

DALLAS BRASS



MUSIC FOR LIFE: THE IMPORTANCE OF SMALL ENSEMBLES

by Michael Levine

According to Little League Baseball, over two million kids participate each season. Very few will ever go pro, but their lives have been enriched by the experience. They have been introduced to the concepts of teamwork, discipline, self-confidence, determination and camaraderie. They have learned how to both win and lose. They have been taught life skills, and have had a whole lot of fun along the way.

An equally staggering number of kids participate in band, orchestra and chorus, and similarly, almost all will go into something other than music. They, too, have been enriched in many of the same ways. Additionally, they have been given the gift of art and expression and the opportunity to develop a love and appreciation of music that can remain an integral part of their lives.

As adults, that hopefully means they become active and appreciative listeners to both recordings and concerts. And, although continuing to play an instrument is by no means required to have music be part of one's life, it stands to reason that for many, the desire to play would remain past high school and college. If so, there are several options to find a playing outlet, depending on the community, such as community bands or orchestras, church groups, even local theatre productions.

If we also consider the small ensemble, such as a brass quintet or woodwind quintet, the opportunities are significantly increased. The small ensemble opens many doors for students to continue playing and performing and develops one's musicianship and character in a way that no other group can.

Thanks to solo and ensemble festivals, many students get the opportunity to experience a small group. However, most often these groups exist only to prepare their selected piece and to perform it just one time. [In the Dallas Brass, we work with some three hundred schools each year, and from our experience, it is very rare to find a school that has an ongoing small ensemble]. Not having ongoing ensembles in the school misses an important opportunity by which schools can give more kids the kind of experience that leads to life long participation in music. This raises the question, "How can we encourage these groups to come together and stay together?"

CREATING INTEREST

There are a number of reasons for the lack of small ensembles—time, perhaps, being a most significant factor. Both the students and the directors seem to have their plates full. For directors, the good news is that, by definition, the small ensemble is self-directed. A director or coach should not be needed on a regular basis. Certainly, periodic coaching is advised, but the beauty of the small ensemble is that the students learn to coach themselves and develop musical independence.

As for the students, the desire is driven by the music. What draws them to jazz bands (which often rehearse in the wee hours of the morning before the school day begins)? It's the music itself! The lack of appropriate repertoire may be the most critical deterrent to the small ensemble. Students need pieces they really *want* to play; music they can relate to. That is what will get them excited. Once the group is up and running, they can be presented with more repertoire in all genres, including Renaissance, Baroque and other classical styles.

One would be hard-pressed, for example, to search through the rather extensive existing *brass quintet* repertoire, to find pieces that are musically exciting to the average high school student, *and* within their grasp, instrumentally and technically.

To address this repertoire issue, the Dallas Brass, in collaboration with composer and arranger John Wasson, has begun publishing small ensemble music for high school students (see inset), and will release their first middle

school book in the coming months. For a modest investment, a school music library can include a variety of ensemble literature—easy to hard, different musical styles—and thereby increase the likelihood that a director will be able to find a musical "fit" for different groups of kids at different stages of musical maturity.

MUSICAL BENEFITS

The beauty of playing in different ensembles—concert bands, marching bands, symphony orchestras, jazz ensembles, pit orchestras—is not only the exposure to different repertoire but in developing an understanding of how one's instrument and part fits into the whole.

For example, the marching band is very much a visual experience, with many people on the same part, and offers the challenge of combining movement with playing in an outdoor environment. The concert band experience often find parts being doubled or tripled, and the approach to blending the band is far different than a symphony which has one wind on a part and a full compliment of strings. The jazz ensemble introduces a rhythm section; the pit orchestra supports singers. The opportunities to be part of all these groups helps build a well-rounded musician.

However, the small ensemble takes it to another level. Most obviously, and most significantly, there's no conductor. The players are *on their own*. They learn a wealth of things that they would never encounter in any of the above-mentioned *conducted* ensembles. They must learn how to start together, they must choose their own tempos and figure out how to maintain those tempos. They are also responsible for dynamics, articulations, balance, phrasing, intonation, not to mention playing the right notes and rhythms. Not only is it one-on-a-part, but with so few parts, each person is a soloist. Their listening skills improve as does their expression. And all of this will ultimately carry over into larger ensembles!

What is more, each player has the opportunity to develop leadership skills, responsibility, organizational skills, stage presence, creativity, identity, and entrepreneurship. The small ensemble offers an additional place where students can find a niche, a place to succeed and feel good about their music. As educators, we owe it to the students to introduce them to this valuable and rewarding facet of the music world.

PERFORMANCE OPPORTUNITIES

The opportunities to perform are plentiful. Inviting an accomplished small ensemble to perform a selection at a band concert would indeed be an honor for the students, and would provide them with an outstanding incentive. Small ensembles can also be used for transition music when shifting large groups at multiple ensemble concerts and small groups can play pre-concert music in the lobby or outside as the audience arrives. A concert of just small ensembles would be an invaluable experience.

These groups can go out and play for community events where it is not possible or practical for the concert band to do so. And the holidays are a wonderful time for groups to play around the community, adding to the joy and festivity of the season.

MUSIC FOR LIFE

Most exciting is that the performance possibilities don't come to an end after high school. Small ensembles help the students connect their music with the *outside* world. Band does not have to be just a *school* activity. It can be a *life* activity.

As your students finish high school and college and move into their adult lives, their desire to play will be based both on the quality and satisfaction of their middle and high school music experience, but also on the practicality of having somewhere to play. As we all know, band instruments are not like guitars and pianos. We need an ensemble in which to participate. Community bands serve a great purpose, but so does the small ensemble. It is practical, mobile, and fun.

IN CONCLUSION

A small ensemble program doesn't mean you must have every student involved in a group. Having just one small group is a great start, and a program can be built from there. It will bring another level of pride to your students. It will help improve your band, make your band program more visible to the community, and most importantly, it will enrich the lives of your students in a deeper and more profound way.

