

# Preparing students for playing in ensembles

## Richard Steggall

### Introduction

I'm certain that every person reading this article can list the benefits of playing in an ensemble. We all want our students to thrive, and I'm sure that many of us have got a kick out of hearing them play well in a group and seeing them happy and relaxed. But what about the ones who aren't enjoying it?

'Join a group,' we tell our students. 'It's such fun! You get to work as a team, make music with your friends. You'll enjoy playing some of the world's greatest pieces – what a fantastic opportunity. You'll meet new people, develop a lifelong passion for music and have a great time.' But will *all* your students have a great time? What about the promising musician who has just quit youth orchestra? They'll cite 'exam pressure' or say they 'don't have the time', but if they were really enjoying it as much as you said they would, wouldn't that be enough to make them stay?

Is it the student's fault that they're not enjoying it? Or the conductor or director's fault for not making it fun enough? Or the organisation running the group for not looking after that student? Or do you – the teacher – have any responsibility?

Think about your own list of the benefits of ensemble playing – it might include developing a sense of pulse, rhythm or pitch. Are you waiting for your students' ensembles to develop these skills, or are you proactively helping your students with these fundamentals so that they can develop in these groups? The problem is that if they don't develop those skills quickly enough, they'll find it hard to blossom in those group situations. A brass player who's struggling to know when to come in, and at what pitch, for example, will soon start to get worried about entries. They might quickly become pretty nervous or scared. The worst-case scenario is that a student permanently associates ensembles with nerves and potential embarrassment.

What's the teacher's responsibility? Are you just putting your students in ensembles and hoping for the best? Is offering to go through ensemble parts together in lessons enough, or is it a teacher's responsibility to make sure their students have the requisite skills to be able to enjoy playing in groups?

### Developing skills

#### Your own teaching style

Most of us have a certain teaching style – or, more accurately, a range of teaching styles for our different students. It's worth thinking about your own individual style. Do you want to nurture independent learning for your students? Do you just want your students to enjoy playing their pieces? Do you focus on learning repertoire, or do you work on other musical aspects, maybe even away from their instrument?

Make a list of skills that you try to nurture in your lessons. Then make another list of the skills that you believe will make your students good and happy ensemble players. Now look at the two lists. How do they compare?

You can probably deduce whether you're helping your students in their ensemble work, or leaving it to someone else – maybe the director of their ensembles.

#### 'Cosy' teaching

There's a certain teaching style that I call 'cosy' teaching. I personally use this style for a very small number of students upon making a judgement that it's the best one for them. It involves making the teaching room a kind of 'safe space' where they can relax and make music away from the pressures of school life. There's little expectation that much practice will have been done, or that rapid progress will be made.

In this style, students are constantly encouraged and praised, and generally the teacher will play along with the students rather than allow them to fail and learn from those mistakes. The repertoire will be tunes they know, and if they ever do practise on their own, they will have a recording, YouTube link or backing track to play along with.

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As a teacher, I'm fully aware that this method of teaching will not be much help to my student if they join an ensemble. It will, however, allow them to enjoy making music and playing their instrument. For these students, we must weigh up what's best for them. I would suggest that 'cosy' teaching is a fairly limited solution for most students, and that enjoyment from playing alongside a teacher is eventually dwarfed by making music with others, particularly a student's peers.

### Are ensembles for everyone?

Many students might really enjoy this 'cosy' style of teaching. There's no expectation or pressure to do well, and no worries about playing on their own. Of course, no one has to join an ensemble, but from my experience those that don't are far more likely to give up and stop lessons.

For those that might be a little worried, beginner ensembles often have safety in numbers. There's less need to count, for example, if the player next to you is doing it. More problems might arise later on when a student is the only player on a part – for example, wind players in an orchestra. It's at this point that ensemble skills must be fairly well developed.

### Can you use exam syllabuses to help?

The 'classic' Associated Board exam is designed to test students in skills that are necessary for good ensemble playing:

- ▶ Pieces: you gain marks for good sound, pulse and rhythm, playing in tune and solid pitching.
- ▶ Scales: you learn to understand scales and play them in different keys.
- ▶ Sightreading: very useful in ensemble work.
- ▶ Aural tests: many of these are useful for the ensemble player.

So surely if you enter your students for these exams, they'll be fully prepared for ensemble playing? Well, it depends how you teach them. If you train your students specifically for these exams, then I'd strongly suggest that they won't be the rounded musicians that you think they might be. Being able to do well in these tests should be a by-product of the work that you do in lessons (and your students do in their practice).

My preference for students is to do performance exams (I don't want them to be judged playing scales or attempting aural tests), but they need instrument-specific back-up to run alongside these exams.

### From page to inner ear

The key skill needed to find ensemble playing easy, relaxing and rewarding is the ability to get the music off the page and into the ear. (It's worth clarifying here that the ensembles I'm talking about, and have experience with, are those using written notation.) We've all heard a student say the phrase, 'I couldn't practise because I didn't know how the song goes.' If you hope that this student will become a successful ensemble player, hearing this should set alarm bells ringing.

Of course, not all students learn in the same way. Many will want to learn by copying, or learning by ear. There's nothing wrong with that... until they want to play in an ensemble where everyone is reading music. At some point, they're going to have to try to extract the sounds they want from the written music, not from listening to someone else.

For beginners, and the very young, this skill will probably not come easily. The ability to read music so that you can hear it in your head has to be worked at. Initially children playing in ensembles will often be shown what their parts sound like – a kind of 'cosy' ensemble direction. But there comes a point when the hand-holding will stop – where the student is required to stand on their own two feet. Have they developed the necessary skills?

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## Core skills

### Pulse and counting

A sense of pulse is something that needs to be developed in all our students, irrespective of whether they are playing in ensembles or not. (See *Music Teacher*, February 2023, for a resource devoted to developing internal pulse.) Hopefully, you are encouraging your students to play in time, with a strong beat in their heads. Obviously, this is vital when it comes to ensemble work. Players need to feel the pulse when they're playing, and, just as importantly, when they're not. Of course, they will probably have the benefit of being able to look at a conductor (if they choose to!) but will still need to feel the pulse internally.

There are many opportunities to work with your students on pulse and counting. If they're playing a piece with another part, maybe an accompaniment, they will have to count bars' rest. Make sure they understand how to do this – get them to count out loud. Don't take anything for granted. If you're accompanying your student on a piano, and giving them a four-bar introduction, then after a few goes of showing where the student to come in, they may well just get the hang of it by listening. For that particular piece, that's fine, but are they actually counting the rests? 'Feeling' when to place an entry in an ensemble when other things are going on is much harder. If you don't practise counting piano introductions in lessons (which is very straightforward), they will face a huge leap to counting in an ensemble.

There are lot of games you can use to help develop pulse. I often use the following one when working with larger ensembles, which encourages students to count silently together, but it can also be done with just a student and teacher.

- ▶ Set up a strong pulse by counting in.
- ▶ The student will play crotchets for a bar before they count a bar's rest internally and silently (no foot tapping allowed!).
- ▶ Without any cue, they will then play another bar of crochets before counting another bar's rest. (You can continue this pattern of alternating playing and counting for as long as necessary.)
- ▶ Increase the rest duration (to two bars, then three, then four, and so on) as they get more proficient.

### Watching the conductor

As mentioned above, some of the stress of having to count while resting and playing music is taken away by the fact there is a conductor. However, this is only of any use if the student can manage to see both the conductor and the music. Be aware that this is a new skill for beginner musicians. Most orchestral musicians have developed a knack of keeping their eyes on the music while watching the conductor in their peripheral vision, but this has been practised over many years.

The ability to look up for a cue, while keeping an eye on the music (and with a good aural image of the entry) so as not mess up that cue, is also extremely useful.

### Exercise: play conductors in lesson time

- ▶ Find a piece of music that the student can play fairly well.
- ▶ Show the student how you can move your hands along with the pulse of the piece.
- ▶ Let the student play the piece with you conducting (exact beating patterns aren't needed yet – it's just a movement on every beat that needs to be seen).
- ▶ Vary your tempo. Slow down or speed up and see if your student can follow. If they can't, make sure they can see you as well as their music.
- ▶ Then swap roles. Explain to the student that you now what them to conduct you and that you will play along with their conducting.
- ▶ Show the student how to move to the beat if they need this help, but otherwise just let them get on with it.
- ▶ Try to follow their beat exactly, so that they can hear and feel what it's like to be leading and in charge of the pulse.
- ▶ Keep swapping roles for as long as the exercise is fun and useful.

### Listening/awareness

Ensemble players need great awareness of what's going on around them musically. They need to be able to listen to the other players and react to what they do. Players at different levels will need different awareness skills. At the most basic level, when playing unison parts, a student needs to ask themselves if they're playing the same note as the person, or people, next to them. A more advanced skill could be hearing a cue note in a different part of an ensemble to help with the pitch of the next entry.

One awareness skill that many young musicians seem to struggle with is awareness of their own playing. This happens especially when music gets loud, and the student can't hear what they're doing. With brass players or singers, if the student can't pitch a note in their head before they play or sing, and also can't physically hear the note they produce, there is really very little for them to latch on to.

Musical awareness and listening can be worked at in lessons all the time. Make sure you play to your students in some way, demonstrating or accompanying, and ask them questions about what you're playing.

### Intonation and tuning

Intonation and tuning are tricky topics because they're hard concepts to understand for younger students. (Obviously, this is not relevant for pianos and drums.) We often start by tuning our students' instruments, but there must come a time when they do it themselves and take responsibility for their own pitch.

String players often have the best sense of tuning and pitch, because it's something they have to deal with every time they take the instrument out of its case. If the weather is fairly consistent, brass players might not move their tuning slides from one week to the next. The look on a young brass player's face when a pianist they've just met says, 'OK, let's tune,' can be priceless.

So how do we introduce intonation and tuning? A useful way is to demonstrate by using intentionally bad tuning and letting the student work out what's wrong:

- ▶ Pick a few bars of a piece and tell the student you're going to play along with them.
- ▶ Choose whether to play in tune, sharper or flatter than your student, and perform the passage along with them.
- ▶ Then ask if the passage was in tune or not.
- ▶ You could play the passage twice, once in tune and once not, and see if the student can tell which was which.
- ▶ You can then see if the student can tell you whose pitch was higher or lower, which starts to introduce the idea of being sharp or flat.

Teach your students to tune with and without a machine. When we start dealing with intonation in passages, we really need our ears working, not a reliance on technology.

### Pitching

Pitching is more of an issue with brass and singing than with other instruments, because of the larger range of pitches that can be emitted when going for a particular one! Can your students match a pitch if they hear it first? Can they hit that pitch 'cold' without any aural clues? Can they hit a pitch at a certain interval from a key note? These are all great skills to have as an ensemble player. Your students certainly don't need perfect pitch, but a sense of relative pitch is so important when there are multiple parts in an ensemble.

### Keys

Ensembles often have to work in keys that you wouldn't normally use when performing solo work on a particular instrument. Beginner ensembles will try to focus on using the notes that are the first ones taught to the players. String ensembles will therefore favour sharp keys, while wind ensembles will play in predominantly flat keys. The problem comes when strings and wind mix.

One answer to playing in different keys is learning scales. If you follow an exam syllabus, I would recommend learning at least one short piece in the key of each scale learnt, so that scales are not taught purely as a technical exercise in isolation. If you're not following an exam syllabus, I would recommend playing pieces (and learning the corresponding scale) moving through the cycle of 5ths. For example, after learning a piece in C major, you could then find one in F, and the next in B flat. Just be sure to move around the cycle both ways – towards an increased number of sharps, as well as flats (or vice versa).

### Dynamics

Dynamics are part of the expression of a piece – a clear indication of the direction of the music. In solo pieces, the dynamic is intertwined with the mood of the solo line and the story that the piece is telling.

In ensemble playing, however, it's not quite so clear. We sometimes have to just play at the right dynamic with no obvious musical reason. We may even have to adjust the volume more than is indicated at the request of the ensemble director (pity the poor flute trying to play a solo over five alto saxophones playing 'piano' long notes!).

Use dynamics throughout your teaching. Everything should have a dynamic, whether you're doing copying exercises or playing scales. Get the student constantly used to inputting a dynamic into the sound in their heads before they start playing anything.

### Playing accompaniments

Most of the time in lessons on single-line instruments, our students are working on playing 'tunes'. Some are therefore surprised by the fact (quite obvious to us) that not everyone in an ensemble will have the melody. That section of five saxophones, for example, will need a little sensitivity when it comes to playing accompanying lines.

Should your students be using lesson, and practice, time to learn to accompany? Absolutely yes. How? We'll come to that shortly.

### Social interaction

You might think that how your students behave socially is none of your business, but a couple of brief words to your students can work really well. If your student joins a new ensemble, ask them to tell you who was sitting next to them. Do they know their name? What year are they in, or what school do they go to? Don't push them too hard, but maybe give them a challenge of finding out for next week. Once a child feels socially accepted in an ensemble, they'll find the music making much less stressful too.

### Sightsinging

One exercise that's great preparation for ensemble work is sightsinging. If you can sightsing, ensemble playing should be a doddle! The majority of our students, however, will find this a very tough ask, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't at least try to develop this skill. To start with, when you pick a new piece, encourage your students to try to sing it along with you. Aim for good rhythm and pulse, and just follow the direction of the music without concern for exact pitches. Start in a really easy way, and you may be surprised at where it might lead.

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### Duets

Playing duets can provide a very easy and fun way of incorporating the 'core skills' detailed above into lessons. When we think of an ensemble, we tend to think about a chamber group, band or orchestra. But we might forget about the simplest type of ensemble: the duo. It might be just two parts working together, but we can think of them as a stepping stone to larger ensembles.

You should be clear, however, that playing duets is very different from 'accompanying'. When we accompany our students (most probably on a piano), we're sympathetic to what they're doing. We comprise our own part to make them sound the best they can, bending our timing and changing our dynamic to match and compliment them. We're trying to show our student in the best light.

A duet, or duo, should be seen as two equal voices. The student must be as sympathetic to you as you are to them. They must value listening as much as playing. It's a partnership, a conversation – making music together. This is what will keep your student interested in music, long after you stop being their teacher.

Let's consider those core skills in this context:

- ▶ Pulse and counting: duets where both parts aren't always playing at the same time are great for counting practice. The teacher must play without rhythmic sympathy for the student's part – keep the pulse going!
- ▶ Watching the conductor: duets will probably be without conductor (unless you conduct two students duetting). You can, however, move your instrument in time to show the beat and encourage the student to watch you. (You can even reverse it: your student can lead you.)
- ▶ Listening and awareness: duets need intense listening to both the other part and also your own. Beginner students often find it hard to play independently – duets that come in and out of harmonic or rhythmic unison are excellent for this.
- ▶ Intonation and tuning: duets are an excellent place to introduce the idea of tuning. In more advanced students, the idea of tuning intervals and different degrees of a chord can also be discussed.
- ▶ Pitching: playing an independent part to the teacher encourages the student to really think about pitching.
- ▶ Keys: play duets in different keys!
- ▶ Dynamics: stretch the student by using a big dynamic range and talk about 'lead voices' where one part can be stronger than the other.
- ▶ Playing accompaniments: make sure the melodies in your chosen duets move between the two parts, so that each part features both melody and accompaniment.
- ▶ Social interaction: say, 'Well done, it was nice playing a duet with you.' See how many times you say it until your student says, 'It was nice playing a duet with you too!'
- ▶ Sightsinging: you can practise parts of the duet by singing.

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### Youth music ecosystems

Ensembles are a vital part of many youth music organisations' ecosystems. For some, good ensemble attendance is paramount to their survival.

In an ideal world, your student has lessons and is encouraged to join an ensemble. They enjoy the ensemble and want to have more lessons. They enjoy playing music with their friends, who also practise and are improving, causing your student to want to improve with them. Your student keeps learning and still enjoys playing music after they've left school (and maybe stops having lessons).

The key word in all of this is 'enjoy'. If your student doesn't enjoy playing in ensembles, don't be surprised if they give up. This is always a disappointing outcome. Is there anything you could have done in lessons to minimise the chance of this happening? Was aiming for perfection in pieces to get a distinction in a grade exam really that important? Or when you step back and look at that musician holistically, is there something else you could have done? Isn't it (at least partly) your responsibility?