

Developing Brass Ensembles in Middle and High Schools, Part 1

By the Giannini Brass

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The goal of these articles is to provide music educators with the tools needed to establish and refine brass ensembles in their programs. Establishing brass ensembles in your program is a great way to strengthen your ensembles. This article covers student involvement in rehearsals, brass ensemble literature, the role percussion can play in brass ensembles, setup and etiquette, and performance opportunities available for your students.

Student Involvement in Rehearsals

Chris Ferguson: The more the students are involved in rehearsals, the less *you* have to be, which allows you to focus on the rest of your program! Start by having students set a day, time, and location to rehearse. Have each member of the group sign a "contract" with this information as well as rehearsal procedures. This is a great way to establish a commitment in the beginning, especially with young students. Have a responsible student come up with a list of things they want to accomplish in each rehearsal, including the methods they plan on using to achieve these goals. You will have to show them how to do this at first. If possible, spread this responsibility throughout the ensemble by assigning each piece to a student. A productive goal for the group in each rehearsal is to record the material worked on at the end of a rehearsal, then have the students listen to the playback and evaluate their performance. Once you have monitored and reinforced these steps, you should find that your time spent with the group is only spent coaching. Beside musicianship, you will be teaching responsibility, self-reliance, teamwork, and creativity, which they will take back to your entire program.

Literature

Dave Nicholson: Finding music that meets your student's abilities as well as instrumentation is one of the biggest challenges in starting a brass ensemble. Whether you are looking for trios, quartets, or quintets of like or various instrumentation, music is always available. If you have very young musicians, you may want to start off by arranging familiar holiday chorales or pulling music from a hymnal. Once you find appropriate music, understand that you may need to read through several pieces before finding one that you like. Quintet literature (2 trumpets, French horn, trombone, tuba) is the most common. There are several quintet collections available. For example, the *Canadian Brass* series

offer quintets that are sorted by levels ranging from beginner to advanced, as well as Broadway and Dixieland collections. *The Phillip Jones Brass Ensemble* has a series entitled "Touch of Brass", which is unique in the sense that it offers substitute parts for horn and tuba parts as well as an alternate baritone/ euphonium part. A similar collection is "Classics for Four Plus Brass" by Douglas Smith (published by Roger Dean/Lorenz), which is a good resource for weddings and commencement ceremonies. For example, this collection contains an arrangement of Pomp and Circumstance and Trumpet Voluntary. A list of literature resources has been provided at the end of this article.

Joe Mount: As Dave mentions, finding music for a brass ensemble is a never ending challenge. The first question that the director or leader of the group needs to address is the goal or purpose of the group. For example, is the group going to perform one piece at a contest or give a full recital? Remember that endurance is always a crucial factor in selecting repertoire. Because most pieces of brass repertoire are 2-4 minutes in duration--think carefully before accepting the 60-minute background music engagement at the mall. This will call for 15-20 selections, unless you want to repeat a lot. Most advanced middle school and medium level high school students can tackle some of the stock Baroque and Renaissance dances that have been published by Robert King. This includes a variety of Renaissance dance pieces by Adson, Pezel, and Holborne as well as canzone by Gabrieli. Perhaps the most played quintet of all times is Die Bankensangerlieder by Speer (listed as anonymous in some publications). More advanced ensembles can attempt some of the real meat and potatoes of the quintet literature such as the Sonatine by Bozza, one of the four Ewald Quintets (No. 1 is a good place to start), and the Malcolm Arnold Quintet. Three Pieces by Ludwig Maurer (ed. By Robert Nagle) is also a playable piece for the more advanced younger player. For variety, the group can move on to some of the hundreds of pop or jazz arrangements, which will be discussed in a future article.

The Role of Percussion in a Brass Quintet

John Beck: Typically there is no percussion music written in the standard brass quintet repertoire. Therefore, the performer is often left to interpret full band parts, or to improvise. For a young player, this can be a daunting task. Arranging percussion parts for a single performer with a brass quintet is relatively easy if the player has a drum set, a few accessory instruments, a good dynamic sense, and some knowledge of musical styles.

Renaissance and Baroque Music

Historically, there were often non-pitched rhythm parts performed in early music, most typically on tambourine, finger cymbals, triangle, or drums. These parts were repetitive and helped to propel the melodies of the pitched instruments. Simple repeated patterns in duple or triple meter will enhance the sound of many quintet pieces from this period.

Marches

Assuming the percussionist has a set of drums with a snare drum, pedal bass drum, high hat and crash cymbal, reading the printed band march part works very well. However, some interpretation is necessary to adapt the part to the drum set. If the performer tries to play a high hat crash with every bass drum note, leg cramps will develop after the second strain. Only add the high hat crashes in the introduction, break strain, and last repeat of the trio melody, and on accented notes within the musical phrases. (This is the same style that Sousa's bass drummer

used when playing bass drum and cymbals by himself.) The suspended crash cymbal can be used for solo cymbal crashes or very loud solos, such as the break strain in *Stars and Stripes Forever*.

Commercial Music

When accompanying a brass quintet with no written drum set music, the drummer has two choices: follow the tuba or the first trumpet part. The tuba part gives the drummer a sense of time with the rhythm of the bass line, but the “figures” are in the lead trumpet part. Reading from the tuba part and writing in the rhythms to be doubled or “set up” from the trumpet part gives the percussionist the most flexibility. It is extremely important to remember to be sensitive to the dynamic range of the other five players and not play as if playing with a full big band. Starting with this simple set of guidelines will help the brass quintet percussionist begin performing in this exiting musical genre.

Performance Considerations

Joe Mount: There are two main considerations when addressing performance procedures. One is musical, the other showmanship. One basic musical consideration is how to set up the ensemble. Professional brass quintets have two basic setups, with slight modifications. Assuming that the group is seated (or standing) in a semicircle, the first and most traditional setup is to have the trumpets facing each other. This achieves a certain balance, similar to stereo. This also can have interesting visual effects when the trumpets trade off lines, particularly in Renaissance and Baroque literature. The other setup, which is used by the *Giannini Brass*, is to have the two trumpets sit side by side. This resembles the orchestral type of setup and, as our trumpet players claim, keeps problems of frequency interference to a minimum. Almost invariably, the tuba will sit in the center of the curve. Because the horn tends to be the most overpowered in terms of volume, groups generally choose a setup that allows the bell of the horn to face the audience. Setups vary from group to group. Most touring quintets such as the *Dallas Brass*, *Canadian Brass* and the *American Brass Quintet* will vary their setup over the course of a concert. This is done sometimes for musical reasons, but usually to create audience interest by adding variety onstage. If the younger ensemble wants to change the setup between pieces in a concert, they should do it fast and make it look effortless (this should be practiced during rehearsals).

The Giannini Brass utilizes a stage setup where musicians (except drummer and tuba) stand for an entire concert. Standing allows greater freedom to move and is visually more attractive to an audience. This setup also is suited to our repertoire, which leans heavily to pop and jazz, where often a soloist will walk to the front of the stage. Standing can also fit well into a historical context for Renaissance and Baroque selections, as musicians of these periods often stood while performing. I would not suggest performing standard quintet literature such as works by Malcolm Arnold, Bozza, Ewald, etc, standing due to their complexity. The younger group might try experimenting with sitting and standing. As I mentioned before, standing can create a connection between an ensemble and the audience, in that it gets performers out the traditional "hiding place" behind a music stand.

Stage Entrance, Stage Presence and Bows

Joe Mount: Unfortunately, a good musical performance can be seriously marred from the audience's standpoint by a lack of stage presence. One aspect in particular is bowing, both before and after the performance. I have seen numerous performances that leave a bad impression

because the bows are almost comical. In the *Giannini Brass* we still discuss bows, particularly if the piece features a soloist. Likewise, it is important to make an energetic entrance and acknowledge applause quickly. Once again, I have seen many groups take the stage so slowly that the applause has died down before they take a bow, creating another comical situation. Bows should be worked out at a dress rehearsal; they should be critiqued by the director or an impartial party, and rehearsed until they look sharp.

Another pitfall for the young musician to avoid is the tendency to make unnecessary or distracting facial expressions. The mark of an inexperienced player is the grimace that they make when they miss a note. This draws the listener's attention to the mistake, when what you really want to do is draw the least amount of attention to the error. Once again, this habit arises from young players (and old) feeling that they become invisible when they are on stage with an ensemble--particularly a large band or orchestra. Remember, when there are only 5 or 6 of you onstage, the audience picks up every movement you make. Along these lines, have you ever seen a brass ensemble perform and noticed long moments of silence between movements or selections due to the performers emptying horns, adjusting slides, etc., until it became either painful or comical? My advice, *be discreet when emptying and adjusting your horn*, it's not part of the show!

In addressing these aspects of showmanship, I suggest that the young player attend a performance by a first-rate touring group, whether it's a brass ensemble or string quartet. Pay attention to how these groups take the stage, bow, etc.

Performance Opportunities

Chris Ferguson: The ultimate goal of your ensembles is to perform, and there are certainly plenty of opportunities for this! Competitions and festivals are great motivating tools for your students. Most districts have Solo and Ensemble Festivals and many organizations such as Bands of America host their own form of ensemble competitions. The most basic performance opportunity for a group is to feature them with your band on your next concert. Ensembles can also perform before concerts or in-between bands during stage changes. Ever been asked to play the National Anthem at an athletic event? Send a brass ensemble! Your administration and parents will appreciate performances at PTA nights and other school functions. Civic groups such as Jaycee and Rotary clubs are always looking for groups to spice up their activities. The holidays bring added opportunities for brass ensembles in the church, where special "love offerings" may be taking to help out your band program. In addition, the Salvation Army utilizes the unique ability of brass instruments and their players to withstand cold temperatures to perform chorales throughout your town during this time of year! With an almost endless supply of performance opportunities, your ensembles will be self - motivated to keep working throughout the year.

When the basics are covered, brass ensembles can be a fun way for students to learn and become more confident performers. This confidence, brought back by these students, will spread throughout you band. Your time spent cultivating ensembles of this nature will ultimately produce more

successful musicians throughout your program!

Some Suggested Brass Quintet Resources

- Pepper Music (they can order from most catalogues and will give music on a consignment basis, so if you don't like it, you can return it) "<http://jwpepper.com/>" or 1 800 345 6296

J.W. Pepper & Sons, Inc.
Box 850
Valley Forge, PA 19482

- Robert King Music (you can find information online, however it may be easier to read their catalogue, the "Brass Player's Guide", which you can request from the address below) <http://www.rkingmusic.com/>

Robert King Music Sales, Inc.
140 Main Street
North Easton, Massachusetts USA
02356

- Hickeys Music (this is a good source for all brass literature and needs! In addition, their staff provides additional assistance in locating out of print or hard to find publications) "<http://www.hickeys.com/index.htm>" or 1 800 442 5397

Hickey's Music Center
104 Adams Street
Ithaca, NY 14850

GIANNINI BRASS

The Giannini Brass was formed in 1989 and named after Vittorio Giannini, the composer and educator who founded the North Carolina School of the Arts. Giannini Brass has been acknowledged for developing innovative community and educational programs, including the acclaimed "Science of Sound". The Giannini Brass has performed in a variety of unusual and interesting performance settings, including multi-media planetarium concerts, with symphony orchestras, and on radio and television. Giannini Brass is on the South Carolina Arts Commission's Approved Artist Roster and the North Carolina Arts Council's Roster of Touring Artists. In 1999-01 the Giannini Brass were artists-in-residence at Classical 89.9 WDAV. The ensemble has released two CDs: *Big-Shot Brass*, and *Christmas With The Giannini Brass*, and will release a CD of Baroque music in December of 2001. The Giannini Brass is a Yamaha Performing Ensemble.

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