ask the question. The most common errors are (a) not waiting long enough for students to answer, (b) not encouraging students to answer as best they can, or (c) failing to acknowledge students' responses. The commonly accepted practice is to wait an average of seven seconds after asking a question in order to allow the student to answer. However, if the student is unable to answer or answers incorrectly, the teacher should employ a technique known as probing.⁸ The probing teacher seeks to alter, reword, or follow up the question, or attempts to amplify, rephrase, or paraphrase the student's answer.

The goal is to get students to answer the question firmly and convincingly so they can apply their knowledge in a new situation. If we return to the question "Are you sharp or flat?" we might find a student unable to answer the question. To "probe" we might (a) ask the student to guess, (b) have the student make the necessary adjustment, and then (c) have the student evaluate whether the pitch improved. The teacher

should follow up the question with encouragement and further probing, if time permits, or if necessary, with the correct answer. The key in probing is to ask a question at the edge of students' musical and intellectual understanding and then, when they have grasped the answer, ask another question or questions that lead the students to where they need to be musically and intellectually. Sometimes the process can take one minute; sometimes it can take one month.

Using Questions in Rehearsal

Using questions in the rehearsal results in the same basic teaching cycle described in the introduction: (a) the student performs, (b) the teacher makes an evaluation of an error, (c) the teacher addresses the error by asking a question based on the intellectual, technical, and musical level of the student, (d) the student responds, as appropriate, with a verbal or nonverbal answer, and (e) the teacher confirms the accuracy or inaccuracy of the student's response. Questions can be applied in two ways: to improve basic technical issues and to encourage students to become complete, independent, thinking musicians—the goal of comprehensive musicianship and the National Standards.

Many common ensemble performance issues can be addressed by asking questions. Earlier in this article, I gave the example of how ensemble precision and intonation might be addressed through this method. This method can be applied to concepts of phrasing and dynamic contrast, and it can assist in teaching more complex musical concepts such as form and texture.

Conductors typically improve poor phrasing by modeling the correct phrasing for the student. The student then echoes the conductor's line until the conductor is satisfied. Each time the student encounters a new line, the conductor must perform the phrase. You could encourage student independence and musical curiosity by asking one of the following questions: "Where is the climax in this line?" "Where does this line go?" or "Why did you think the line goes there?" If students have a problem making a

decision, ask them to listen to other musical ideas that might help them develop an answer.

You might even move a player next to the musical idea you want him or her to comprehend. For example, a trumpet player who is playing a solo line may be having trouble determining the harmonic direction of a section of music while the trombones are playing the primary harmonic accompaniment. You might move the trumpet player to the middle of the trom-

bone section so she is surrounded by the harmony and better able to hear the musical ideas she should be referencing.

Students can reply aurally (by playing) instead of verbally and even provide a few different interpretations. Similarly, you can address dynamic contrast or ensemble balance. Students could be asked to identify the melody, relate their dynamics to other sections, or compare the apparent importance of their musical line to

other lines. In each case, you are asking the students to analyze and describe the music (Standard 6), evaluate their performance (Standard 7), and then make an adjustment (which improves the quality of performance).

Teaching Advanced Musical Concepts

As mentioned earlier, publications on teaching comprehensive musicianship or the National Standards usually outline techniques for teaching con-

Table 1. Rehearsal Questions to Prompt Student Thinking

If the desired student thought process is to	Then you might ask to improve performance	Then you might ask to improve music thinking in general
Describe	What other instruments are playing the melody?	What instruments do you hear playing in this musical example?
Operationalize criteria	How will you know if your performance is successful?	What makes a piece of music good?
Metacogitate	What are you thinking as you perform this passage?	What do you think when you are listening to a piece of music?
Assess/evaluate	How successful do you think the performance of this piece was?	How do you feel about this piece of music?
Relate or compare	How does Grainger set the melody differently in A and B?	What do you think is similar about the music of Vaughan Williams and Gustav Holst?
Infer	Based on your knowledge of the Sousa marches we have played these past two years, how short should we play the staccato notes?	After listening to <i>Appalachian Spring</i> , <i>Rodeo</i> , and "Down a Country Lane," what can you say about Aaron Copland's music from this time period?
Analyze	What is the form of this work? How should that knowledge influence our playing?	Explain what compositional effects the composer uses to achieve the climax of this work.
Cause-effect	What did you do to perform with better intonation?	How does the composer's use of dynamics increase musical tension?
Synthesize	Based on our knowledge of chorales, how should we balance the chords of this work?	Based on our class discussions, what do you think are the major compositional techniques of the twentieth century?
Self-prescribe	When you have the melody, what must you do to play it stylistically correctly (based on discussion with other sections)?	What must you do to accurately prepare this part for next time?

The desired thought processes listed in this table are taken directly from Arthur L. Costa and Robert J. Garmston, *Cognitive Coaching: A Foundation for Renaissance Schools* (Norwood, MA: Christopher-Cordon Publishers, 1994), pp. 222–24. The questions for each term were adapted from those in the book to represent a music-specific example.

cepts like form and texture without instruments in hand. The teacher plays a recording and then graphs the form or lists textures on the board. The students then take notes and are given additional examples to evaluate their understanding of form or texture.

However, we could use the music we perform every day to teach the same concepts. While rehearsing a fugue, the conductor can point out the subject, real and tonal answers, and countersubject, and refer to each by name. Then, while rehearsing the work, the conductor can ask students to identify their roles in the music and how those should inform the way they perform their parts. The next time students encounter a fugue—whether titled “fugue” or not—the conductor can remind them about their knowledge of the fugue form and how they can perform their individual lines with a greater degree of stylistic accuracy. The same applies for any musical form, such as a march, a passacaglia, or a theme and variations. The conductor achieves this partially through direct instruction (describing parts of the fugue), but the rest arises from students’ increased understanding and their application of personal musicianship.

Texture can be taught in a similar manner, particularly if the ensemble is rehearsing a piece that contains multiple settings of the same melodic concepts (Percy Grainger’s instrumental settings are excellent for this). As each new setting is learned in rehearsal, the teacher asks the students: “What is different?” “How is it different?” and even “What is the musical effect, and how do we enhance that in our performance?” In each case, the students are learning to listen to, analyze, and describe the texture of the piece, and to evaluate and improve their performance in relation to newfound musical knowledge. Any musical concept or National Standard content found in the music you’re rehearsing can be taught through the rehearsal process and lead students to be more complete and independent musicians.

Broader Implications

Professional music educators have long stressed performance as the most important activity of public school

music.⁹ Numerous opinion-based articles, however, have advocated that all students receive a broader musical education that should include the ability to think critically about music.¹⁰ The ensemble rehearsal is an excellent place to develop and perfect these skills while preparing for outstanding performances.

As a novice teacher, I believed that music was only about performance. Over time, I came to realize that if I applied well-known questioning techniques in my rehearsal approach, I would have more successful and rewarding rehearsals, and I would be teaching thinking skills that most of my colleagues would love to address in their own classes. The approach *depended* on my ability to encourage students to think. To quote from Arthur Costa and Robert Garmston in *Cognitive Coaching: A Foundation for Renaissance Schools* (words in brackets are mine): “A direct correlation exists between the level and syntactical structure of questions and the production of thought. Effective coaches [or conductors] deliberately use questions in ways that produce desired mental processes in the mind of the teacher [musician].”¹¹ The way we teach students affects the way they think.

To develop high-order thinking, we must ask questions that will prompt our students’ thinking beyond the per-

formance. Table 1, adapted from the concepts outlined by Costa and Garmston, lists numerous high-order thought processes that teachers of any subject would want to encourage in their students. Listed in the second column are questions that might be used to improve musical performance, and in the third column are questions that might not have a direct or immediate tie to performance, but can be used to encourage students to become more comprehensive musicians with a deeper knowledge of music—leading to better performance in the long term.

It’s important to use these questions appropriately. Students typically must be able to improve their own performance before thinking in larger and broader ways about music. Once students have a proper grasp of their individual parts, they’re ready to consider the questions in the second column. When they begin to make musical decisions on their own about the quality of performance, they’re prepared to consider questions in the third column. Obviously, students may reach each level at different times. Good instruction adapts to the individual, and so should the kinds and levels of questions we ask.

Our profession has long been focused on performance. The National Standards and the education community in general have encouraged us to

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think more broadly about our students' education. We do not need to reduce the quality of performances. We only need to adapt our own approach so that we both prepare for performance and teach the National Standards. Then we will have ensembles that perform at a higher level, understand music more deeply, and enjoy the process of rehearsal as knowing participants.

Notes

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3. Melvin Pontious, "A Profile of Rehearsal Techniques and Interaction of Selected Band Conductors" (PhD dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1982), abstract in *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 43 (09): 2920A.
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7. See Bloom, *Taxonomy*; Anita Harrow, *A Taxonomy of Psychomotor Domain—A Guide for Developing Behavioral Objectives* (New York: David McKay, 1972); David R. Krathwohl, Benjamin S. Bloom, and Bertram B. Masia, *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, the Classification of Educational Goals. Handbook II: Affective Domain* (New York: David McKay, 1973); Elizabeth J. Simpson, *The Classification of Educational Objectives in the Psychomotor Domain* (Washington, DC: Gryphon House, 1972).
8. Arthur L. Costa and Robert J. Garmston, *Cognitive Coaching: A Foundation for Renaissance Schools* (Norwood, MA: Christopher-Cordon Publishers, 1994); Michael Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, 2nd ed. (Newburg Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1990).
9. Bennett Reimer, "Music Education in the Twenty-First Century," *Music Educators Journal* 84, no. 3 (1997): 33.
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