



THE INTERSECTION OF FOOTBALL AND MUSIC

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As any conductor that has worked with a musical ensemble for long enough has learned, having a successful program is more than just your knowledge and passion for the music. Important aspects like recruiting, time management, and personnel depth all influence our final product on stage. These aspects have crystalized for me as I am approaching my 10th year conducting the Youth Orchestra of Central Jersey Saxophone Program (yocj.org), which is made up of two saxophone ensembles totaling approximately 40 students. Like many musicians, as the years have progressed, I've found the need for a hobby, and for me that became college football. Little did I know, upon embarking on this new hobby, that I would be reminded of the timeless "fundamentals" of creating a great ensemble program.

If you follow college football, one of the greatest teams of all time is Alabama. Consistently, they are either the winner of the national championship, or the runner-up, and have won five national championships in the last ten years. At beginning of each season, a discussion ensues across the nation speculating on who can or will dethrone them. One team that often comes close, but never capitalizes, is the University of Georgia Bulldogs. To put this in perspective and underscore an incredible point, we should review some recent history between the two teams. In the January 2018 bowl game between Alabama and Georgia, Alabama beat Georgia in overtime, despite losing for nearly the entire game. In a rematch in December 2018, Alabama took the lead with 1:04 left on the clock, after being behind for the entire game. To sum this up, out of more than 120 minutes of playing, Alabama only led in these two games for 1:04, yet won both of them. It did not matter that Georgia led for 119 minutes; in the end they did not win. As a conductor of any ensemble program, there is a lot to learn here.

One of the most important aspects ensuring a great performance is the final set of rehearsals leading to the concert. While the entire season of preparation is important, how we structure and maintain focus in the final weeks is key. Students often lose focus as a concert nears, because

the newness and excitement of fresh repertoire has worn off and they are ready to move onto something different. However, months of fruitful rehearsals, followed by two to three sloppy rehearsals, can be a death-knell for a great performance. Just like a coach can help motivate and inspire the team at the end of a game to hold onto their lead, a conductor should fill that inspiring role to the students, motivating them to push through to the end. When the ensemble is weary, we cannot be weary and must bring a renewed vigor to the music. In addition, how we plan out the progression of rehearsals over a season can make a big difference. For instance, tackling tough sections in small pieces over the course of a concert preparation period can make it more manageable on the performers. If there is a natural crescendo to the intensity of rehearsals, with ebbs and flows as needed, students are much less likely to be burnt out at the end. With vision and preparation ahead of time before the rehearsal "season", each individual rehearsal can be as productive as possible.

Coming into my newfound love of college football exposed me to another aspect of a successful football win: time management. Perhaps more so than in any other sport, time management, particularly at the end of a hard-fought game, can mean the difference between a rewarding win, or a disappointing loss. Teams can use various types of plays to affect the flow and movement of the game, including the decision between punting the ball or pushing for a first down, and even use timeouts as a way to affect the count-down of the clock and spirit of the players. Many of these aspects of football create an incredible metaphor for our rehearsal management as conductors.

Our individual rehearsals, just like our "season" of rehearsals as a whole should have a natural, but intentional flow to how they are structured in order to achieve success. Just as football teams don't go for the most ambitious play on first down, similarly, it is important to build throughout our rehearsals from easier musical material, to more ambitious material. No rehearsal plan, though, goes perfectly according to plan, and knowing when to "punt" a piece for

the week, rather than trying to push the students is important to discern. Wasting thirty minutes on a piece that is going nowhere, but is what was “planned”, is far less fruitful than moving onto something different. Conductors should always be ready with a plan B for rehearsals (and a plan C). However, sometimes all that is needed is a “timeout”. If taking five minutes to give the students a chance to recharge creates an additional twenty minutes of successful rehearsal time, then it is far more worth it to do this than to try and push through a grueling and unsuccessful twenty-five minutes. This proves true in private lessons as well. Sometimes asking a student about their week, or talking about their favorite television show or video game can snap them out of a technical issue they are having on the instrument.

While all of these rehearsal management skills are important, the kind of personnel we have in our ensembles makes a significant difference as well. There is a reason why certain college football teams continue to be great year in and year out, and that is through reputation. Whether your ensemble is a professional or a public school position, high standards attract excellent students. If you are new to building a program, however, don't expect to see overnight results. Instead, it may take years to see the fruit of your labors. It is important to have intentional goals for recruitment numbers, and a plan for how to recruit. At Youth Orchestra of Central Jersey, we have grown from approximately 160 students in 2010 to over 260 students as of January 2019. As Recruitment Director for the entire organization, I have worked to create strong relationships between our program and public school and private music teachers. Reaching out to new teachers and making in-school presentations has helped us to grow from a mostly West Windsor-Plainsboro based program, to one encompassing students from as far as Union County, NJ to Bucks County, PA and southern NJ as well. We've rediscovered that this in-person touch works much better than just another e-mail campaign. But, what if your instrumental program is insular to a single school, like a band or orchestra program? In this instance, our next metaphor is what can help create a growing, vibrant program.

Just as the best football recruits want to play for successful universities and proven coaches, everyone wants to be part of a “winning” program, whether it is football or music. While a first year public school teacher rebuilding a program will need to do significant recruitment and may scramble to have all parts covered, a focus on excellence regardless of our personnel will help to ensure students come back year in and year out. Most importantly, it will encourage students to share with their friends the positive experi-

ence they are having in their music program. We should strive to continually be raising the bar on our ensembles, challenging them just a little more each year. Students do an amazing thing when you present them with a challenge: they want to achieve it. Whether they ultimately perform that tougher piece perfectly or not is secondary to whether the ensemble improved and the students were motivated and inspired by the challenge. By continually challenging our ensembles, keeping our repertoire fresh, and building a culture of excellence, our programs will construct themselves.

Lastly, when building a great ensemble program, we must be careful to cultivate a program with depth. Football commentators often talk about depth, and this is when a team has multiple players in each position that can be relied on when the going gets tough. The reason behind this is that not every great player has a great game all the time. Great players get injured, or they simply have an “off” game. In our musical ensembles, do we too much rely on one great player, or do we have depth? Is just our lead clarinet player good, or is the whole section accomplished? While having excellent lead players can make a huge difference, we should always be focused on building programs with depth. Do we challenge all players in the ensemble just like we would challenge that lead player? Do we focus on all lesson groups with the same level of intensity? Considering these questions can help us to have great rehearsals, sectionals, and lessons, even when our star player may be out of the game.

As conductors, it can be incredibly helpful for us to step back from our roles and see that we are not just musical shapers, we are inspirational speakers, we are recruiters, we are comforters, we are challengers, and we are timekeepers. Our leadership role shares many characteristics to the role coaches play on football teams, and our use of time management throughout our entire rehearsal season, our conscious and deliberate structuring of individual rehearsals, and our cultivation of our “team” can make the difference between a successful win at our next concert, or losing with less than a minute to go.

