

**“Just like anything else that is played, a scale needs to have a purpose and should show some manner of improvement in the group, no matter how small that might be, each time it is played.”**

As with intonation, a quality ensemble sound cannot be produced with inferior individual tone qualities. Stressing the development of a mature and appropriate instrumental tone by each player will lead to a fine, full ensemble sound as well as high-quality section and solo playing.

### **It's for Balance.**

Do the students understand the concepts of producing a balanced sound and have that sound in their ears as they play? Are they constantly comparing what they are producing with what they have been taught to hear? Do they play with a controlled sound that allows for the acoustical differences of the instruments? Do they focus on balancing middle and lower tones? Do percussionists (if they are playing along with the scale) listen for the quality of the ensemble's sound and try to blend with the ensemble?

Balance, tone, and intonation are intertwined. As with the other two, the teaching of the initial concept of balance with a scale needs to be done on a note-to-note basis. Students need to be aware of the register in which they are playing and the particulars of playing in that range of their instrument. Aural skills need to be addressed so that students have a uniform concept of the ensemble tone that you, as the conductor, are striving to achieve.

### **It's for Dynamics.**

Closely linked to balance and tone is the concept of dynamics. Do students maintain a good tone quality whether playing *pp* or *ff*? Does the tone have appropriate air support—not too little when playing softly and not forced when playing loudly—for each dynamic level? Is there really enough contrast when going from *p* to *f*?

Just as it is important to work individually on tone and tuning, the same is true for dynamics. Students may individually practice long tones that start at a *pp* level and crescendo to *ff* and then come back down. This can then be transferred to the full ensemble, with attention being paid to maintaining balance throughout the dynamic range so that tone quality remains consistent.

### **It's for Ensemble Technique and Articulation.**

The scale can be a good vehicle for teaching articulation and ensemble. But once again, I have a few questions: When playing a specified articulation, are the students playing it consistently? Do they know the techniques for playing staccato, legato, accents, etc.? Do they know how to use the tongue, air, and embouchure to achieve the best results on each instrument? Do they know how to breathe properly? Do they listen not only for the attack of each note but also for the release so that the length of each note is consistent throughout the ensemble?

Exercises to assist in the teaching of articulation/ensemble may easily be created from scales. For example, begin with four slow quarter notes in a legato style on each degree of the scale. Are the players focusing on the consistency of the tone, smoothness of the tonguing, support, and leading from one note to the next? A more advanced exercise can involve having the group play a measure of quarter notes staccato on “do,” followed by a measure of eighth notes on “re,” followed by a measure of eighth-note triplets on “mi,” etc. The variations are limitless. By

using scales in this manner, exercises will remain fresh and the learning will be reinforced in many ways. Additionally, exercises such as these will not only assist in developing the style of articulation and ensemble, they are also excellent aids to the individual development of more control, consistency, and endurance of articulation skills. But there are more questions. Is the articulation consistent from both individuals and the full ensemble? How is the response of each note? How are the dynamics and the balance when articulating?

### **It's for Learning Scales.**

There is no question that playing scales is an important facet of developing technique on all instruments. But I still have a number of questions: Are students using correct fingerings (e.g., clarinet fingerings in the concert D or A major scales)? Playing the correct notes but without the correct fingerings will void a lot of the purpose of teaching scales. Are all of the students in the group playing the correct notes in each scale or are a few “carrying” the entire group? Do the students understand the theory behind the transpositions? Do

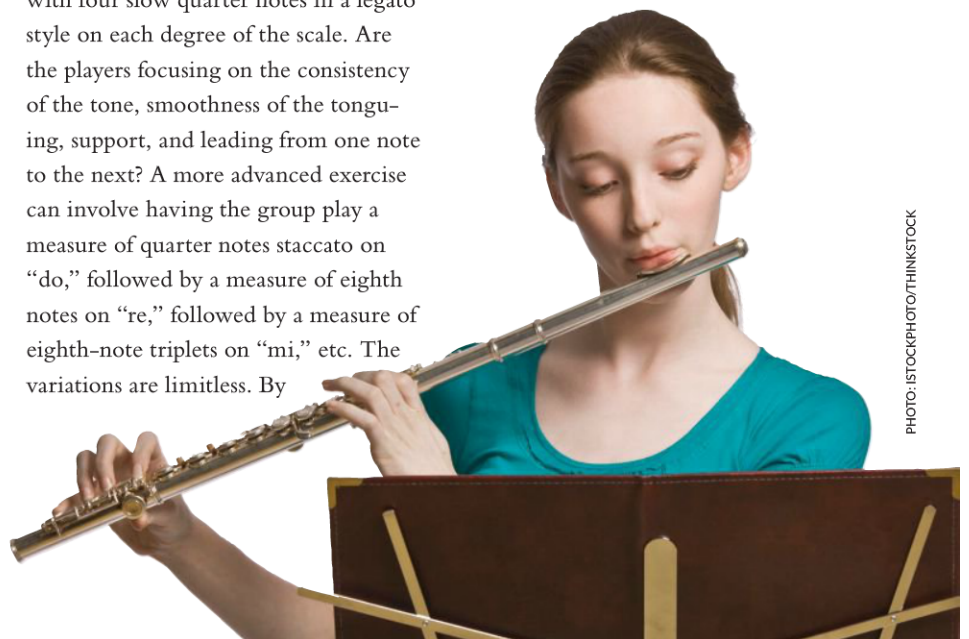


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they know the key signatures for each scale? Are they able to recognize the scale patterns when they appear in a piece and thus transfer this learning?

When I am adjudicating a festival, bands frequently perform a scale (usually B-flat or F) as they warm up on the stage. It often amazes me how poor the scales sound. Yet, sometimes when these same bands begin the adjudicated part of the program, the group sounds great. It's as if a different group has come onstage. If that is the case, I have one more question: Why has the learning that has taken place for the adjudicated pieces not transferred to the scale? My next questions are: Why is the scale allowed to sound as it did? And, therefore, what purpose did it just serve? One question that I frequently ask student teachers at the conclusion of an observation is: What was better at the end of the rehearsal than at the beginning? Usually students answer by saying something like "The rhythm at letter B was better."

*By asking ourselves one more question, which will probably lead to one more question, and then another, conductors can better determine what it is that needs to be taught."*

This was probably true, but my follow-up questions will be about things like tone, articulation, intonation, and phrasing—questions that "peel the onion" of the band. Learning to play an instrument and to make music is difficult. It certainly ranks high in the field of multitasking. Students will try to do what they are taught as long as it is reasonable and appropriate for their level of performance. By asking ourselves one more question, which will probably lead to one more question, and then another, conductors can better determine what it is that needs to be taught.

So, what about our B-flat concert

scale? Should we use it as the first notes of our rehearsals? Should we play it over and over again? Should we play it in different ways? The answers to these and other questions must be decided by each conductor for each ensemble. There is no question that scales can have their place in a rehearsal. But, as shown above, it needs to be more than just playing the scale: We must question how we are playing it, as well as why. If we are working on the balance of parts

or the tuning of triads, might a chorale be a better choice? Or could a slow piece, or a slow section/movement of a piece to be performed, serve the same purpose? Or, if the chorale is used, can the qualities that are learned be transferred to that slow piece? As we can see, there is always one more question. By finding it and determining the answer, our teaching will become more directed. And the B-flat scale will become our friend. ■



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# B-flat Concert Scale ... Friend or Foe?

Scales have their place in rehearsal, but what does the playing of them actually achieve?

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**WE'VE ALL SEEN IT.** In fact, probably most of us have done it. It's the beginning of rehearsal. The conductor steps onto the podium, greets the band, and says "B-flat concert scale." After over 40 years of teaching, I can't begin to count the number of times I've heard groups play that scale. But what I do know is that more often than not, what I've heard has not been good.

I've heard it in many permutations, including unison/octaves, various rhythms, various meters, various dynamics, various articulations, and in a round. I know that if I asked a conductor the purpose for playing the scale, I would get many responses, including for warm-up, tone, intonation, ensemble, balance, etc. But, a psychologist friend has a favorite saying—there is always one more question. And so, to everyone who has just conducted that B-flat scale, I ask one more question: Did your band sound better—or for that matter, any

differently at all—when it finished the scale than when it began? Actually, there are many more questions that come to mind. Was it better in tune? Was there more precision when you conducted different meters? Was there a high-quality balanced tone when you conducted at different dynamic levels?

If the answer to any of these questions is "no," then is the scale serving more as a foe and only reinforcing bad habits? Is it being played in a Pavlovian manner because the students know that they must play the scale in order for the main part of the rehearsal or the performance to begin? Just like anything else that is played, a scale needs to have a purpose and should show some manner of improvement in the group, no matter how small that might be, each time it is played.

The purpose of this article is not to be a lesson plan on using scales. Instead, it is about asking the next question—one more question. Since each band is different and each individual in the band brings different experiences, needs, and abilities to each rehearsal, there is no one-size-fits-all recipe for

teaching music. It is hoped that by listening, analyzing, and understanding, each teacher will arrive at the questions that apply to his/her groups. Answering these questions will require the development of appropriate teaching/rehearsing techniques that may be applied to their students' performance levels. While this process may be used with any piece of music that is being performed, the subject of this article is the scale. So, let's address some of the ways in which scales may be used. And in doing so, let's ask even more questions that may help to make it a friend.

## It's a Warm-Up.

Well, if that is the case, why are trumpets playing the upper octave of the scale and therefore warming up on high C? Why are students playing the first notes of their warm-up at a *ff* level? Do woodwinds need to warm up in the same manner as brass players? What about percussionists? Why don't professional ensembles play a scale to warm up?

More experienced players most likely



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IT IS IMPORTANT  
TO DETERMINE  
THE REASON  
WHY YOU REQUIRE  
YOUR STUDENTS  
TO PLAY SCALES.

have their own warm-up routines. So, what would be wrong with simply saying that you have a few minutes to warm up on your own? It won't sound pretty, but each player will do what he/she finds most beneficial before progressing to tuning and the main portion of the rehearsal. This is certainly the professional model. For less experienced players, warm-up procedures need to be taught. Think of how you warm up on your own instrument. What register, volume, articulation, and other issues are important? Yes, the scale can be an effective warm-up, but in order to fulfill that benefit, students must know how to properly warm up individually on their instruments and then bring that concept to the playing of the scale. Simply playing the scale will not automatically serve as an appropriate warm-up for everyone.

### **It's for Tuning.**

This is certainly a valid purpose. But here's one more question: Was the intonation better when you finished the

scale than when you started? Here are a few more questions: Do the students know what it sounds like to be really in tune? Have they rehearsed while listening for unisons and octaves and trying to eliminate beats? If playing the scale as a round, do they understand each harmonic function as it is formed and how to tune each of those triads? Do they understand the intonation tendencies of their instruments as they each play the scale? Do they know how to adjust for these tendencies? Has the scale been played one note at a time with each person/section adjusting for the intonation tendencies of their particular note?

Learning to play with good intonation requires a curriculum of its own and is something that must be continually developed, but it must be remembered that full band intonation begins with each player. Good individual intonation results in good section intonation, which results in good ensemble intonation. A breakdown in

the chain can have significant results and there is no short cut for learning this process. Simply tuning each student with a tuner to B-flat (or, for that matter, any other pitch) will not teach students how to play in tune, nor will just repetitive playing of a scale. Similarly, playing a scale slowly will not improve intonation if the students do not understand the issues involved or are not at a level to apply them properly.

### **It's for Tone.**

This can be another important use of the scale, but another question here is: Can the students individually produce a tone that is of an appropriate quality for their level of playing? Do they hear a quality concept of sound in their mind each time that they play? Do they understand the technical demands required to produce that sound? And perhaps most importantly, do they listen to examples (either live or recorded) of fine players on their instruments so that they have a strong aural model?