

Developing ensemble skills

Edward Maxwell

Introduction

Access to ensembles is a hugely important aspect of children's development. Not only do ensembles improve students' musical skills, such as reading fluently and playing rhythmically, but they also develop broader social skills, such as listening and responding, and learning to work cooperatively in a team.

Ensemble playing is also an important way of recruiting and retaining students: many students alternate bursts of enthusiasm with phases of apathy, but playing in an ensemble can keep them on a constant track, sustaining them through the periods of indifference. Personally, I certainly would not have ended up pursuing a career in music without the rich variety of ensemble playing afforded to me when I was growing up. There were patches when I did little practice and was close to giving up the trumpet, but the orchestras and bands I played with had become an integral part of my social life and the foreign tours, exciting concerts and residential courses were alluring.

However, not all ensembles provide positive experiences. Two important factors will ensure successful outcomes: the suitability of the music being played (both technically and musically), and whether the student has an understanding of basic ensemble skills. Unless you're actually running the ensemble yourself, you're likely to have no control over the repertoire, but as teachers we can at least help our students to make the most of their ensemble experience by inculcating some basic skills in their instrumental lessons.

Although I'm looking at this from the point of view of someone who plays an orchestral instrument, many of the same principles apply to vocalists who sing in choirs, and pianists who accompany.

Learning from negative experiences

Not all ensemble experiences are positive ones and, in order to consider the skills to make them enjoyable, let's first consider what can go wrong.

My trumpet teacher ran an adult 'rehearsal' orchestra, and when I was about ten years old, he asked me to play second trumpet in a play-through of a Mozart symphony. This was my first ever experience of playing in an orchestra.

Mozart used trumpets very sparingly, and the second parts generally use only three or four harmonics (consisting of notes in an arpeggio). I was working towards Grade 5 at the time, so what could possibly go wrong? Here are just some of the things I was spectacularly unprepared for:

- ▶ Reading accurately: I made frequent errors playing simple rhythms.
- ▶ Pitching: when hearing lots of different notes around you, it can be hard to isolate the pitch you need to play. Mispitching and splitting notes is an occupational hazard for brass players.
- ▶ Transposing: I had not transposed before, and although transposing a handful of notes from one arpeggio into another might seem easy, it wasn't for a ten-year-old and I kept forgetting to make the necessary adjustments.
- ▶ Counting bars' rest: I was pretty much permanently lost, frequently missing entries and playing in the wrong place. For brass players, sometimes the counting is harder than the actual playing.
- ▶ Following the conductor: I had little idea of what any of his gestures actually meant.
- ▶ Blending with the other trumpet player: I was unable to match the crispness of his tonguing, the clarity of his tone, his dynamics, his tuning, how fully he sustained notes, and how he shaped his phrases. I simply stuck out like a sore thumb.

These are skills that we, as professional players, probably take for granted. My teacher – a formidable musician – simply hadn't considered what a liability I would be. The other trumpet player was exasperated and asked me to play with a mute to hide the sound as much as possible. The whole experience was deeply humiliating.

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When I see school ensembles play, there are usually some accomplished players who ‘carry’ the group, while others sometimes seem completely clueless, often resorting to playing random notes, or trying to copy their neighbours’ fingerings and gestures, rather than reading the notes for themselves.

Exam certificates

Many ensembles stipulate a grade standard as a benchmark. Although working towards an exam will inevitably build up some of the required ensemble skills, it does not guarantee suitability for an ensemble *per se*. An exam syllabus should not be mistaken for a comprehensive curriculum. There are plenty of people who possess a piece of paper declaring that they’ve passed Grade 8, yet would be completely out of their depth in an orchestra that advertises that it’s ‘Grade 6 and above’ standard. This applies particularly to students who are taught largely by rote.

On the other hand, a Grade 4 or 5 player with excellent general musicianship skills might fit in perfectly. This is something that often needs to be explained to parents who think that a particular Grade pass is absolute proof that their child has reached the requisite standard.

Let’s now look at some of these skills in more depth.

Reading

Good reading skills are my number-one priority for a valuable ensemble player. If a conductor hands out a new set of parts to read through in a rehearsal, it’s no use saying that you can’t play it until you’ve had a chance to practise it at home, go through it with your teacher, or – my pet hate for brass players – write in the fingerings or slide positions. You need to be able to at least have a go at reading it straight away. This obviously also helps to develop the skills required for sight-reading in an exam – you don’t get the chance to write in fingerings in advance.

In the school ensembles I run, even the beginner groups, I actively discourage students from taking music home to practise. This might sound foolhardy, but the intention is to sharpen up their reading skills in the rehearsals. One day, they might be required to sight-read something in a performance, so why not start learning this skill straight away? I also sometimes ask students to swap parts to keep them on their toes.

I try to build up a large and varied repertoire, rather than merely preparing one piece for an end-of-term concert, which is rehearsed to death week after week. Some pieces we might read through and discard, while others become firm favourites.

I’ll split reading skills into three elements – rhythm and beat, pitch, and musical details.

Rhythm and beat

Playing with a strong sense of beat is the bedrock. Rhythm should always be the number-one priority, and students need to have the skill to maintain rhythmic accuracy even if they play a few wrong notes along the way.

In order to instil this, you can use backing tracks for pretty much everything a student plays: warm-ups, technical exercises, scales and pieces. *Everything* needs to have a beat – even ‘boring’ exercises – and backings can provide additional musical interest so that scales and exercises have a sense of shape, evenness and forward movement. If a student is playing unaccompanied, I’m invariably clicking the beat with my fingers or tapping my pencil against the music stand. Playing with a strong pulse is non-negotiable.

Pitches

Right notes are overrated. Obviously it’s preferable to play them, but rhythmic energy is so much more important. We all play the odd wrong note, and the ability to recover from this is an absolutely key skill. The student who stops and apologises every time they make a mistake will not fare well in an ensemble. If they do encounter a passage they can’t play very well, the ability to fudge something convincing *in the correct key* is an important skill, which is why it’s so important to learn scales, arpeggios and note-patterns in different keys.

I’ve already mentioned the difficulties of finding your pitch in an ensemble, especially if you play an instrument where you create the pitch yourself, such as a trumpet. If you have the ‘tune’, pitching is normally quite easy, but if you have a ‘harmony’ part, or a counter-melody, it can often catch you out by going in an unexpected direction.

Playing regular duets with your students is great for their development, but don’t always give them the upper part. I often use duets where the parts swap over – sometimes the student is playing the

tune, but sometimes they play a lower accompanying part, so they always need to be on the ball, complementing the other player without actually copying them and *always* reading the music carefully.

All students should be encouraged to sing regularly, and the ability to hold a pitch among different harmonic lines is a hugely beneficial skill.

Musical details

An impressive ensemble plays with attention to dynamic shading. It can be magical when *all* players observe the dynamics, but one player playing *forte* in an otherwise *piano* section can ruin the whole effect. Likewise, one player slurring when everyone else is playing staccato will make the whole group sound sloppy. Developing the technical control and musical awareness to vary your dynamics and articulation according to the musical notation (and sometimes just responding to what the music seems to need, even if not marked in the part) is something that should be taught from the very start. As an examiner, it surprises me how some candidates completely ignore such basic things as articulation and dynamics. Allowing this to go uncorrected can cause all sorts of damage in an ensemble setting.

Keeping your place

Counting bars' rest is an important skill, and it should be stressed that each player needs to take responsibility to do this. Don't rely on your colleagues, and don't rely on any cues printed in the part – if these are missed, it can easily cause a catastrophic domino effect of missed entries.

Encourage your students to count the rests when they practise their individual pieces – it's easy to skip over them. Obviously playing with backings or an accompaniment helps to hone this skill.

It's worth giving some handy hints about counting. For example, if the conductor says, 'We'll start at bar 47' and your next entry is at bar 92, you don't need to do any subtraction – just count from 47 to 92. To help keep count, I always count along my fingers, so a tap with my thumb represents a bar number with either a 1 or a 6. At the end of each chunk of bars' rest or at a rehearsal mark, it's customary to do a hand tap on your thigh, to confirm that you're counting in sync with your colleagues.

As a trumpet player, I spend far more of my life counting bars' rest than actually playing notes. This isn't as onerous as some people think – I can enjoy the beautiful music going on around me while reading a book or watching the football on my phone (obviously only in rehearsals, not concerts). I have (mostly) developed the skills to keep track of where I am in the music so I don't miss my next entry.

If you work in schools, there's likely to be a strict 'no-phone' policy that you must adhere to. However, in out-of-school ensembles, I take a lenient approach to phone use in the brass section *as long as the students know where they are in the music*. The multi-tasking involved with counting and scrolling on your phone is a useful skill to learn. It amuses me when a conductor berates students for being on their phones, saying, 'This is very unprofessional.' Have they not seen an entire professional brass section in a rehearsal browsing on their phones while simultaneously counting their rests?

Following a conductor

Following a conductor is another multi-tasking skill, where you need to read the music and simultaneously follow the conductor in your peripheral vision. It amazes me how some students can slowly drift out of time, ignoring both the conductor and the collective beat established by their colleagues. Or sometimes they might be playing to the pulse, but get a beat out, steadfastly ignoring every strong downbeat. While you can't truly replicate an ensemble experience in a lesson, you can beat time to get students used to following a conductor.

When I went through my ABRSM exams, one element of the aural tests was conducting a beat. Sadly this is no longer a requirement, but it's still a very worthwhile thing for students to understand, and should be incorporated into their training. Do your students understand how the terms 'up-beat' and 'down-beat' relate to conducting?

Ensembles without a conductor

Not every ensemble has a conductor. If you regularly play alongside your students in lessons, they will hopefully develop the skill of playing sympathetically with others. One important aspect of ensemble playing is a tidy start. Rather than counting them in when playing with them in lessons, get them used to picking up subtle cues – a simple nod or breath is usually sufficient. See if your students can start a duet with a clear lead and without a count-in. The movement might vary according to whether the piece starts on an up- or down-beat.

Ending notes together also requires a gesture – a circular movement is often used, but it doesn't really matter as long as it's clear.

Tuning

Some ensemble leaders spend an inordinate amount of time tuning their students up... who then spend the rest of the time playing out of tune. When left to their own devices, members of a school orchestra will often play a wide variety of As in response to the oboist's tuning note, but will lack the know-how to make the necessary adjustments.

Playing in tune is a complex interplay between listening, applying correct playing techniques, and the actual quirks of the instruments being played (some cheap instruments, for example, are virtually impossible to play in tune).

Intonation on a trumpet, which relies on the harmonic series (and consequently the laws of physics), does not exactly correspond with the 'equal temperament' tuning system, which is standard in most genres. Advanced players 'lip' certain notes in tune, along with moving the first and third valve tuning slides to make small adjustments. Alternative fingerings can also sometimes be used to improve intonation on certain notes. For string players, tuning the strings precisely will guarantee only that open strings are in tune. For all other notes, obviously, players need to learn to put their fingers in the right place. Likewise with trombonists and their slide positions.

With beginners and intermediate players, we may need to accept that certain notes are going to be out of tune, but this isn't to say that we shouldn't be working to improve tuning in their individual lessons. We can play along with our students as much as possible to build an awareness of intonation. Playing in unison can sometimes be problematic because it's hard to differentiate between the two players, but playing along an octave higher or lower can be useful. Scales can be played together in octaves, 3rds or 6ths.

If you do tune up individuals in a group, you can enlist everyone to help, to engage them in listening critically. Rather than saying, 'You're a bit sharp, pull out,' how about: 'Hands up who thinks this is sharp; now hands up for flat.'

Electronic tuners

It's easy to shift responsibility for tuning on to a machine or app. Although they're useful tools, tuning machines should not be considered a substitute for fine-tuning our aural skills (pun intended).

Just because your A (or whatever note you tune to) is in tune, this doesn't guarantee that all your other notes will be in tune. On instruments such as the trumpet, there's the risk that you lip the note in tune to match the tuner, rather than moving your tuning slide. I always encourage a student to shut their eyes, find the centre of the note by blowing consistently, and *then* look at the tuner. When this is done with a variety of notes, you can find a compromise for positioning your tuning slide.

Summary

Essential skills

As previously outlined, a valued ensemble member will have the following abilities:

- ▶ Read music fluently.
- ▶ Keep their place in the music at all times.
- ▶ Follow the conductor and play in time.
- ▶ Play in tune.
- ▶ Play with a sense of musical line and style.

There are some additional skills that can be extremely useful, especially if a key member of the group is unavailable and someone else needs to step in to cover at the last minute.

Bonus skills

Transposing

Even if you don't play a transposing instrument, basic transposing skills should be taught across the board. Let's suppose the clarinettist in your school band has been taken ill. Can an oboist cover the part by transposing down a tone at sight? A trumpet player might be able to cover a French horn part, but only if they can transpose down a 4th.

If the orchestra is accompanying a vocalist, but the arrangement doesn't fit their range, can everyone instantly transpose it to a more suitable key? If so, it will save music teachers a lot of time writing out new parts.

Playing by ear

If an ensemble player gets lost and misses their entry, an alert colleague may be able to spare their blushes by jumping in and covering the tune, even if it's not notated on their part. Playing tunes by ear – and in different keys – can be a fun activity in music lessons.

Improvisation

The ability to improvise is not the exclusive preserve of jazz musicians. Although some ensemble directors will insist on every note being rigidly observed, others will allow a little spontaneity. If a player has a solo, some ad libs might add some extra fun, especially if there's a repeated section – why not embellish this? If you have the skills, you can also improvise your way out of trouble if you get lost.

Editing on the hoof

If a part is too difficult, the ability to adapt it as you go along is extremely useful. You may need to capture the essence of the music, but without the hard bits:

- ▶ Simplifying rhythms, while keeping strictly in time with the overall beat.
- ▶ Simplifying note-patterns, but still playing in the right key and maintaining the overall melodic shape.
- ▶ Putting something down (or up) an octave so it is in a more comfortable range.

Social skills

By playing in an ensemble, students learn many life skills. Here are some things they will have to learn to navigate – they might encounter similar scenarios in the workplace in the future.

- ▶ Sometimes you're afforded creative freedom, putting forward your own opinions and ideas, while at other times, things are strictly imposed and you need to do as you're told.
- ▶ Sometimes the atmosphere is relaxed and informal, while at other times, things are run with rigid discipline and military precision.
- ▶ Sometimes you're working with people you get on well with and with whom you find it easy to come to a consensus. At other times, however, you'll need to deal with abrasive and domineering colleagues.

Playing in an ensemble that has a fun, friendly and encouraging environment will help students gain confidence and social skills. Not only will they develop their musical radar, where they understand their place in the team, but they will also learn to work cooperatively with people. They may need diplomatic skills – for example, how can you tactfully tell the person sitting next to you that they're playing a wrong note? They will sometimes need to sit quietly and patiently when part of a rehearsal is devoted to a different section of the orchestra.

In small ensembles or sectional rehearsals, it's important to give students the freedom to discuss musical details. How should we phrase this passage? Where should we breathe? How can dynamics enhance the musical shape? How do the musical lines interact – which is most important? Ideas may be overruled and a consensus may need to be found. Similar musical discussions should be taking place in individual instrumental lessons, where we can give students the confidence to speak out and express themselves, reassuring them that their opinion is always valid, even if it differs from our own.

Larger groups can require more discipline, however, where we need to unquestioningly follow the conductor's commands.

While much of this is an individual's journey of self-discovery where they learn as they go along, our job, whether as an individual teacher or ensemble leader, is always to be on hand to provide mentoring, support, advice and, where necessary, a little gentle admonishment when students step out of line.