

An aerial photograph of the Dordt University campus. On the left is a large, modern building with a prominent glass facade and a gabled roof. To the right is a tall, slender clock tower with a circular base and a clock face. The campus is surrounded by green lawns, paved walkways, and trees with autumn foliage. The sky is blue with some clouds.

Steps to Score Mastery: How is this Supposed to go?

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Score Study: How is this supposed to go?

Each time we select a work to do with our ensembles, we must begin one of the most important aspects of being a conductor: Learning and internalizing the score. Many of us, as young teachers and conductors, learned the score along with the ensemble. This is a very ineffective way of acquiring the knowledge that is needed to lead a group in preparing for a performance. It also does not allow for us to make vital decisions BEFORE we begin working with the musicians, in addition to limiting the amount of pedagogical teaching that we can accomplish. It is important that we know each note, articulation, orchestration, dynamic, and tempo, before we have the first reading. Every conductor has a slightly different process for this, however they all are similar in that we must have a way to interpret the music and internalize the composition, in advance of rehearsing the ensemble. If you already have a score study process, hopefully this will offer you a few more ideas that will help make it more fruitful. If you have never spent time studying a score, this is one of many ways to do so. I hope it gives you a great place to begin developing your own process of score study. As you proceed through this process it will be very tempting to take shortcuts and not apply the needed time to master each step. With that in mind, I offer this quote from my mentor and teacher Russel Mikkelsen, Director of Bands at The Ohio State University, “never withhold information from the musicians!” In order to give our musicians all of the essential information, we must have ALL of the written music and our interpretation of it, mastered before we step on the podium for the first rehearsal.

For this article, we will use the second movement of *Three Ayers from Gloucester* by Hugh Stuart for our visual examples. This is a work that is playable by many middle school and high

Step 1: Familiarization

Ex. 1

[illegible]

Ex. 2



Ex. 3



This is not a comprehensive list, but these are some of the things that should jump out at you as you browse through a piece.

During this time, you will also want to begin your research of the composer and the work itself. Questions such as the composer's background, was the work a commission, and what does the title tell us about the piece, if anything? This movement is entitled *Ayre for Eventide*. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines Ayre as "a song," and Eventide as "in the evening." Although this is somewhat open to interpretation, it gives us a good starting point for our interpretation of a "song for the evening."

Step 2: Precision Study and Absorbing the Music

The next step is internalization of each portion of the score. At this point, begin at the top of the score and take one instrument at a time. As you go through each part, mark everything that

is of significance. I recommend using only three primary colors, red (for crescendos and dynamics *mf* and louder), blue (for decrescendos and dynamics *mp* and softer), and green (for everything else). I will also use a pencil to mark cues, entrances, tonal analysis and any important conducting cues. As you mark each part individually, sing the part while sitting at the piano. Use the piano to help you find the beginning pitch, and while singing to stay in the correct key center. When first learning this method, you may find yourself playing every few notes to stay on the correct pitch. It will be slow going at first, but you will find that with practice you will be able to achieve longer and longer phrases with only singing. At the same time, you should be marking the part as mentioned above. If you refer to ex. 4, you can see the markings I have made to first page of this movement.

Ex 4.

IN B^b

1-68-70

2. AYRE FOR EVENTIDE

Andante (J-63) 75

Flutes

Oboe

Bassoon

Clarinets

Alto Saxophone

Baritone Saxophone

Tenor Saxophone

Trumpets

Horns

Translators

Baritone

Tuba

Percussion

67 Andante (J-63) 75

B^b M^b 7^b I (B^b) III (D) II⁷ (C^b) IV⁷ (F^b) V⁷ (B^b) VI⁷ (G^b) VII⁹ (C^b) VIII⁹ (F) IX (E^b) X⁷ (A^b)

At this point you will continue down the score through each of the woodwind instruments. Each time marking and singing through each part. If you find yourself making pitch mistakes, it is very important to go through the part again until you reach an accurate rendition. This will help you truly internalize each part and thus make hearing pitch errors during rehearsals much easier.

After completing this for the woodwinds, you will then move to the brass and finally the percussion, using the same method.

Step 3: Multiple Part Vocalization

As you finish the individual marking of a family of instruments, it is then time to begin to put the sounds together. There are many ways to do this. The first step is singing and playing any two of the family of instruments together. For example, in the previous step we spoke about the woodwind instruments. When reaching this step, you may sing the flute part while playing the first clarinet part, or play the bassoon part while singing the alto saxophone part. This can be any combination of instruments, but it is very important that you do as many different combinations as time allows. The amount of time you have allowed yourself to learn the score before the first rehearsal will dictate how much of this will be able to complete.

Another method that can be used to achieve this is to use a synthesizer or one of the many software programs that allow you to record yourself and then overlay with additional tracks. Multiple parts can be recorded and played back while you sing or play a different part. Although this takes time and effort, you will reap the benefit of “hearing” the score without any interpretation other than the one you are developing.

Step 4: Internal Audiation

Now that you have sung, played, and marked each part in step 3, it is time to attempt to audiate an entire section of the score. This step can take place after you have sung and played through every individual part in the score, or as you finish each instrument family (i.e. woodwinds, brass, and percussion). I prefer to do this after finishing each family as I have just played and sang through each part and they are each very familiar to me. The idea is to now “hear” all the members of the family of instruments at the same time in your mind’s ear. This will take some practice, but if you have strictly followed through with singing and playing of each individual part, as well as beginning to sing and play two or more parts together, you will find that your inner ear will begin to be unable to turn off the sounds of the other instruments.

At this point you should turn on a metronome at the given tempi throughout the score. While the metronome is running, you can “listen” through the score hearing the instruments you have studied so far. This will allow you to begin to fully form your interpretation as well as make key decisions regarding phrasing, tempo, articulation and all the small things that you will need to be aware of during your ensemble’s preparation.

Step 5: Full Score Audiation

Now that you have played, and sung through each family of instruments in the score, as well as audiated each family of instruments, it is time to “hear” the entire score in your mind’s ear. This can be difficult and time consuming when first beginning. If you use the piano to help with pitch centers and chords, you can then rely on the work you have done in the previous steps to help you begin to hear the score. I would urge you to not listen to any recordings during these steps. In today’s electronic age it is very tempting, and quicker, to go to a recording to get the score in your ear. However, this can create an imposed interpretation that is not your own. If

you have done the proper research and background study on the work you are learning, you will be able to make an educated and viable interpretation of the work without listening to a recording. This process becomes very important when premiering a work that has never been performed or recorded. Take as much time as possible to go through the work diligently and thoroughly at this step. Use a metronome to help you make tempi decisions and to keep you as true to the score as possible. I also would recommend doing this at the piano to enable you to check pitch centers and various non-chord tones, to make sure you are being true to what the composer has written. This crucial phase is your time to create the perfect recording of what the work should sound like in your mind. When you begin rehearsals this is a crucial part that will allow you to shape the music as you have decided through educated and through score study.

Step 6: Score Timeline

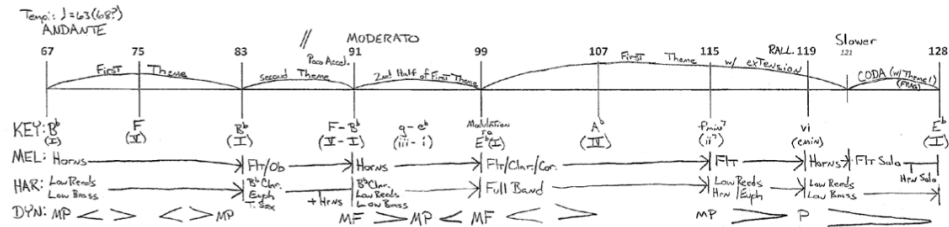
At this point you have internalized the score and are very familiar with the themes, key centers, and development sections. It is time to take this knowledge and put it in a concise form as a timeline that you can use to help you see the big picture. This can be done as step six, or jointly with step five as you fully audiate the score. All the things that you circled or notated in pencil in the score should go here, as well as anything that you have noticed during the precision study phase. In ex. 5 I have a basic timeline for *Ayre for Eventide*. Yours can be as detailed or as sparse as you feel necessary. However, it should include enough information that you can go to it to quickly find something during rehearsal.

Ex. 5

Three Ayres from Gloucester

2. Ayre from Eventide

Event Timeline



Step 7: Begin the preparation!

You have now arrived at the point that you can competently prepare your ensemble for performance. You know the intent of the composer and have made all the necessary decisions to create a unique interpretation that is yours! Although there are many variables and other things to think about, you can now simply help your students by sculpting the ensemble sounds to match what you have created in your mind's recording during your study. However, the study does not end at this point. As you rehearse the group you may find that some of your initial decisions are not viable, or they do not convey the essence of what you believe the work is supposed to be. This is fine! Although you may change some of your initial thoughts, you have come equipped, due to your study, to make the needed decisions to form the music in the best way for your students, listeners and yourself.

It is during this phase that you can now allow yourself to listen to recordings to see what others have done. It is very important to listen to as many different recordings as possible to enable yourself to not be influenced by any one interpretation. You will likely find yourself enjoying certain aspects of each recording and disliking others. Take what you enjoy and put it with your own interpretation. Part of what makes music wonderful is the ability to do it so many ways and yet still be correct, and true to the music's creator.

Step 8: Perform!!!

You have spent the needed time in learning and internalizing the score. The ensemble is prepared and excited to play the music. Now all of you and your student's hard work comes to realization as you place into the air, what was only ink on a page a few short weeks ago. Although lots of time and effort was invested in the preparation, the satisfaction of hearing your students present a wonderful performance and departing as better musicians than they were when you started, should be a source of pride. Many times it is easy for us to say that the time needed to prepare every score in this manner is not realistic. I would challenge you to spend your time on the things that only you can do, and allow others to do the rest! Be the band director that always has a score in your hand!