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Conceptualizing Conceptual Teaching:  
Practical Strategies for Large Instrumental Ensembles  

Abstract

Half a century ago, calls had already been made for instrumental ensemble directors to move beyond performance to include the teaching of musical concepts in the rehearsal hall. Relatively recent research, however, suggests that conceptual teaching remains relatively infrequent during rehearsals. Given the importance of teaching for long-term musical goals, revisiting this critical topic, backed by research and learning theories, is important and timely. Enriched by insights from my own teaching experience, the goal of this paper is to clarify the nature of conceptual teaching and encourage conceptual teaching in large instrumental ensembles by addressing the following questions: What is conceptual teaching? Why teach conceptually? How may musical concepts be taught through the rehearsal hall? I conclude this article with some thoughts toward the future.

**Keywords:** conceptual teaching, large ensembles, instrumental music education, practical strategies

Article

“Play shorter!”

The clarinet section obeys. The band achieves a Superior rating at the State Festival and is commended by the adjudicators for its sense of style and articulation. All seems well and good. The problem is, if *all* that the students have been taught is to “play shorter,” have they truly learned about style and articulation, or have directors created an illusion of learning?

Clearly, there is a need for instrumental ensemble directors to move beyond giving technical instructions. Useful as they are for achieving performance results, simply telling
students to “play shorter” has limited impact on their long-term musical learning. The more

important questions entail teaching generalizable knowledge of style and articulation, that is, conceptual knowledge that students can transfer from one piece to the next.

Since the latter half of the twentieth century, much has been written on the importance of teaching musical concepts through large instrumental ensembles. In a 1968 issue of *Music Educators Journal*, William Thomson likened giving mere technical instructions to computer programming, and termed this form of teaching “indoctrination” rather than “education.”¹ Thomson’s solution was an approach whereby students are taught conceptual awareness alongside performance goals. Similarly, at the turn of the century, Bennett Reimer reiterated the importance of “performing with understanding,” while Harry Price and James Byo reminded directors that without teaching conceptually, they are “condemned to reteach” in new teaching situations.²

Despite all the above efforts, Larry Blocher, Richard Greenword, and Bentley Shellahamer found that middle and high school band directors spent only 2.79% of total rehearsal time teaching conceptually.³ In a replication of this study, Dijana Ihas reported that middle and high school orchestral directors devoted only 5.3% of total rehearsal time teaching musical concepts.⁴ In both studies, verbal instructions (such as “play shorter”) continue to occupy a far greater proportion of rehearsal time. The researchers highlighted the need for more models and practical strategies for teaching conceptually in the instrumental rehearsal hall. They also suggested that the low amount of time spent teaching conceptually may be due to insufficient knowledge of learning theories, the lack of conceptual teaching role models, and
teacher education. Indeed, it could very well be that directors do not teach conceptually because the “concept of teaching concepts” is not sufficiently clear.

Given the above, it is crucial that there is a practical resource on conceptual teaching that instrumental ensemble directors can use in the rehearsal hall. To this end, it is important to draw on relevant learning theories and research as they can help teachers craft teaching strategies and learning environments more effectively. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to help school instrumental ensemble directors conceptualize conceptual teaching by drawing on learning theories, research findings, and my own applied experience. I do this by clarifying the nature of conceptual teaching, offering reasons for teaching conceptually, suggesting ten strategies for teaching conceptually, and concluding with some thoughts toward the future. Although this article is framed within the context of instrumental music education, choral music educators may find some of the ideas applicable to choral music education as well.

**What is conceptual teaching?**

Suppose we open the program of a school orchestral concert and see Pachelbel’s *Canon in D*, Vivaldi’s *The Four Seasons*, and Bach’s *Air on the G String* listed on the page. A word that probably comes to mind for some readers might be “Baroque music.” Our mind groups the three listings in a way that reduces cognitive overload and makes sense to us. “Baroque music,” then, is a *concept*—a mental abstraction that classifies and names the three pieces based on their stylistic similarities, while the three works are *instances* of the concept of “Baroque music.” Concepts are powerful learning tools as they enable educators to generalize across specific instances, serve as the basis for students to form mental schemas, and enable students to make sense of the things they learn. They also facilitate the transfer of learning, that is, the application of what one learns in new contexts.
The roots of concept teaching can be traced to the writings of John Dewey and Jerome Bruner. In music education, interest in concept teaching increased particularly in the latter half of the 20th century. As noted by Blocher, Greenword, and Shellahamer, conceptual teaching involves at least three aspects: (a) creating awareness of the concept, (b) facilitating understanding of the concept, and (c) teaching for the transfer of learning so that students are able to apply the concept learned in novel situations. For example, when there are staccatos notated in a band score, an example of a conceptual approach would be to draw attention to the concept of staccato. This may be followed by teaching the concept of staccato (which may include a discussion of articulation in relation to musical style), and then checking if students have learned to transfer the concept learned to another musical passage that contains staccatos. If conceptual learning has taken place, students ought to be able to play staccatos without the director having to instruct them to do so. By contrast, a non-conceptual approach might simply involve a technical instruction to “play shorter.”

There are seven basic musical concepts that may be taught through the classroom: rhythm, melody, harmony, tonality, form, texture, and timbre. These seven concepts could be taught with what Jerome Bruner describes as a “spiral” approach to education. The key features of the spiral approach are: (a) the student revisits a topic, theme or subject several times throughout her or his school career, (b) the complexity of the topic or theme increases with each revisit, and (c) the new learning has a relationship with old learning and is put in context with the old information. For example, with respect to rhythm, the concept of pulse may first be introduced to a middle school band and then reinforced in subsequent rehearsals with reference to progressively more complex rhythmic concepts, such as quarter note rest, eighth-note subdivision, and sixteenth-note subdivision. A spiral approach to the teaching of musical
concepts influenced several notable “Comprehensive Musicianship” programs, such as the Manhattanville Music Curriculum Project in New York and the Hawaii Music Curriculum Program in Honolulu. As the term “Comprehensive Musicianship” suggests, these programs aim toward an holistic approach to music education that include performance, music theory, history, composition, arrangement, music analysis, conducting, and improvisation.

Why teach conceptually?

Several music educators have criticized an approach to large ensembles where directors issue verbal instructions, present performances, and repeat the process. By saying “play shorter” each time staccato marks appear, directors are simply instructing and their students are merely obeying. Students who learn the concept of staccato, on the other hand, are able to do it by themselves. They are independent musicians, not just while they are in school, but also throughout the rest of their lives. Even if they forget the specific details of the musical piece that provided the opportunity to learn the concept of staccato, the concept stays with them as it can applied well after they graduate from school, be it performing, listening, composing, or teaching. Therefore, when directors teach conceptually, their ensembles are no longer performing machines, but conduits through which lifelong musical learning may take place. The musical pieces are learned not just for purposes of performance, but also for students to learn larger musical concepts.

Research has found many benefits to teaching conceptually in the rehearsal hall. In brief, teaching conceptually has been found to (a) deepen understanding of musical concepts, (b) sharpen aural skills, (c) encourage musical improvisation, and (d) result in more expressive performances. Students and expert teachers have also been found to rate conceptual teaching highly. Needless to say, teaching conceptually requires time–time that otherwise may be used
to rehearse and polish a musical piece for performance. The natural concern, then, is that by teaching conceptually, performance standards may be compromised. However, this is not supported by research. A number of studies have compared ensembles that used conceptual approaches with those that do not, and found no differences in performance standards.\textsuperscript{17} In fact, some studies have found that the performance standards of ensembles taught conceptually had higher performance standards than those that are not.\textsuperscript{18} All the research evidence points to the crucial need for directors to teach conceptually.

**How to teach conceptually?**

As noted earlier, research has found that instrumental directors spent low proportion of rehearsal time teaching conceptually. The researchers speculated that this may possibly be due to the lack of conceptual teaching methodologies in teacher education programs and the absence of role models. Given the importance of conceptual teaching as unpacked above, this section proposes ten practical strategies for the teaching of musical concepts in the instrumental rehearsal hall. The goal is to help ensemble directors incorporate conceptual teaching in their rehearsals more frequently and with a wider range of strategies.

1. *“Pull” concepts from the musical literature*

   The musical literature that students learn in their instrumental programs may be used to teach musical concepts.\textsuperscript{19} Take, for example, Frank Erickson’s *Air for Band*. During score study, directors may already begin to “pull” musical concepts and craft lesson plans to teach them during rehearsals. One such musical concept is phrasing. Instead of instructing students to insert breath marks for every single phrase throughout the piece (i.e., a non-conceptual approach), directors may teach generalizable concepts such as phrase markings, phrasal contours, and breath support in relation to phrasing. The students may sing or play the principal theme together, and
be encouraged to think of myriad ways to shape the melody. Rather than having the director dictate breath marks, students may be tasked to apply the concept of phrasing that they learned and decide suitable places to breathe for themselves. Although this approach may appear time consuming at first, directors eventually save time as students become musicians who can think for themselves when they learn new pieces of music.

2. **Seize “teachable moments” to present conceptual “nuggets”**

   While directors may plan musical concepts to teach in advance, there are often times in which the unexpected happens during the course of a rehearsal. Say a band does pretty well with phrasing in Erickson’s *Air for Band*. In the middle section, however, the tubas start to drag. Instead of instructing the tubists to “play faster,” it might be more fruitful to seize the “teachable moment” to present a quick conceptual lesson (“nugget”) of playing in time to the entire band. The director may use the tuba section as an example to demonstrate concepts associated with playing in time, such as maintaining a sense of pulse and listening to other musicians. The band may also engage in listening and clapping activities to develop a corporate sense of pulse. In my personal experience, virtually all unexpected performance problems may be generalized into larger musical concepts and converted into “nuggets” that directors can present to the students. However, this requires practice. Directors may analyze videos of their own teaching, think of ways they can convert non-conceptual verbal instruction to pithy conceptual teaching, and consciously make efforts to present conceptual “nuggets” during subsequent rehearsals.

3. **Link perception to conception**

   Conception is inextricably linked to perception, that is, hearing, seeing, and becoming aware through the senses. Drawing on the ideas of Jean Piaget, Marilyn Pflederer Zimmerman explained that musical concepts are formed through musical perception. This principle can be
applied to teaching the concept of intonation in large ensembles. The climactic C major in the final measures of Erickson’s *Air for Band* is a place where intonation problems tend to occur. Instead of shying away from the unpleasant acoustical “beats” and “fixing” the intonation by going down the row with a tuner (again, a non-conceptual approach), directors may embrace quite the opposite strategy of drawing attention to the “beats” and using them as bases for teaching the concept of intonation. Two flutes playing a unison C, for example, may be used to enable students to hear an example of out of tune playing evidenced through the presence of unpleasant acoustical “beats.” Upon bringing the two pitches together, students can hear a disappearance of the beats and form the concept of in tune playing associated with beatless intonation.

4. *Present positive and negative instances of concepts*

While positive instances are examples of concepts, negative instances are non-examples; they are “opposites”—“what it is” versus “what it is not.” Conceptual teaching is more effective when both positive and negative instances are presented. To teach the concept of *staccato*, therefore, it is crucial for directors to provide both positive and negative instances of *staccato*. The director may then perform a couple of musical excerpts on her primary instrument and task the students to distinguish between an excerpt played using *staccato* articulation and one that is not. Other examples of positive and negative instances include in tune and out of tune, in time and out of time, in balance and out of balance, and characteristic and non-characteristic tone quality.

5. *Define and describe concepts clearly*

Since concepts are mental abstractions, it is crucial to clearly define and describe them. In music, these abstractions are often encapsulated in musical terms, such as homophony,
polyphony, consonance, dissonance, *maestoso* and *dolce*. Clear definitions of musical terms and descriptions of musical concepts aid conceptual teaching.\(^{24}\) Additionally, students learn concepts faster when defining features of the concepts are prominently established.\(^{25}\) Defining features are characteristics that are present in positive instances of concepts. For example, the defining features of Baroque music are functional harmony, terraced dynamics, use of the harpsichord, and figured bass notation. Highlighting these defining features facilitates the learning of the concept of Baroque music.

6. *Model musical concepts*

In a study comparing time use in instrumental rehearsals, Thomas Goolsby found that experienced teachers made more frequent use of nonverbal modeling to teach musical concepts than novice and student teachers.\(^{26}\) In my own teaching, I have found that students respond more enthusiastically and learn concepts faster when I model them on my primary instrument. One concept that I particularly like to model is phrasing. To some students, especially younger ones, phrasing may be a rather elusive concept. While verbal instruction can be pretty useful in teaching the concept of phrasing, students often “get it” within a couple of seconds when I show the difference between a well-shaped phrase and a phrase that is performed without a sense of line. At the next downbeat, I immediately hear a change in the ensemble’s phrasing. Rarely do I hear no change right after demonstration; even in instances when I do not, it was usually because I did not model clearly enough. One more attempt at a good model usually does the trick. In order to avoid modeling as rote teaching, directors should ensure that they include all three aspects of conceptual teaching noted earlier: creating awareness of musical concepts, facilitating understanding of concepts, and teaching for transfer.\(^{27}\) Upon teaching conceptually through
modeling, directors should check for evidence of learning by making sure that students are able to transfer their learning to other musical passages.

7. Ask thought-provoking questions

In professional ensembles, conductors seldom ask questions. In educational settings, however, this cannot be the case—students cannot be passive recipients of verbal instructions. Their musical interests ought to be piqued and their curiosities need to be aroused through the use of questions that stimulate thinking. In my own teaching, I have found that students’ body language often changes for the better when I pose questions: their eyebrows lift, they lean forward, they look at one another, and they look more engaged compared to direct instruction. “What’s the difference between playing it staccato and tenuto?” “What are other ways to shape this musical phrase?” “What is ppp, and why did the composer write it here?” Asking thought-provoking questions about the music (as opposed to simplistic questions such as “what is that fingering?”) are ways to facilitate conceptual teaching. When mentoring young directors, I have challenged them to convert all verbal instructions into challenging questions that facilitate conceptual teaching. Through time, they learn to use an artful mix of questions, modeling, and direct instruction in their teaching.

8. Provide opportunities for discovery learning

In 1970, Charles Fowler argued for the use of the discovery approach to teach musical concepts. In such an approach, teachers do not teach in a “top-down” manner; rather, students are given space to experiment and learn on their own. Among the many discovery approach strategies that Fowler outlined, I have adapted one of his suggestions for teaching the expressive value of dynamics in a rehearsal of Bach’s Air on the G String. Although my ensemble already knew the concept of dynamics, I wanted to deepen their understanding of its expressive power.
First, I handed out parts with no dynamics printed. Following a brief review of dynamics, I grouped the students in pairs and had them work together to experiment ways to make the performance of the piece more musically expressive through dynamic shadings and nuances. As each pair of musicians took turns to present their ideas, the range of possibilities offered surprised all of us. I also played three professional recordings, and the students had fun trying to figure out the expressive intent behind their own, their peers’, and the professionals’ musical decisions. At the end of the rehearsal, the ensemble took a vote, and we eventually performed the version with the highest votes. By the time the ensemble finished experimenting with dynamics, heard many different versions of the same piece, and thought about the music, they knew it so well there wasn’t much left to rehearse!

9. Think spirally

The above approach to teaching the concept of musical expression through dynamics was possible only because my students already knew the fundamental concept of dynamics. As humans organize concepts and group them to form larger and more inclusive concepts, ensemble directors may adopt Bruner’s “spiral” approach by finding out what concepts their students already know and revisiting them through increasing levels of sophistication. Needless to say, in ensemble situations, it is not always possible to take on a strict spiral approach and plan all forms of learning in a rigid linear fashion. Students may enter rehearsal halls with varying levels of skills and knowledge, and the repertoire may not always allow for precise sequencing of musical concepts. Furthermore, learners sometimes learn in haphazard ways. Still, as a general rule of thumb, directors may ask students what they already know and briefly review the musical concepts before teaching them at a higher level of complexity.
10. Think comprehensively

In addition to traditional rehearsals, directors may consider incorporating aspects of Comprehensive Musicianship into their curricula and include other classes such as music theory and history to facilitate conceptual teaching. In preparation for a performance of Tchaikovsky’s Fourth Symphony with my youth orchestra, I invited a professional Russian musician to give a presentation on Russian history and culture in relation to Tchaikovsky’s composition. Through interactive video clips, pictures, and stories, students further deepened their appreciation and understanding of the Russian Romantic musical style. Additionally, I invited a music theory professor to talk about the cyclic technique used the work—where the opening “fate” motive recurs dramatically in the final movement. During a rehearsal right after the lecture, the orchestra played the dramatic passage rather plainly. I asked, “What happens at this point?” A student exclaimed, “The ‘fate’ motive returns in F minor!” “Well, let’s hear it again then!” I immediately gave the downbeat, and the orchestra played with greater performance intensity. Theory and history need not—and should not—be dry, sterile facts that have little bearing to performance. On the contrary, as indicated in research, they can be used to deepen conceptual knowledge and enhance performance.

Toward the future

I began this article with the observation that half a century ago, the need for conceptual teaching in large ensembles had already been raised. Fifty years from now, will we see more evidence of conceptual teaching in rehearsal halls, or will things remain relatively status quo? This remains to be seen.

To effect change, perhaps there is a need to reexamine our underlying assumptions of what large ensemble rehearsals ought to look like. Conventional wisdom says that directors
should talk less, show more through gestures, diagnose problems quickly, offer solutions, and keep rehearsals relatively fast-paced. I agree—and often try to do all the above in my rehearsals.

However, this is surely not the only way of doing things for all rehearsals throughout the school year. What do students really learn if all that we do are to “fix problems” and “keep things moving”? Might we consider investing time to “pull” concepts from the musical literature, seize “teachable moments” to present conceptual “nuggets,” link perception to conception, define and describe musical concepts, present positive and negative instances of concepts, model concepts, ask questions, provide opportunities for discovery learning, think spirally, and include theory and history into performance classes? Directors may consider trying out one strategy per month; over time, teaching conceptually weaves naturally into daily rehearsals. While these ten strategies are certainly not the only ways of teaching conceptually, I hope they are useful for those who would like to go beyond merely issuing the directive to “play shorter!” And when our students truly know why they need to play shorter, when they need to play shorter, and the stylistic reasons for playing shorter, the Superior rating becomes a genuine reflection of music education for life through the powerful medium of large ensembles.

Notes


4 Dijana Ihas, “Teaching Behaviors of Middle and High School Orchestra Directors in the Rehearsal Setting” (PhD diss., University of Oregon, 2011).


6 Ibid., 392.


21 Ibid., 249.


28 Bazan, “The Use of Student-Directed Instruction,” 23-56.


30 Ormrod, Human Learning, 262.


33 See also, the cognitive theories of Jean Piaget (e.g., Assimilation, Accommodation, and Equilibrium), in Ormrod, Human Learning, 311-312.
