

Improving the Sound of the Band

Walter Beeler, edited by Mark Fonder

From 1935 to the late 1960s and then again in the early 1970s, Walter Beeler (1908-1973) led the Ithaca College Concert Band to national prominence. In doing so, he built a legion of highly-successful band directors, many of whom are still active today. Notable alumni include Frank Battisti, Thomas Everett, Arnold Gabriel, Anthony Maiello and many others.

In the early 1960s, Crest Records distributed a set of five LP recordings called Walter Beeler's Band Development Series. They were intended for band directors, band students, and future band directors at teacher-training institutions, with the purpose of "providing instruction and suggestions which will be of help in the developing of fine concert bands."

It has been over 30 years since the release of these recordings and they have been long out of print; however, many of the ideas are timeless. This first-time-ever compilation of Walter Beeler's teachings - excerpted from these now-famous recordings and left in conversational style as if he were speaking directly to you - is presented here with the hope that his insights may continue to help in the development of fine bands.

Band Tone

Band tone is of the utmost and primary importance because until we get what we call 'a good basic band tone' there isn't any point in going on to anything else.

It's interesting that we all have different concepts of tone; it would be pretty monotonous if each band sounded like every other one. My ideal is to strive for a round, relaxed, soft concept. The reason I like a rather mellow tone is that I think we tire of anything too sensational. So often we hear bands with constant intensity and enthusiasm of sound, and they completely exhaust us.

If a band has a general failing, it is probably that its overall tone is too brilliant and often much too hard. It's possible to do a lot of damage with brass instruments. To create a more pleasing sound, it helps to think of blowing a lot of air slowly through the instruments rather than a small amount fast. In other words, I think it's the speed of the air stream that creates the hard sound. I would rather the players feel that they are getting the horns filled up, but in a relaxed way.

Band clarinetists, particularly in the high registers, are inclined to play much too

loudly, probably in an effort to get up over the brass. It's my opinion that reed instruments cannot play very loudly successfully, so they just shouldn't try. Forced, heavy qualities would be okay for a measure or two, but would probably get on your nerves if you had to listen for very long, so we try to keep that sound to a minimum.

Restraint is especially important in fast music; the spirit begins to suffer if played too loud. The audience tires, the players tire and it becomes a very determined piece. It's hard for a band to play with restraint because speed and excitement always tend to increase the volume. But if we rely on articulations, accents and rhythm (rather than volume) to bring about a condition of brightness, it will definitely be more musical.

Finally, to get a fuller sound in your band, I would stress having the lower people fill out considerably and keep the top people down. It gives the sound a depth. The tone may not carry quite as far, but most bands are able to be heard to the back of an auditorium anyway. If we could only make our young third chair people realise their great importance in the building of a band tone, I think we might have applications for third chair. It is my feeling that any band is made or broken in its third chairs.

Band Balance

We have had some nice remarks about our band tone, and people ask how we get this sound. It's because we work from the bottom up. It's just that simple. We don't let ourselves be deceived by the melody line. We have to think in terms of building our sections in the shape of the triangle so that we have the most weight at the bottom and diminish in strength as we come up.

We must have good reliable people in the 'under' stands. Third chair people are going to underplay their instruments if they feel neglected or unimportant. Too often they feel they are just going along for the ride. I ask as a favour that my strong players sit outside second and third chairs, while perhaps they should be seated up in first. For the band, they are much more valuable there. Too often, when under-players are weak, first chair players will begin to force in an effort to get what they think is sonority, with resulting sounds that are top heavy.

Use percussion as instruments - audibly, or not at all. I object to the feeling that the bass drum and cymbal must accompany everything. We shouldn't let them rattle on and get used to them. I think too often we permit percussion to overbalance because we are no longer aware they are there.

Intonation and Tonality

Intonation means getting in tune with yourself and others. Tonality means key or chord awareness, playing in the key, which isn't easy to do. In the band we play 'in the key of B_♭' but when in E, we play 'in 4 sharps'. I guess the only cure is to be as familiar with the key of E as we are with the key of B_♭. Unfortunately, all of our music is written in one or two keys, and it's a vicious circle: the publishers won't put it out in other keys because 'they won't buy it,' and until it's put out, nobody's going to learn to play sharps. So here we stand.

Students do not play out of tune because they have tin ears; it's just that what they hear isn't being transferred to the instrument. With the exception of string players and trombonists, people tend to accept the note that was sent to them by the manufacturer. If they buy a high-priced instrument, I suppose they have the right to think that it is in tune. It is not.

Intonation has to start from the inside and work itself out. I've found that bands, no matter how poorly they play, can sing a chord in tune. Obviously then, if we can tie up the thing they hear inside with the thing they are producing on their instruments, we probably will be much more successful in playing in tune. The procedure must be to make the instrument match the pitch that the student hears, rather than to allow the instrument to dictate the pitch. By having them sing, you can make them realise the faults either of their instrument or of the way they play it. When we happen upon a chord that is out of tune, I have the group sing their tone, play their tone, then go on to the next chord. When they begin to be really dissatisfied, they begin to realise how approximate all of these instruments are.

I think that every organisation must work in some slow, relaxing chorale or harmonised scale book. Most of our music is much too busy to allow anyone to stop and wonder about the tone or the intonation.

Rhythm

Rhythm determines the character, the action, motion and life of a piece. Without it, melody and harmony can be all things or nothing. Rhythm is the means of transmission of feeling and of appeal to an audience.

For our purposes, we'll address rhythm as the movement of beats within a measure and of notes within a beat. Two items give us trouble: ignoring anything but the principal beat, and not realising the relationship between note values. It is only a

mathematical abstraction to say a quarter (crotchet) note

gets a beat and an 8th (quaver) note gets half a beat. The thing that has to be sold is that when one plays the quarter, he must learn to hear two 8ths or he won't possibly be able to come in on the next beat on time. To demonstrate the flow of 8th notes throughout, half the band should play quarters and half 8ths, and then alternate.

I've never taught anyone who had natural rhythm, so we have to develop it. Rhythm is a kinesthetic thing. It's a muscular thing, a form of eurythmics applied through the instrument. It has nothing to do with the mental process, and I don't think we should approach it through the mind; rather, through the body. Rhythm cannot be thought. It must be felt.

Our rhythm problems begin when we combine notes of different duration. The motion of the faster figure must prevail; however, we tend to suspend them in the longer notes and to wait for the faster ones in order to resume our movement. Inevitably, this causes rushing, for we never seem to wait long enough in the note of the longer duration. The cure? From the first introduction of 8th notes, the student must be made to feel these 8ths in all notes of longer durations such as quarters and halves. The mental acceptance of this condition can be grasped immediately, but the muscular ability to execute comes only after endless drill.

Two other conditions are necessary to playing rhythms correctly.

1. Each rhythm group must reflect the pulse of the basic beat to identify it as that particular type of motion - notes that are absolutely alike have no rhythm, but are waiting to be grouped;

2. Rhythm implies forward motion - each note or group of notes must lead to the next beat.

There are systems that use words to teach rhythms and I think they're fine - but once you've said 'huckleberry' (for four 16th notes) that is the end of the word and you are thinking 'stop.' If you say something silly like 'and so I do' you have to keep going to the next beat. A series of figures in rhythm must not end. This is motion. The minute we stop the motion, we stop the rhythm. Everything beyond the first note should be directed to the next note - the effect of 'and so I do and so I do and so I do.'

The average youngster will put quite a space between the groups of 16ths if allowed to. This is logical because that is what he

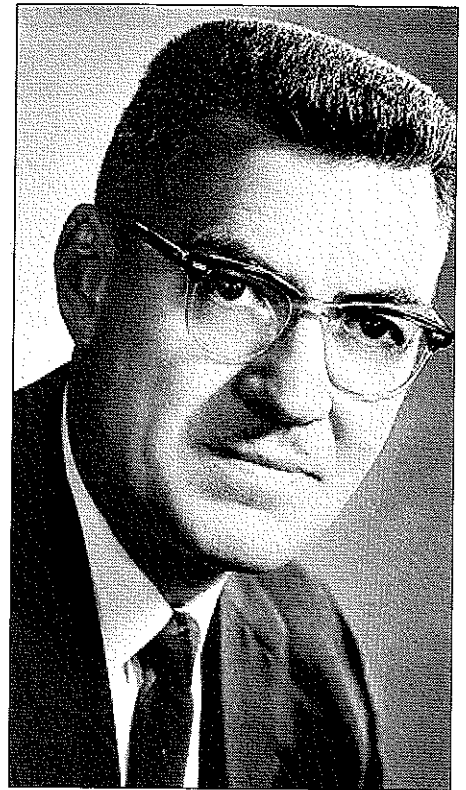
sees on the paper. We have to teach the youngsters the difference between the thing you want them to play and the thing that's on the paper. We say unthinkingly 'play what you see' and if a youngster plays what he sees he would give you a most unnatural picture most of the time. What you mean is 'play what I see when I look at this, after 20 years' experience.'

Most people are taught to play by fractions and it shows. We are so concerned with the fractional value of the notes that we aren't paying any attention to the rhythm figure itself. Any rhythm figure beyond the quarter note is not a series of even notes. It is a group. For example, the minute you dissect a triplet you have three notes but you don't have a triplet anymore. You have only three isolated notes. They have to be put together. They are indivisible. A triplet is not three even notes; it's a pulsed note with two others thrown into it. If we insist on teaching evenness to the exclusion of everything else, we aren't going to have a triplet feel, we are just going to have a three-note feel.

What I am driving at is that we have to teach all rhythms first by ear and by rote. First, we'll sing or play it to him and make him imitate it, rote style, and say 'whenever you see this notation on paper it should remind you to play that thing that we learned by ear a few days ago.' How can we ever hope to teach anything but mathematics if we approach music by the mathematical route? We try to make it too scientific and too mechanical and thereby lose the beat. Rhythm is kinesthetic, it's a feel; and anyone will accept this in a minute in a dance band.

I am harping on this because I spend almost all of my time trying to get what I like to call 'a relaxed ensemble rhythm.' Even though you have drilled and spent a lot of time in your rehearsals on rhythm, the minute the band is under any kind of stress, they will revert to their old system of playing, which is a typewriter-like way of playing notes without a beat.

When you examine it carefully, almost no music is really played the way it is written. All notes in a group look the same size or weight, but they are not played that way. The string sections of major orchestras always lean forward when they come to the beginning of a beat. They get into the thing. They don't do this to show off, they do it because it's a muscular necessity to get a little more emphasis on the first note. But



our band people sit here like dead fish; they don't have that muscular participation. We discourage it. All of this sort of thing leads to sameness in playing.

Common Rhythm Problems

Final notes in beats or measures are likely to be rushed. It is the neglect of these notes that causes this condition. The 16th note groupings will tend to disintegrate toward the end of them, particularly when slurred, with consequent rushing. Triplets are also susceptible to the bunching of notes, causing a small space in between groupings. The most common error is the practice of playing the notes grouped in triplets or four 16ths entirely without beat or pulse. Playing this way contributes nothing to the rhythm or the meaning of the piece because they have taken no form. As they stand, they could be divided into three four, five, seven, any grouping you like. This can be corrected in great part by adding a feeling of crescendo to each grouping rather than a feeling of decrescendo. Make it feel as if it moves to the next beat. In four 16th groups, have them feel as if the second, third and fourth notes lead to the next beat. A series of notes must have a feeling of pulse and of continuity.

A lot of things can go wrong when performing the dotted 8th-16th figure

People tend to cut the first note too short as though it had a rest; or they make it sound like a triplet (even though it is played in the right rhythm) because they over-accent or over-emphasise the 16th; or they give the figure a sloppy sound by giving the accented note a legato tongue. This figure isn't played the way it is written. The first two notes don't have any relation; it's the second and third (the 16th to the next 8th) which should be coupled. We need a single note, a pause and two more. Saying 'day today today' produces a natural dotted 8th and 16th feeling. The size of the 16th depends on the tune. In Spanish music, often you hear very reputable recordings with it as a 32nd. Who can say how long it is? But I've never seen a piece where the 16th really belonged to the note barred to it. * One of the hardest problems of bands of any age or any size is the playing of notes in relation to rests, because in rests - even more than in sustained tones the rhythm tends to disappear. The only way possible for an organisation to sustain a rhythm over a rest is to feel the motion of the notes over the rest period.

Any player's musicianship can best be measured by his rhythmic poise. A conductor cannot do anything about a player's rhythm. That has to come from within each player's system. It's not the conductor's job to concern himself with the sustaining of rhythm. If he has to do that he isn't free to pay attention to the overall interpretation of the piece. Rhythm is an element. It isn't the music. Often I find myself more concerned with the rhythm than all other things. This is wrong, because then I am no longer a conductor when this happens. I am a metronome.

Interpretation

(articulation, styling, phrasing, terms)

Bands seem to divide themselves into two categories: those who tend to articulate too sharply, and those who tend to play too legato. On a string instrument, even a pizzicato sound carries; but with a wind instrument we're able to produce a sound that doesn't carry or sustain itself a 100th of a second. If we use too much of this articulation, we might better turn the whole thing over to the snare drums, because they do it much better. In other words, I think that most any staccato should have some endurance. Cardell Simons [trumpet] was death against any tone that didn't taper a little bit. No matter how short, he insisted

that it be somewhat of a bell-tone, and could demonstrate it to everyone's satisfaction.

For the most part, articulation problems will be absorbed when correct styling is achieved; but this does not necessarily apply to phrasing. Reasonably good basic style may be in evidence, while phrasing is still far from acceptable.

The music must appear to move horizontally, but young bands tend to violate this principle of phrasing because of breathing problems and lack of control. Band music must sing; it must not jump up and down. Phrases must be held to maturity. The surest indication of the amateur is the shortening and hurrying of phrases. Good phrasing necessitates approaching and generally receding from a natural climax or high spot. Succeeding phrases of a similar nature must be handled in a refreshing manner to avoid monotony.

Wind people are inclined to make two phrases where one should be. This effect makes the band sound tired and 'out of steam'. Also, 'under' voices tend to breathe more often than the melody people, which leads to an empty sound.

The youngster can think in terms of musicianship better without the horn, so I encourage a singing band and realise the necessity of doing things from the inside out rather than cramming them down via the instrument.

If a band of players would understand the full implications of the 75 or so most-used music terms, and if they had the technical ability to play according to their feelings for these terms, they would be well equipped to interpret most of their music in a sensitive manner.

The majority of music terms that relate to action have a specific style as their basis. A Polonaise, well-written, is always a Polonaise and its characteristics can be learned. Other examples of 'definite' terminology include Barcarolle, Berceuse, Farandole, Pavanne, etc.

Other terms are less definitive and rely more on judgment and experience for their interpretation. These 'indefinite' terms include Adagio, Andante, etc. They have characteristics other than speed, for each is used to create a type of atmosphere.

Terms relating to changes in conditions of the music include allargando, ritardando, crescendo, etc. We must avoid the tendency to overdo them. A glaring alteration may be worse than no alteration. For example, rubato (literally 'robbed') usually means an

increase in the tempo at the beginning of a phrase, which is compensated for in the latter part. Abuse of this effect is definitely corny. Also, in a crescendo, the tendency is to gain volume too rapidly, thus anticipating the maximum effect; and a decrescendo is usually played with too sudden a drop off in weight, so it becomes a *fp* effect.

It's very important that bands change their tone for each new piece, depending on the character. Instrumentation alone won't do that. There has to be a concept along with it.

Most writers will leave the dynamic balance up to the conductor or the performers. The fortissimo that goes up and down the score is rarely how it should be played. We have to explain what fortissimo means. It means different things where it occurs in the score, whether it is in the melody or support areas. Too much of the loud nullifies any attempts toward musical climax.

Generally, due to problems in control, bands tend to use a rather narrow range of dynamics, ignoring those of lesser weight. Also, young players naturally tend to feel that a dynamic indication is a fixed quantity. They must be taught that dynamics must be considered in relation to the composer, the tempo, and the type of music. They must realise that a forte in a Haydn minuet is quite different from a forte in Wagner's Tannhauser March.

The purpose of dynamic change is to sustain interest on the part of the listener, as well as to create a mood. Obviously, the wider the dynamic range of the band, the better prepared they are to do both.

In the name of good taste, we should caution young players that no dynamic indication, no matter how many *fffs* requires the absolute maximum of sound that can be obtained from an instrument.

For musicianship, continuity of phrasing and rhythm is so important. Youngsters will stop and breathe too often if they are permitted to. It is natural to want to breathe; but if being alive has to be sacrificed for the melody, let's have the melody every time!

Walter Beeler's impact on the field of music education through bands was significant in every way - performance clinics, scholarly writings, compositions and arrangements. He nurtured and furthered concert band artistry for two generations. Through this article, it is hoped his beliefs can contribute to the success of a new generation.