

## BAND: INTRODUCING NEW MUSIC AT THE MIDDLE SCHOOL LEVEL

By Jennifer Bergeron

**T**he moment we embark on teaching a new piece is charged with excitement, as crafting the introductory experience of the music is crucial. This next piece will become the focal point of rehearsals for several weeks. As you consider programming for your next performance, reflect on your last concert. Which was your band's favorite and least favorite? Which piece sparked the most excitement during rehearsals? And is it possible to cultivate enthusiasm for *every piece* students perform? The following are some strategies that have worked in our program, consistently yielding positive outcomes and ensuring a joyful and productive rehearsal atmosphere.

### ENGAGEMENT

Engagement begins with your passion. If you don't *love it*, then don't play it. Select music that resonates deeply with you, and that you believe will both excite and appropriately challenge your students. Then, share why you love it and be prepared to bring that energy into rehearsals daily. Before distributing the music, build anticipation by discussing what excites you about the selection—its composer, the story it tells, and why you chose it above all others.

Before the students see the music, let them hear it—experiencing it as a listener. Discuss how the music makes them feel and the images it weaves, aiming for a collective understanding of the desired audience reaction during performances.

Pass out the music, but don't plan on playing it right away. Allow time for individual exploration for a few days. Tell them when the first rehearsal is and set preparation expectations. By building excitement and understanding, students will not only learn the music but also connect with its intent, setting the stage for a compelling performance that resonates with audiences.

### BUILDING BLOCKS

Before the full ensemble rehearses the new music, use this time to introduce concepts in the piece that will be the greatest challenge for the students. Isolating these elements out of context allows for dedicated time to focus solely on refining new skills before integrating them into the broader narrative of the music. To learn parts efficiently, utilizing sectionals is a great option if the structure of your program supports it. This approach addresses common roadblocks by clarifying questions that might arise in initial rehearsals.

Creating specific unison exercises tailored to the rhythms present in a piece is invaluable in full ensemble preparation. For instance, before tackling John Mackey's *Night on Fire*, our students mastered a "Rhythms on Fire" exercise we created to ensure under-

standing of rhythmic patterns they would encounter (to download this exercise, go to [www.tmea.org/bergeron2025](http://www.tmea.org/bergeron2025)). While melodic exercises can be effective for simpler melodies within the range of a fifth or sixth, they can push some instruments beyond their comfortable register in a unison setting. It's crucial to maintain focus on skills directly relevant to the piece's performance, avoiding excessive emphasis on technicalities that won't impact the music.


Efficiently allocating teaching time to ensure that students grasp individual elements of the piece allows for smoother rehearsals with fewer obstacles.

### PUTTING IT TOGETHER

As rehearsals begin with the full ensemble, it's crucial to keep the end goal in mind. How does each phrase relate to the original purpose of creating emotion in an audience? The foundation of long tones, articulation, and technical studies is to ensure the students possess the necessary skills to communicate without interrupting the audience's experience.

I might structure the first week of rehearsals of a new piece as follows: Introduce the first fifth of the piece on Monday, followed by the next fifth on Tuesday, continuing this pattern through the week, concluding each class with a run-through of only the phrases that have been previously introduced. Friday marks the anticipated culmination, where the ensemble plays the piece for the first time in its entirety. End the week on a high note by conducting the first full run-through of the piece, capturing it as the ensemble's initial *rough draft*, with an audio recording. This approach enables students to absorb the entire piece while also allowing sufficient time to develop correct habits from the start.

Each day, ensure the students achieve something *great*, regardless of how modest. You define what success is for the ensemble and keep them motivated toward the goal. Instead of playing broad and shallow run-throughs of many measures, aim for focused teaching that dives deeply into shorter phrases, taking care to strike a balance between detailed instruction and the broader context. The pacing should align with the piece's complexity and the students' abilities relative to its demands.

Cultivating excitement and a collective understanding of goals from the outset promote productive rehearsals to deliver an engaging performance that resonates with the audience. 



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