

Ensemble Skills that Transcend the Marching Arts

By Lauren Teel

In the world of ensemble performance, success is rarely the result of individual talent alone. What transforms a group of performers into a strong musical ensemble is a shared sense of musical purpose and active awareness. I often credit my own experiences in the marching arts for developing my sense of ensemble awareness and listening skills.

This PASIC50 session will explore those skills in depth, offering performers and educators tools to build musicianship from the inside out. While the clinic is framed through the lens of the front ensemble, takeaways are applicable to all performers striving for ensemble excellence.

SOUND AS THE DESTINATION, NOT A BYPRODUCT

I always start with sound. As an aural artform, sound should be the ultimate destination in any ensemble I work with. Too often I encounter students whose primary focus is on the motion, with little attention to the intention or quality of the sound they're producing. Technique is important because it gives us control over sound, but of equal importance must be the awareness and ear training. The sound must be a deliberate choice. As an educator, it's important to spend time with students discussing differences in qualities of sound — not necessarily in the framing of “good” or “bad,” but more along the lines of “resonant,” “dry,” “articulate,” etc. The more they can perceive differences in the sounds they are producing, and the avenues they took to achieve those differences, the easier it becomes for them to intentionally develop their own sense of voice.

VOCABULARY, TIMING, AND MUSICAL FLUENCY

Once the ensemble has a general consciousness of sound, we move towards making them “fluent” in their musical language. We use a set of simple scalar exercises during the summer that

functions far beyond daily endurance-building. These exercises are designed to develop basics of their musical vocabulary but, more importantly, engage the brain. These simple exercises can be adapted and played with endless variations. The end result is a much more well-rounded musician.

The analogy I use is linguistic: when you first learn a complex word, it may feel clunky or forced. The more you encounter it in different contexts, the more naturally it becomes part of your language. Musical vocabulary is no different. By rotating phrasing, hand sequences, and dynamics, performers can begin to “speak” musically with more confidence and clarity. Imagine you are reading a passage in a language you are unfamiliar with.



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The emphasis and cadence might sound odd to a native speaker because you are not truly fluent in the language or understand the context of what you are saying.

BALANCE, TOUCH, AND LISTENING AS A REFLEX

One of our main focuses in the summer is what it means to truly be “clean.” The playing must not only be in time, but also at the same dynamic and with the same articulation. That’s easier said than done, especially in an environment where players are often separated physically and aurally. We spend a great deal of time developing active listening skills, just as much as we work on techniques and other skills.

One of my favorite ways to develop a student’s sense of active listening is through an improvising game. I will have all the students start on one keyboard and layer in, one at a time. Each player must match the previous player’s tone, dynamic, and phrasing, essentially “reading” one another in real time. The next player is not to enter the improv until they deem the players before them have matched all of these qualities. It fosters deeper listening and ensemble intuition. This exercise is particularly revealing when done without a visual cue. Much like how being in a dark room heightens your hearing, removing visual cues can amplify what you are able to hear.

We also explore how the physical setup of instruments (e.g., placing timpani near the low end of the marimba) affects timing

and clarity. These details matter, but they must always tie back to a deeper “why.” When students know *why* we do something, they internalize the purpose. Usually the answer is simple: “Because it’s the sound we want.”

CONTEXT IS EVERYTHING

It’s not enough to know *how* to play a part, but also there needs to be a strong understanding of the context. What is the intent of this phrase? Who has the main line? Is the phrase an arrival or transitional moment? How does your voice support or contrast the ensemble? What is the source material and style?

Understanding context helps avoid the pitfalls of “flow state,” where players are technically executing but mentally disengaged. By training awareness, performers can stay connected and responsive, even during moments of error. Performance psychology becomes just as important as physical technique.

At the core of it all is intentionality, knowing what you want to say musically, and listening deeply enough to say it well. These skills are universal, not just for the front ensemble, but essential habits for any musician.

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