

Planting Seeds for Lasting Success

An Interview with Chip De Stefano

By John Thomson

Chip De Stefano, who this fall begins his 17th year at Oliver McCracken Middle School in Skokie, Illinois, has learned over the years to think about the long term rather than the short term. “I remember sitting in the audience at a concert at Midwest and looking over the roster of a high school band performing. I noticed that the entire flute section consisted of freshmen except for one sophomore. I thought, ‘This group is sitting on stage facing all

these expectations of how they are supposed to sound, and the flute section is brand new.’ I leaned over to my friend and asked, ‘How did he pull this off?’ The response was, ‘That’s why you build a good program.’ This reminded me that building the program is the most important part, not the performances. If you build a good program there will always be students to come in that are capable of taking over for the students who leave.”

De Stefano, who earned a bachelor’s in trombone performance and a master’s in music education from Northwestern University and also student taught at McCracken, has four bands consisting of roughly 200 students ranging from fourth through eighth grade. Even with beginning students, De Stefano has become unafraid to tackle the finer points of tone, pitch, blend,

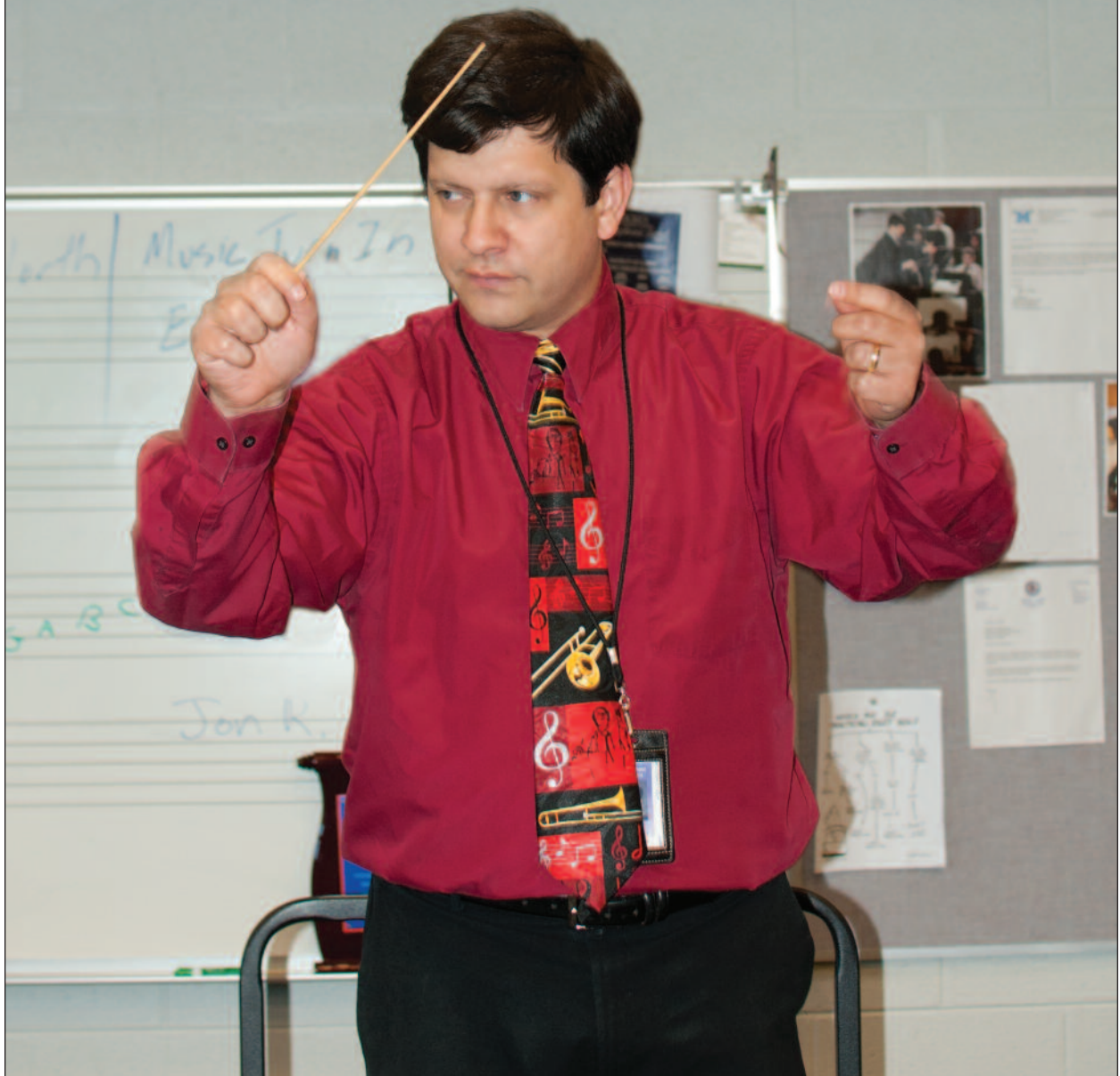
and balance. “Younger students understand talk about fitting their sound into the sound of their neighbors. With beginners, I make method book exercises into a game. As we play, students that I can hear individually are tagged out, and we play the line again without them. This teaches students to listen to how their sound fits in with the whole group.”



What are the tricks to maintaining order in elementary and middle school bands?

I have one rule for my students: You will rehearse, perform, and behave like professionals. By the time students are in seventh or eighth grade, there are few discipline problems. This is mostly through training. Part of the daily rehearsal routine is what students should do when they come in. When students start as fourth graders, we train them how to enter the room, put their instruments together, how to breathe, how to sit, how to behave. We explain it

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“Students are a reflection of the director. We have to model professional behavior, planning, and what we want our students to be. I want my students to be life-long learners of music; that means I have to continue learning to model that for them.”

and practice it, and that is the expectation. If students drift, I retrain them. It isn't meant to be militaristic, but students should order their music as it is listed on the board and warm up on their own quietly. At exactly 7:20 I get on the podium and give a downbeat. Everybody plays concert F at that moment, and rehearsal begins.

I train students to start rehearsal this way from the beginning, so they know what to expect when they're promoted up to the next band. Even then, we still revisit how to start rehearsals at the beginning of the year. I'll have students pretend it's 7:19 and they're warming up or talking to a neighbor, and then I hop onto the podium and give a downbeat. If everybody comes in on that F we move on, and if not we try again. With middle school students, you always have to repeat something over and over until they get it – and then say it one more time.

What are the keys to making every rehearsal productive?

Middle school rehearsals should be very high energy with little down time. Students should play their instruments for most of the rehearsal, and knowing what you want to accomplish each day makes it easy to keep things moving at a quick pace and keep all students engaged. Young students learn a lot more while playing than while a director talks, so if I can keep my words to a minimum and keep students playing more, they will get more out of it. If I can save something for a sectional to keep all students playing, I will do so. I like to record rehearsals. The first thing I do with every rehearsal recording is transfer it into an audio program. The audio waveform, that crooked line that shows how loud the volume is at any given point, instantly shows how much and how long I'm talking versus how much students are playing.

Rehearsals should be extremely well structured and planned out. There should be a routine, and students should come in knowing what to expect. Routine is important, especially for young students, and I like to keep things the same from day to day. There should be no change to the routine without a good reason.

We start every rehearsal with a series of Remington exercises in unison based on concert F. Beginners do this at a basic level and add more as they progress. We go through the whole routine in the top group. We address concepts of sound and pitch every day. I rehearse it as if we are performing it at a concert and expect students to treat it with the same seriousness. If students are just going through the motions, I stop and let them know that it sounds poor. We always follow that with a simple chorale. I have arranged a number of them in easy key signatures so students can focus on tone, posture, and breathing. We do that every day.

We do breathing exercises almost every day. I have students use the arm as a fuel gauge. When the hand is all the way out, the lungs are completely empty, and when their fingers are touching their lips, the lungs are completely full. It's one relaxed inhalation and one relaxed exhalation.

The next breathing exercise is similar, but students take three breaths in and then three breaths out. Inhaling three times gives students a good sense of how much capacity there is in their lungs. I sometimes start chorales by having students take three breaths in. It's amazing how much more well-supported that first note is after three breaths.

I also have students use their hands to create resistance. The second knuckle of the index finger is touching the nose, the side of the hand is touching the lips. They take one big breath in and then exhale. Then, I have students remove their hands, and they are usually able to take a fuller breath.

To teach students to take a full breath quickly, I have students use their lips to create suction on the back of the hand. When I give the sign, students pull the hand away, and their lungs instantly fill up.

At the beginning of the year, 90% of our rehearsal might be those items. Further into the year we might be able to go through them a bit faster, but we spend a lot of time on them. Even with three weeks left of school, it is common to spend 10-15 minutes of a half-hour rehearsal working on the Remington exercise and chorale.

We do not always jump into repertoire immediately after warmups. If we are working on scales, we

might do that instead of repertoire. How I introduce repertoire depends on the piece. Last year we played *Pageant* by Vincent Persichetti, and I introduced it differently than I might a march. For a march we might talk about such things as key signature, time signature, and key changes in advance and then read straight through it. I knew *Pageant* was going to be a more difficult aesthetic sell, so we read just a couple sections the first day. I played recordings to give students a sense of the whole piece.

With a particularly difficult work, instead of reading it straight down it is best to start with a section in which most of the students are playing. *Chorale and Shaker Dance*, which is also difficult, takes some time before the entire band is playing. When I introduce that piece I start in the splashy middle section, which gets students excited about it, and I delay rehearsing the opening section for a bit. Much of it depends on the piece and my preconceived notion of how students will react to playing it for the first time.

When we prepare for a major performance, I record rehearsals. I will listen to the recording that night to help me plan what we need to address the following day. Listening to recordings is both rehearsal reflection and preparation at the same time. I can also listen to the music without distraction and get a sense of whether what I hear on the podium is happening. The recordings are my lie detector; I never believe a piece sounds good until I hear it on tape. If I think it sounds good on tape, then the band is probably ready to perform.

What has listening to rehearsal recordings taught you?

Early in my career we usually tuned to one note, and the unisons and octaves were in tune, but it just didn't feel right. The sound on the recordings was not full, and it didn't sound the way I envisioned in my mind. I had always thought that just intonation was beyond young students, but I listened to the recordings and realized that I had to teach pitch more completely. If the band was going to sound any better, that was the next step in my students' development.



I now believe that tone and pitch are the two most important aspects of a student's playing regardless of age, and I work on them throughout the entire rehearsal. I do not always stop for a wrong note, but I always stop for bad sound or intonation. It is important to address both daily because they are long-term skills, not something students learn in a day, such as a new fingering. This is why we rehearse chorales every single day. I like chorales that are extremely simple; I want students concerned about tone and pitch, not notes, accidentals, or ranges. The only way to make a simple chorale sound better is to improve pitch and tone. We rehearse the chorales as if we were going to perform them the next day, so even if we are sightreading a chorale, I will spend some time on it to make it sound better.

It is necessary to address tone with both the individuals and the ensemble. I check individual tone by making sure the embouchures are correct, students breathe correctly, and equipment is not a hindrance. Students learn about good sound by listening to recordings of their instruments. Another key aspect of individual tone is making sure students are doing the exercises they need to have a good sound, such as long tones and lip slurs – or developing a good piston stroke for percussionists. There are few secrets left in terms of individual pedagogy, but there are no shortcuts. Developing a good tone is a long-term process, and teachers have

to be diligent about instilling proper fundamentals if the aim is for students to have good tone.

A discussion of pitch with beginners may be limited to getting them to recognize what is in tune and what's out of tune. The goal is to introduce and discuss tone, pitch, blend, balance, technique, musicianship, expressiveness, and style in their minds to the level they're capable of understanding it. With younger students I just want them to be able to hear whether a note is in out of tune, and I want them to become intolerant of bad pitch. You do that by treating out-of-tune notes like they are wrong notes, because they are.

After getting them to hear whether a note is in tune, the next step is getting students to correct it. I tell my fifth and sixth graders to just make an educated guess based on experience with the tendency of your instrument and gut instinct. If students change something the pitch will either get better or worse, and then it is no longer a guess. At the middle school level, woodwind players should know how to vent and shade fingerings to adjust their pitch. Short-term thinking is getting a C tuned at one specific spot in one piece. Long-term thinking is getting students to play C in tune regardless of where it is in the chord.

Directors who keep a tuner on their stand and go down the row telling students whether they are sharp or flat are doing students a disservice. Students should be taught to figure this out on their own or they will never be able to adjust on the fly in performance. The best method I have found to help individual students with pitch is by using a drone that includes both a fundamental pitch and the harmonics above it. When students do exercises with this drone, it is easier for them to hear the waves of an out-of-tune pitch. It still takes students time to get used to hearing if pitch is off, but once they can do it, the skill stays with them. If students can tell whether they are off with the drone, they are able to apply that when playing with the other members of their section. The other thing I like about using a drone is that it helps stu-



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dents develop a sense of just intonation. Unisons and octaves are fairly simple to tune, but students learning which way and how much to adjust depending on which part of the chord they have takes time.

Many of us teach students to listen down to the lowest pitch, but this should be expanded. Students should listen to every sound that is lower than theirs all the way to the bottom. I call it listening through rather than listening down. To teach this I have just the tubas play their part. Then, I have the rest of the instruments with the bass line play, listening to the tubas. Next, I add the tenor line, but I have them listen to themselves to blend and then listen to the bass instruments. Then I add the alto line, with instructions to listen through the tenor and down to the bass. Then the soprano instruments are added in with instructions to listen to the other three parts. If the students playing higher-pitched instruments listen through all the lower parts rather than just to the tubas, it makes a remarkable difference in the sound.

How do you assess students' progress?

One of the interesting things about our program is that our students do not receive a grade for being in band. It is considered a curricular subject by the administration, the community, and me, but they don't receive grades, not even pass/fail. I like this because then the focus moves past getting good grades. They are not doing what I ask because they want to get an A. The goal is making music and trying to realize what a composer has written on a page. If I assign a playing test, the goal of the test is for students to be able to play the music correctly as an individual so we can put that together and become successful as a band.

I do give periodic playing tests, usually when I'm unhappy with students' preparation. If everything is going well, I may not feel the need to assign a playing test. For playing tests, I break a piece down and they play it for me individually on a weekly basis. Their playing tests are usually just eight measures of a phrase they are struggling with. In their sectional time I'll take five to eight minutes to listen to each student. I use a rubric for these tests and give students their score the next day. Anyone who does not pass has to retake the test. The pressure students feel to do well is intrinsic; students do not receive a bad grade on a report card for failing a playing test.

How do you motivate students?

High-quality music played well is the single best motivating factor for students, particularly young students. It's also self-perpetuating. Once you start to get in that cycle, it feeds upon itself. Music can be graded in terms of technical difficulty or musical difficulty.

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I look for music where the musical difficulty equals or exceeds the technical difficulty. It is easy to find flashy works that are difficult technically but may not have much musical depth. Much more difficult to find are works with a high musical grade level that are technically easy. A piece that is a grade 2 technically but a grade 5 musically can be played by both beginners and an advanced group.

I love doing transcriptions. The Bach/Moehlmann Preludes and Fugues are some of my favorites, as are the Ken Singleton, Bob Margolis, and Larry Daehn transcriptions. Renaissance music is often technically simple, but musically complex; it is technically easy for my students but also deep music with much to offer. I have a core repertoire list I keep coming back to, and I keep it on the band website (www.mccrackenband.com/repertoire) because I am frequently asked for recommendations. I repeat pieces because they are favorites and also because many of those on our core list are classic band pieces that I feel students should play in middle school. Whenever I am unsure of what to play, the first place I look is that list. I can scan previously performed works and usually find an old favorite.

How do you solve technique struggles?

When students struggle with technique, I write out a line for all the instruments so we can rehearse that technique in unison as a full band. We rehearse it slowly then gradually bring up the tempo and will do this for a few days if needed. This way the section that needs the work is getting it, but the rest of the band is learning that technique too.

Muscle memory and tempo are mutually exclusive. When I work with technique, slowing it down is the first thing we do. Rather than gradually speed something up, we'll play it slowly as many times as we need and then instantly play it up to tempo. If a student is having trouble with a scale we'll do it note by note and then at the required rhythm slowly several times. When it feels like the scale is automatic, we take it up to tempo and see where students are, and if we need to slow it down again, we will. Ideally, directors should also select some music that is just below students' technical level to avoid focusing on technique nonstop.

How are strong band programs built?

Much of it has to do with high expectations, but you can have high expectations and a poor ensemble, so high expectations aren't necessarily the key. I try to get students as far as I possibly can in the limited amount of time I have with them. From the moment they start with me in fourth grade, I push and push.

The core philosophy I ascribe to is that students are a reflection of the director. We have to model that professional behavior, planning, and what we want our students to be. I want my students to be lifelong learners of music; that means I have to be a lifelong learner of music. I have to continue learning to model that for them. I love when I can say in the middle of rehearsal, "I read about this earlier this week; let's try it today." It brings a sense of excitement to the rehearsal that the students share in because they reflect that feeling from us.

What advice would you offer to new teachers?

The journey of being an inexperienced teacher – the process of learning what I didn't know – shaped me as a teacher, and I would hate to have missed out on some of those revelations. Focusing on the long term rather than the short term is one of those lessons that I'm still struggling with. Part of me thinks that six or seven years ago our bands were performing at the level they were performing at sheerly from my sense of will. They got to that level because I willed them to get to that level from working relentlessly. In recent years I've been developing a more systematic approach to some of my teaching, and making sure that development is happening. From the

moment I start students in fourth grade I think long term. What that means is building toward new skills and introducing them at appropriate times rather than randomly or when a method book dictates.

Hold yourself to a very high standard. Do not try to be the infallible king of the bandroom, but be the way you want your students to be. If we made a list of everything we did over the course of a year as teachers – administratively, rehearsal-wise, recruiting – that list would be 100 pages long on a legal pad, but everything on that list is an opportunity for us to model professional behavior to our students.

It is important to plan. One of my core philosophies as a band director is that students reflect their teacher. They will not care any more than we care or work any harder than we work or practice any more than we prepare for rehearsal. I try to take that to heart. If I expect my students to practice for half an hour a day, then I should prepare for rehearsal for at least that long.

The best characteristic a middle school band director can have is relentless energy. Also, the focus has to be on developing a strong program rather than getting invited to play at festivals or conventions. If you build a strong program and develop good musicianship, the invitations will come. □

New Trumpet Recording for Students

Becki Ronen Walenz, a master's student in trumpet performance at Crane School of Music has released a new educational CD exclusively of trumpet music commonly played by middle and high school students. With 14 pieces and 50 minutes of music, the CD includes many of the works that high school players prepare for district and state contests. All of the music is on the required lists of at least six states; the music is largely unavailable on iTunes and YouTube. The CD was released by Madstop Records, a record label associated with Crane School of Music. (www.beckiwalenz.com)

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