

Getting kids listening

... inspiration for the ears

Adrian D. Griffin

Making a beautiful sound is sometimes as easy as realizing what one wants to sound like. Students often accept whatever sound comes out of their horn as “what I sound like.” They forget to hold themselves to a higher standard, especially if the best sound they hear is the student sitting next to them. If teachers can offer their students immediate, tangible and frequent examples of beautiful and brilliant playing, students’ standards for themselves will quickly rise.

Starting a listening library

Even the most modest high school includes a library where students can explore the boundaries of human learning, experience and creativity. Why is it that most high school music programs lack a music library where students can go have the same experiences in the musical realm?

It is not difficult to begin a small music library in your band department or even the main library of the school. Involve the students in the planning process so that they are invested in the library, have input in the selection of music, and will be excited to use the library once it is established.

Once the library is established, it can be stocked with music donated by the students, parents, friends of the school, or local musicians who have extra recordings of a particular piece and would like to see them used and enjoyed. The library should represent many genres, including jazz, blues, rock, symphonic band, brass chamber music, big band, and classical music of every period (Renaissance, baroque, classical, romantic, and modern).

The musical library can also include scores of the music the students are currently playing in band, as well as scores for some of the CDs in the library. Most students have never seen a score before, and will gain sophistication as they begin to understand the layout of the score, follow the music they are hearing, and learn the meaning of performance markings they have not seen before.

Structured listening assignments

Directors may find it useful to require that students to sign up for two time slots during which they will listen to their UIL band music, as part of their required band assignments. While some students may do this on their own, setting the requirement ensures that each student has this valuable experience, and may be a nice opportunity for them to interact with the band director before or after school.

During class, encourage your students to develop their own music library, whether in CD, i-tunes or mp3 format. Since students are probably already developing their library of popular music, it is relatively easy and cheap for them to diversify into styles of music that are relevant for their instrument.

Live performances, live inspiration

In addition to recordings, there is absolutely no substitute for seeing musicians perform live. The immediacy of watching the players on stage, as well as being a part of an audience, lends an energy to the musical experience that just cannot be matched through a set of ear buds. When students hear live music, you can almost feel the electricity from them. They get excited, nervous and anxious to watch someone else do what they do but at a high level.

Arrange field trips for students to see the local symphony orchestra, a college wind band or marching band, jazz bands, and mariachi bands, or even a live DCI contest. Establish a fund to bring groups into the school, performing either for the band classes or for the school as a whole. Various organizations may offer educational programming that is either partially or fully underwritten by government cultural-education dollars.

Bringing performances into the classroom

Ask your lesson teachers to play in all the students' lessons as much as possible. This serves as a concrete model for the students, as well as a constant source of inspiration.

An easy way to gain exposure for your band members is to bring in an outside performer either during class or after school. Music students from a local university would be happy to have a chance to perform their recital program as a dry run, and your students will get to meet a student musician who is intermediate between themselves and the professional world. The opportunity can be set up through the private teacher at the university, who will appreciate his students having the opportunity to gain performance experience.

It is invaluable to bring in a professional musician to give a recital and master class for the students. The students will gain confidence in interacting with another professional, as well as useful tips and experience from a teacher other than their primary lesson teacher. The whole experience will encourage your students to take themselves seriously as musicians, not only in the band context but as future adults in the larger musical world.