



Music education topics of interest to stimulate motivate and inspire...

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One Perfect Note by Rob Shaver

There is a popular t-shirt slogan that has been around for a while that says, "If Band were easy, they would call it football." Since football is not easy, I suppose someone is trying to say that playing an instrument in the band is much more difficult than it looks, and I think they are right. The number of skills that must be developed to play solo music is astounding. And it only gets more complicated when we try to learn how to play together as a group.

Most of the time we as directors approach skill development one skill at a time. For instance, during warm-ups we focus one day on intonation, the next day on articulation, then balance, dynamics, and so on.

But occasionally we should also practice multi-tasking, doing many skills at once. That is when I turn to the "One Perfect Note" exercise. With this exercise we work on almost every fundamental skill all at once while having the whole band play just one note.

The setup is simple enough: choose a note for everyone to play together. With my younger middle school students I use concert F. It isn't too low or too high for anyone. The alto and baritone saxes will probably be sharp, but this gives them the chance to learn how to adjust their tuning with their embouchures.

I have my advanced students play a concert Bb chord. Ultimately, you can choose any note or chord you wish; the exercise will still work.

The attention to details begins before the students ever play. Check chair and music stand set up, posture, hand position, and embouchures. Doing this early in the school year with young students is the best time to catch bad habits while they can be easily corrected. But this is also a good opportunity for a "tune up" with older students.

Now comes the playing. Start with a long tone so the students will have to watch for the cutoff. And since the note length will be unspecified, you can stop when you hear something that needs to be corrected, whether that is after one beat or 16.

Later on, or on another day, use a whole note. You might be surprised how many attempts it will take for the band to play one perfect whole note, but do not move on to other note values until they have mastered it.

In rapid order you will have to listen for:

- **Deep breaths** – a collective deep breath will be audible, but not obnoxious.
- **Tonguing** – start the note with the tongue and air together.
- **Tone Quality** – Good tone quality indicates good technique and functioning equipment (reeds, instruments in good condition, etc).
- **Intonation** – Adjust with lips and air while playing; adjust instruments after the cutoff.

- **Balance** – can all sections be heard in the proper proportions?

While students are playing, you can develop their watching skills by giving them something to watch. With each attempt direct a different dynamic level, add a crescendo or decrescendo, or vary the articulation with accents or legato attacks.

When the cutoff comes, listen to how the players end the note. If done properly, they will release the note by stopping the air. There should be no “choking off” the note, and the sound should remain consistent to the end with no drop off in pitch.

Of course, they will have to be watching carefully to end the note together. And they should keep their instruments up until you lower your hands.

Most importantly, a perfect note ends with silence. Instead of talking, players should listen to the end of the sound, watch for you to lower your hands, and then listen for instructions. This exercise can be a good way to encourage proper rehearsal habits.

After each attempt choose one thing to improve on the next try. Start with the earliest mistake in the process: perhaps more students need to take a deep breath, or maybe a few students forgot to tongue, and so on.

Finally, do not be afraid to ask the students what they think should be improved. Their answers will tell you how much they are listening and thinking. And once they start listening and thinking, anything is possible.

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