

Autonomy Without Anarchy:  
Peer Interaction, Learning, and Musical Growth in the School Ensemble

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### **Abstract**

Classroom engagement and student learning are two educational topics that garner great conversation within traditional classroom settings but are included less often in considerations of school music ensemble and their rehearsals. Student development within these settings is often evaluated only through musical output, yet both a growing body of research and concern for student retention support a broader consideration of the topic. This paper explores three examples of non-traditional rehearsal practices - conductor-facilitated collaboration, peer mentoring, and collaborative ensemble autonomy – viewed through both theoretical and practical lenses. The overarching goal is to provide research-supported expansions and extensions to existing methods and techniques as well as consider the positive effects of increased student autonomy on the musical and personal growth within ensembles.

### **Introduction**

Each year, we recruit. Conductors and directors seek to fill rehearsal spaces with the best and brightest: the students whose potential shines through and whose interest in music and its performance eclipses all others. This pursuit often involves both salesmanship and advocacy, forming into an intricate choreography to cajole, beguile, entice, and ultimately secure membership in ensembles.

This dance is one that school music teachers across America know well because it is how ensembles are built and grown, over time, into programs. Person by person, musical communities are shepherded into existence and developed by directors through the students they recruit and retain. What begins as a glimmer of interest and a twinkle of engagement results in a

room filled with what scholar David Hansen (2006) refers to as, "bundles of energy, confusion, insight, doubt, accomplishment, innocence, worldliness, and more." (p. 177) Yet the contribution of these "bundles," with all their potential, is often proscribed and specifically scripted after their initial recruiting interaction. Once a student is firmly a member of the ensemble, the expectation and interaction of exchange changes in a significant way.

Instructors, directors and conductors spend a great deal of time planning students' activities, and rightly so. To ensure musical and personal success, excellent teachers want to provide their students with the best instruction, scaffolded in a developmentally appropriate progression. They select works that balance musical quality and educational merit while scheduling performance opportunities that allow their students to gain experience at the highest levels available. This vein of activity, rich, deep, and steeped in the conservatory tradition, is one that has clearly created success for musicians and ensembles the world over with the power to elevate musical performance to exceptional heights.

Nevertheless, it often situates student musicians as receptacles of imparted knowledge and information, rather than active participants in the creation of their own learning. Our "best practices" frequently reflect a bias toward conductor-focused strategies. However, if these thoughtfully crafted supports and scaffolds are never removed and students are expected to simply execute, research and practice suggest that students experience an incomplete music education. In short, students' active participation in feeling, analyzing, evaluating, synthesizing, and performing is necessary to complete the circle of musical learning.

This paper explores the theory and practice of three instructional frameworks that utilize the existing structure of the ensemble but emphasize student engagement in learning and musical growth. Underscored by theories of student autonomy, motivation, and learning in a social

setting, the three models of instruction we will examine are extracted from functioning and successful rehearsal rooms across a variety of grade levels. These three models, i.e., conductor-mediated collaboration, peer learning, and collective ensemble autonomy, are ones that can be implemented in classrooms without wildly altering curricular or organizational principles, but whose powerful effects can be seen quickly after their introduction.

### **Autonomy, Motivation, and Learning in Social Setting**

As a developmental tool, autonomy is both fundamental and invaluable. Defined as “action that is chosen; action for which one is ultimately responsible,” (Deci & Ryan, 1987, p. 1025), it stands alongside competence and relatedness as central tenets of Self Determination Theory (SDT). This broad framework offered has been noted for its applicability to music ensembles (*see Weren, 2015 for a substantive discussion*), and gives form to some of the forces acting within the students who make up the ensemble. At its core, SDT is fueled by individual student motivation, spanning a continuum of extrinsic to intrinsic, with the latter showing strong links to deeper perceptions of individual autonomy, positive learning outcomes, and greater feelings of well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

In performance-oriented settings, intrinsic motivation may manifest itself as a student whose self-guided knowledge of a given work or composer dives deep, far outstripping peers, or as a student whose experience arranging a piece for small ensemble piques his or her interest in composition, and creating a possible career consideration. As is clear from the examples provided, this motivation and the autonomy it develops has been shown to produce a host of positive outcomes including increased confidence and mastery motivation (Deci, Nezdik, & Sheinman, 1981) as well as deeper involvement and task persistence (Miserandino, 1996) in educational settings. Indeed, the factors that give rise to intrinsic motivation and resultant

feelings of autonomy are as varied as the students. Because the director holds an authoritative pedagogical position, he or she wields significant power to either facilitate or undermine this kind of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Interestingly, the school ensemble grants access to a robust context, which can simultaneously develop musical skills and individual autonomy. When compared to traditional classrooms, the context and content within the ensemble rehearsal is clearly and meaningfully different. Students must coordinate their activities with a high level of precision, and through this communal effort create an experience that is perceived by performer and audience alike to be greater than the sum of its parts. As scholar Thomas Turino notes, "The arts are a special form of communication that has an integrative function -- integrating and uniting the members of social groups but also integrative of individual selves." (2008, p. 3).

The social nature of the music ensemble also exposes the function of several theories of learning built on the educational nature of human interaction. Most salient among these is Lev Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (1978). While researchers, practitioners, and theoreticians have written much on this subject (*see Chaiklin, 2003 for an extensive discussion*), we will summarize using Vygotsky's own words,

[The Zone of Proximal Development] is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86)

While Vygotsky focuses primarily on language development in children, his framework is easily transferable to other learning contexts, as evidenced by its incorporation into instructional theories and practices of Jerome Bruner (1960) and his colleagues (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). Especially applicable within ensemble music, the model of the ZPD leverages interaction,

either with an experienced adult (i.e. the director) or with a more capable peer, e.g. more senior members of the ensemble. Because Vygotsky was especially interested in the role played by others of greater skill in a child's learning and development, the socially situated context of school music provides fertile ground for this type of learning. The structure of the ensemble provides embedded opportunity for interaction and promotes both social and musical growth through that interaction. However, this embedded student-to-student interaction and learning can actually be blunted by the intentional cultivation of instruction and information from a narrow selection of authority figures who are ostensibly engaging in the act of teaching. This is not to say that the two streams of learning cannot live harmoniously together, but the choice of the central, focused pedagogic channel over a less controlled student-to-student interaction is especially prevalent where an ensemble's performance goals bear great consequence, e.g. a concert or contest. While we know that students do improve under the centralized model, research suggests that there are other avenues to learning that are shut down in its presence. In other words, "[t]eaching is neither necessary nor sufficient for learning." (Duke, 2005, p. 10)

To illustrate this intersection of social learning, autonomy, and musical growth within the school ensemble, three hypothetical vignettes are presented. The text is structured to showcase an ever-increasing amount of autonomy entrusted to the student-musicians, beginning with conservative and functional structures that are extensions of traditional ensemble procedures and moving through increasingly progressive practices present in the field. Each context provides multiple perspectives and presents an example of theory into (or existing within) practice. This focus on existing practices and frameworks highlights the practical usefulness of these theoretical examples and is intended to allow for quick translation into rehearsals of any size or ability level.

Though the majority of the examples in this paper reflect the author's background as a band director, it is hoped that the prevalence of music in schools across the United States (Elpus & Abril, 2011), the broad similarities in the nature of students in performing ensembles, and the communal nature of music itself will emphasize the rich potential of this exploration to strengthen musical learning and deepen the impact of outcomes already in place within the shared context of scholastic music.

### **Conductor-Facilitated Collaboration**

As any veteran teacher can attest, students are unending fonts of thought and opinion. One only need scan the faces of the performers in any group to see a wide array of thought and opinion. Harnessing of this unending internal dialogue to the end of ensemble development presents an enticing means to redirect off-task behavior and subvert it to support the development of ensemble autonomy. If a conductor can use the incessant conversation characteristic of their students to the end of real musical engagement and learning, a powerful tool is created in addition to an already robust collection of available rehearsal strategies.

An interesting example of this kind of rehearsal paradigm is seen in the second auditioned wind band at the University of Washington, where the author completed graduate work. Peppered throughout the expected music majors in the ensemble there is a wide assortment of highly talented musicians with majors ranging from Near-Eastern language and literature to aerospace engineering. The breadth and depth of intellectual activity represented in the group is nothing short of stunning. Within this setting, the primary conductor and his assistants, i.e., graduate music education students, work to provide the ensemble members with a variety of meaningful opportunities for musical participation that reflect the kinds of thinking

and collaborative interaction that they experience in their other courses (Beyer, Taylor, & Gillmore, 2013, p. 63).

This is accomplished across multiple contexts, both during and between rehearsals. Space is created within rehearsals for the ensemble members to openly discuss various aspects of the repertoire being performed, as coordinated by the conductor rehearsing them. Paired with this, ensemble members are provided with both discussion prompts and recorded rehearsal excerpts on a course-specific discussion board. Neither type of interaction is a required portion of the course; but many students take advantage of the opportunity to apply their experience and knowledge to the ensemble's musical output. This creates an ongoing, communal conversation that allows for the ensemble to interact with each other and develop the repertoire being performed.

As one might expect, this kind of musical autonomy is viewed in as many different ways as there are ensemble members in the group. Research by Alison Farley (2013), a former assistant conductor of the group, suggests that students who take advantage of both the live and online aspects of this activity clearly perceive individual value from the experience, and in addition see benefit for the group overall. Some praise the unorthodox and novel nature of the task, especially as it contrasts their experiences in secondary ensemble settings, while others note that the democratic process promoted by this plurality of voices works to create a more engaging classroom environment when compared with their other courses. Though the research in question does not directly point to musical outcomes, it does note that the performance ownership felt by members – even those on the fringes of the interaction – is notably increased.

The inherently social element of the ensemble's rehearsal is thus conscripted to a pedagogical end through interpretive and analytical discussion focused on music and its



performance. Through these interactions, the expertise of the group evolves over time, evidenced both in the tenor of the conversation and the clarity of musical idea that results from it. Within this context, the abilities of younger and less experienced students are enhanced by interaction with those of their stand partners and section mates, in a manner reflecting Vygotsky's aforementioned theory of sociocultural learning and development (ZPD). Within this, the ensemble develops an internal narrative, expanding on Vygotsky's observation that, "[e]very thought moves, grows and develops, fulfills a function, solves a problem" (1962, p. 125). This observed process of learning is strengthened by the conductor's planning, scaffolding, curation, and facilitation of the overall process of student learning. In this way, these interactions exist in both the social and intellectual spheres of student experience, expanding the rehearsal to encompass the performance of music as well as the individually targeted development of skill and musicianship from a wide variety of sources.

Because classroom management is a very pressing concern, and the thought of turning the ensemble over to the students can be an intimidating prospect, some conductors may seek a middle ground of deputizing more experienced or expert students in section leader or section coach roles, to distribute instruction and the dissemination of information within the ensemble. While this does democratize the structure of learning and development to a degree, it does not fully embrace the admittedly messier paradigm presented here. Though many options for implementation do exist, the appointment of students to act *in loco magister*, or as extensions of the central teacher, can sometimes promote silence over conversation from other voices in the ensemble.

It is easy to imagine that conductor-facilitated collaboration might be a tough sell to conductors and musicians alike, especially in its initial stages. The organic growth needed for

this environment to develop starts small and grows slowly, but once this method of thinking becomes infused into the daily habits of the ensemble, the interaction and development grows exponentially. In ensembles where students have the opportunity to maintain membership over multiple years, this kind of interaction becomes an invested part of the group culture, owned as much by the membership as the conductor. Even for intermediate school ensembles, conductor-facilitated collaboration is effective because few forces are as powerful to the adolescent as the thoughts and opinions of friends and peers (Adler & Adler, 1998, p. 194), and once championed by the “hard core” members of the ensemble (Abril, 2011), the process becomes inexorably woven into the cultural tapestry of the ensemble.

Conductor-facilitated collaboration presents a forum-like framework that is useful across a range of ensemble activities but maintains the normal organizational and physical structures of the ensemble. From granting members an interpretive voice in the ensemble’s development to providing them with a scaffolded means of directing the ensemble’s activity within a given rehearsal, the conductor acting as mediator of peer interaction and facilitator of communally driven student development provides a valuable means to promote musical autonomy.

### **Peer Mentoring**

Rehearsals are a sacrosanct space for school ensembles. The best among them might appear to an outside observer as stretches of musical performance interspersed by direct feedback and quiet reflection, with very little verbal interaction from student to conductor. The hushed silence of an actively engaged rehearsal, interrupted only by sonorous performance, the rustle of music, and the click of pencils, is often taken as evidence of student learning. Yet this stereotype of the cloistered classroom belies what experienced teachers and researchers are quick

to point out: the external manifestation of classroom or rehearsal behavior does little to reflect what actual learning might or might not be taking place.

This external appearance of engagement, dubbed “civil attention” by researchers (Howard, 2015, p. 14), is an element familiar to student and teacher alike in large format classroom settings. What is less documented, but doubtless prevalent, is the presence of a different strain of civil attention within the ensemble rehearsal. Few are the conductors who have not had the experience of looking out on their ensemble in the midst of rehearsal, and while seeing students displaying good musical behaviors, have nonetheless wondered at the level of active learning and mindful music-making behind that guise. This dichotomy between activity and outcome is brilliantly captured by Robert Duke (2005), where he notes,

Focusing primarily on the activities in which teachers and students engage without carefully considering the learning that teaching is intended to bring about is decidedly disadvantageous, because teaching and learning are not inextricably linked. (p. 10)

One of the methods proposed to decrease the incidence of civil attention in lecture classes revolves around the quality of interaction between teacher and student, paired with the depth of thinking fostered by that interaction (Howard, 2015, p. 25). Reaching every student individually is something that educators, whether wielding a dry erase marker, a whistle and clipboard, or a score and baton, work to accomplish every day. Unlike traditional classroom settings, however, the student-teacher ratio is skewed wildly against that effort in the music rehearsal. Nevertheless, the large class size and participatory nature of the ensemble can be leveraged as a means to deepen and strengthen the effective engagements of student musicians.

The empowerment of students in ensembles to teach *each other*, peer-to-peer, is a common method for achieving this. Many ensembles, whether through implicit or explicit

means, recruit elder students to act *in loco magister* for their younger counterparts. We see this in the quasi-militaristic hierarchy of the high school marching band, with its section- and squad-leaders, often pairing incoming students with experienced “band siblings.” Students in leadership positions facilitate all manner of interior ensemble tasks in choirs and orchestras, e.g. bowings and rehearsal markings, during sectional rehearsals. Even away from these structural examples, we see peer mentorship and teaching each time one student consults another about the what, when, how, or why of the activity being undertaken.

These students, whether appointed or not, are often those who have “bought in” to our programs. We observe them contributing countless hours to the betterment of the group, often for no greater reward than the enjoyment it brings them. When prompted to reflect at graduation or program exit, many of these same students often speak about the quality and quantity of what they have learned as members of the ensemble, both musically and in general. While isolated and anecdotal, the commonalities of these reflections suggest that something deep and positive is at work through the embedded peer-learning of the ensemble.

These effects highlight central tenets of Deci & Ryan’s exploration of Self Determination Theory (2000), specifically their identification of competence, relatedness, and autonomy as key psychological needs that can lead to higher levels of intrinsic motivation and increased mental well-being. These factors are strengthened by the already communal and collaborative nature of group musical performance, as highlighted by Denis and Jouvelot in their application of educational game design to the context of music education (2005). In their paper, they share some of their observed best practices, including the fostering of competence by giving power to the students, allowing them to test the boundaries of the system and receive meaningful feedback. Similarly, relatedness flows from the social connection to other people through

interactions ranging from the casual to the competitive. Feelings of autonomy can result from the student's ability to redirect the expected trajectory of learning to explore other avenues in arriving at an educational objective set before the ensemble (p. 464).

While there is considerable overlap between these three examples, they highlight the potential power within peer mentoring. While the surface appearance of this practice is not foreign to conductors, the abdication of conductor-centric authority and instructional control may be less familiar, and therefore uncomfortable, to some. To contrast this, a recent informal survey of secondary-level band directors who utilize peer-instruction practices yielded the following thoughts:

*... there [usually] is a student in the room who can explain what the teacher is trying to do in his/her own words, and the teacher doesn't always need to explain everything.*  
(Jorge, Washington)

*As a teacher, I am able to see students re-imagine a concept in a way that I may not have thought of!* (Lee, Texas)

*The biggest take-away for me [...] was that I didn't have to be the person providing the instruction [for] the students to be successful.* (David, Texas)

*It helps all levels of the program, and pays dividends for all involved [...] especially when those students who received help in the younger grades start to make their way up to the high school level.* (Bruce, Maryland)

*... it is a concept that improves over time as students gain more experience working with their peers, so don't be discouraged if the desired results aren't observed immediately.*  
(Karl, Ohio)

*It's a learning process for teachers as well as students. For the program, I think it creates a healthy mix of educational approaches that lead to strong student engagement and a better possibility of content mastery. (Lee, Texas)*

In considering these responses and the tenets of Self Determination Theory set forth above, we see that their application to music education includes the potential for increased student engagement, learning, and ownership limited only by the collective imaginations of the students themselves.

That we find these practices in ensembles throughout the world with a high frequency and consistent character suggests that the positive effects are universal. In Japanese band rehearsals, it is the expectation that the elder students will lead sectional rehearsals with their peers at a high level of detail and specificity (Hebert, 2012, p. 181). Within *El Sistema*, stand partners – both by direction and by learned practice – take it on themselves to help their neighbors learn and grow as musicians through collaboration and peer mentoring (Hernández-Estrada, 2012, p. 43). Considered with the underpinning of Self Determination Theory, the inherently communal and collaborative nature of music ensembles and the frequency of informal peer mentoring in ensembles, the deliberate development of peer mentoring is a strand of instruction that provides rich potential for the betterment of ensembles, of students' music-making, and of their learning.

## **COLLABORATIVE ENSEMBLE AUTONOMY**

In group performance, a student's involvement in the creation of music often stops at the outer bounds of his or her instrument. This is not to trivialize the learning and development of performance-based skill; regardless of context or culture it is central to the study of music. But music situated within an educational setting has ready access to more than that single avenue of contribution, especially when we consider both musical and personal development as an end

goal. While conductor-facilitated collaboration and peer mentoring speak to two tangible and readily found means of expanding the student's voice in ensemble learning, a less commonly utilized but no less effective approach is one in which the students are responsible for all aspects of the ensemble's preparation and performance. For our purposes, we will call this wholly student-led effort "Collaborative Ensemble Autonomy."

Far from being an anarchic experience, both professional and scholastic ensembles have adopted this as their primary mode of operation or utilize it as a rehearsal technique within their musical development. Prominent among professional groups are New York City's famous Orpheus Chamber Orchestra and the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra of Houston, Texas, with groups from intermediate to collegiate adopting this practice to foster deeper and more meaningful musical experiences for their members. Below we will examine three of these examples and discuss the theories they highlight.

During the 2014 Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic in Chicago, Illinois, a session presented by Symphonic Band of the Ohio State University highlighted collaborative practices situated within a traditional ensemble configuration. With the tacit guidance of the conductor, Dr. Scott Jones, the group explored the idea of a completely conductor-free, student-run ensemble, showcasing rehearsal and performance behaviors loosely modeled on the practices of the aforementioned Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. The presentation reflected a longer project undertaken by the ensemble where works (a march and a ballad) were prepared for performance *sans* conductor. The emergent development of the ensemble's rehearsal method was documented through video now embedded on the ensemble's web page, providing an invaluable archive of both methodology and participant experience through the process.

The rehearsal behaviors seen in both the Midwest Clinic session and archival video are congruent with those that a conductor would provide, e.g., rehearsal pacing, error identification, and interpretive considerations but are distributed across the ensemble. Members stand to deliver a thought, seek consensus among their colleagues, work through differences of opinion, and provide feedback on completed rehearsal segments. The ensemble's performances are initiated in a manner similar to traditional chamber practices, using head- and upper body gestures, and rehearsals are stopped with a cut-off gesture from multiple performers, similar to what a conductor would provide.

The ensemble strives to treat all thoughts and feedback in such a way that each contributor is given access to an amount of musical agency within the larger ensemble performance. The videos posted by the group highlight the effect this kind of interaction has on the members of the ensemble, with one member reflecting,

Now, I am much more thoughtful about how I approach a rehearsal, or a piece of music, and I come with my own ideas... not that I didn't always have them, it just wasn't my place to share them. Now, inside this setup ... not only is it okay to share those ideas, quite frankly it's expected. (OSU Symphonic Band, 2014)

College students operating at this sophisticated level seems very reasonable because they are older and have a broad background to call upon in their musical and social interactions. However, while these characteristics and qualities may seem the domain of the highly educated student, younger students are no less sophisticated in their abilities, merely less experienced.

At a recent band festival held in the Pacific Northwest, a middle school band performed two pieces, one of which was selected, rehearsed, and presented completely by the students in the ensemble – to very positive reception. Despite this ensemble's use of a student conductor, situated as a first among equals, the practices utilized and rewards earned appear much the same



as those found in the collaborative Ohio State University Symphonic Band project. Research in child development strongly suggests that these younger students, far from being blank slates, are highly capable of upper-level thinking and action, more so than they might appear even to a trained observer (Gopnik, Metzliff, & Kuhl, 2001). Clearly, at this age level they possess a robust ability to think musically, found in various manifestations and across a wide variety of cultures

Hesitant as many directors might be in turning their ensembles loose on a work without their explicit influence, there does exist an intermediate step to be considered. In suburban northwest Georgia, a large high school makes it a practice to independently rehearse in small ensemble groupings that broadly represent the instrumentation of the ensemble. These quasi-chamber groups are given objectives scaffolded by their director and sent out into the rehearsal spaces to work on their own. At the conclusion of the instructional segment, the ensemble reconvenes and groups come forward to present their work and share their observations of the music being rehearsed. The directors report that this practice appears to foster a deeper understanding of the musical elements in a work than a traditional rehearsal, sharing also that they, "...[as a result] have seen students making mature, artistic decisions where before they wouldn't." (personal communication, September 2015).

The theories of both Vygotsky and Deci and Ryan are clearly applicable to the practice of collaborative ensemble autonomy. Indeed this context provides a clear picture of how students learn from their more experienced peers, develop a sense of relatedness, and test the boundaries of 'what might work' thus, building both competence, and autonomy.

As developmental psychologist Jerome Bruner reminds us, "Teaching specific topics or skills without making clear their context in the broader fundamental structure of a field of

knowledge is uneconomical in several deep senses.” (1960, p. 31) What may seem the turning loose of inexperienced performers on a piece that may put them out of their depth, the apparent “sink-or-swim” aspect to collaborative ensemble autonomy is mediated by students’ earlier experience in ensemble and buoyed by the more expert members of the group leading the way and setting the agenda together. This method, while unorthodox, provides a context for upper level thinking in a way that is starkly different from conductor-led rehearsal. Just as in any new learning method, it may produce some splashing and sputtering at its introduction, but – more readily than one might think – the ensemble members will right themselves and begin swimming.

## CONCLUSION

There is certainly no perfect way to teach music, and no sure-fire method that will reach all students. We can, however, present our young musicians with an array of opportunities for learning and growth through which they can experience the intellectual, artistic, and musical aspects of their ensemble experience. By inviting the members of the ensemble to collaborate in the teaching of their peers and tapping into the powerful social forces highlighted by Deci, Ryan, Vygotsky, and others, we stand to expand the percentage of students who remain musically engaged and active after they leave our groups.

Instead of defining students by what they cannot do, we should consider the things they can, and potentially might, do through a more socially interactive development of their musical thinking and skills. Few factors loom as large in the lives of adolescents as do the thoughts and opinions of their peers, and while these kinds of engagement should not replace traditional instruction, they do have the ability to powerfully augment, strengthen, and deepen it toward life-long musical engagement. As music education scholar Lucy Green commented, “We can surmise

that many children and young people who fail and drop out of formal music education, far from being either uninterested or unmusical, simply do not respond to the kind of instruction it offers” (2008, p.3). It would seem that now is a good time to consider our options.

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