

# Recruiting *balanced* instrumentation in your ensembles for optimum musical outcomes

## Levelling the recruiting playing field: you *can* have a more balanced instrumentation!

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### **HAVE A CLEARLY DEFINED GOAL**

Before you start to think about recruiting you need to determine the overarching philosophy of your program. i.e. is your program about students learning whatever instrument they feel they want to learn OR do you want to have an effective ensemble experience for everybody, the latter of which mandates a well balanced instrumentation. We would assert that a balanced instrumentation is essential for optimum educational outcomes. It allows for the best possible sound, ability to play any desired repertoire, both of which provide the most satisfying experience for players, conductor, and audience. Furthermore, balancing instrumentation in the early learning stages means that it should carry through the rest of the program AND into the years beyond school music. Conversely, instrumentation that is not balanced in the recruiting stages leads to many adult musicians on the more “popular” instruments who have limited opportunities to play in community ensembles and the like because there is an oversupply of those instruments. If an ensemble program with balanced instrumentation is your philosophical viewpoint, then it needs to guide all of your decisions in the recruiting process and all aspects of the program.

It is important to recognise that some instruments are harder to recruit—it is not a level playing field. You will need to “manage” and proactively control the recruiting process in order to end up with a balanced ensemble. More detail on this under “Strategies to Level the Playing Field” below.

### **SO, WHAT CONSTITUTES BALANCED INSTRUMENTATION?**

It is an easy trap to recruit based on the instruments you have available in your school or setting rather than working towards an optimum instrumentation. If you don't already own

key instruments such as viola, 'cello, double bass (strings) or bass clarinet, baritone sax, horn, euphonium, tuba (concert band) you need to have a plan to acquire them over time. This can take several years obviously but it needs to be planned for. Some programs own all instruments for first year learners. Philosophically, the earlier a student owns their own instrument, the more commitment you will get from them and their families. Many programs require students on flute, clarinet, alto and tenor saxophone, trumpet, and trombone to purchase their own instrument from the very beginning. Some programs require student acquisition of these instruments after the first year. It is typical for more expensive instruments such as bass clarinet, baritone saxophone, bassoon, french horn, euphonium, and tuba to be school owned for many more years. Some programs start with a more limited instrumentation with the idea of switching students to certain instruments later (typically after the first year). For example in strings switching to viola from violin, and to double bass from cello. In the winds common switches are clarinet, sax or flute to double reed (oboe, bassoon); alto or tenor sax to baritone sax, clarinet to bass clarinet; and trumpet, trombone to horn, euphonium or tuba. In some cases programs require intending saxophone players to play clarinet first and intending percussionists to have a keyboard (piano) background. Any of these scenarios can be effective with a carefully managed plan that reflects your philosophy. It should be self-evident that it is important to have your school administration and music parents on board with your philosophy. Having a good instrumentation requires financial support. Effective advocacy for the importance of balance is a vital aspect of successful recruiting. The following numbers are a suggested guide to how a balanced concert band instrumentation would look given two approximate starting group sizes. This assumes, of course, that you have instruments available (especially the more expensive instruments). If you are going to start with limited instrumentation then you should end up with something like these after "switching."

### **27+ players**

3 FL  
 1 OB  
 1 BSN  
 5-6 CL  
 1 B CL  
 3 SX (aat)  
 3 TPT  
 2 HN  
 3 TBN  
 1 EUPH  
 1 TUBA (or KB BS)  
 3-4 PCN

### **38+ players**

4-5 FL  
 1 OB  
 1 BSN  
 8 CL  
 1-2 BS CL  
 4 SX (aaat)  
 5 TPT  
 3-4 HN  
 3-4 TBN  
 1-2 EUPH  
 2 TUBA (or KB BS)  
 5 PCN

These numbers are approximations and if you are going to "switch" instruments you do need to think about adding numbers to areas that will be switched "from," e.g. start extra clarinets in order to switch to double reeds, etc. Please note that the biggest single section in these concert band instrumentations is always the clarinets. Many school concert bands have more flutes, saxophones, trumpets, percussion, etc., than clarinets. This creates problematic balance issues immediately. In larger groups with around 50 players, the clarinet section should ideally number around 10-12 with no more than 4-6 saxes and no more than around six players on each of flute, trumpet and percussion. The numbers of other instruments should be relative to the indicated smaller instrumentations.

## **A WORD ABOUT BASS**

There is no doubt that the tuba is the absolute best option for a bass instrument in the concert band and the string bass for the string orchestra. In both cases, smaller versions of these instruments are available to accommodate younger students. Given the prevalence of electric bass in some school ensemble programs, it seems there is a belief that this instrument is an effective substitute for acoustic instruments in concert ensembles. While the electric bass is absolutely idiomatic in more vernacular music styles, the electric bass on its own is by no means the best proxy for tuba in concert band or string bass in orchestra. This is best achieved with a synthesised keyboard bass (indicated as “KB BS” in above lists) that is capable of emulating the acoustic instrument in question. One of the vital distinctions is the ability to sustain a note indefinitely and, through volume control, play appropriate dynamic rise, fall, etc. This control can be a dial or slider on the keyboard or via a volume foot pedal you can connect on many keyboards. These keyboards are readily available across many brands and are very cost effective—typically around \$500 or less. It is important to recognise this is not any kind of piano sound as these also decay and lack sustain and volume adjustment. The desired tone is as close to the acoustic instrument as possible (either a “patch” on the keyboard that lists as tuba or sometimes a french horn patch played in lower octaves can also work well). This has the added potential advantage of engaging a student with even a limited keyboard background who may not have been attracted to one of the other ensemble instruments. We would encourage directors to consider the keyboard bass as an excellent supplement to the acoustic instruments even if you should you have them, in order that the bass sonority can be fully and effectively realised without overblowing, etc. The reed bass instruments (bass clarinet, baritone sax, bassoon), while important and valuable, do not make up for a lack of tuba or string bass. These reed bass instruments lack the breadth of tone that provide the warmth to the desired ensemble sonority and having them as the only bass voices may result in them feeling forced to play with less than characteristic tone to try and compensate. Another decided advantage of the keyboard bass is pitch stability at the foundation of the chords — this can be a real boon to helping work intonation effectively.

## **STRATEGIES TO “LEVEL THE PLAYING FIELD”**

You will need to employ a variety of strategies to ensure you set up the environment that will optimise your chances of obtaining a balanced instrumentation. Never underestimate the value of one on one discussions with parents and students to help “guide” instrument preference.

### **1. ESTABLISH QUOTAS**

Programs that recruit successfully, typically lay out the “quota” of the anticipated instrumentation at relevant parent meetings, etc., so that all stakeholders understand the vital nature of this issue to a successful program. This means that you need to do whatever it takes to achieve a balanced instrumentation and to get adequate numbers of students to play the less “popular” instruments. It is usually necessary to ensure students provide multiple preferences (typically three) for instrument choice to allow the teacher some flexibility in achieving optimum instrumentation. Some programs encourage “diversity” in these choices (e.g., one woodwind, one brass, etc.).

### **2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON POTENTIAL RECRUITS**

Another proven strategy is to gather information on the student cohort that you will recruit from by collecting information from those students’ classroom music and primary classroom grade teachers about student personality, work habits, perseverance, family support, behaviour, etc. This can be a simple checklist to be returned to you or a meeting

with these teachers. Many programs also get data from aptitude tests (e.g., the freely available Selmer Music Guidance Survey and other available tests such as the Gordon Instrument Timbre Preference Test, etc.). Armed with all of this information, the goal is to target the students with the preferred personality dispositions and aptitudes to take up a significantly larger proportion (or even total) of the instruments that are more difficult to recruit. This ensures that you have a much better chance of keeping these in the program as this cohort moves forward.

### 3. SOME INSTRUMENTS ARE “SPECIAL!”

It can help to make students and parents feel that getting to play one of these less popular instruments is a special privilege reserved for the “top” students. It can also help to emphasise that playing less popular instruments will ensure more future opportunities for those students (e.g., scholarships, greater ensemble opportunities, etc.). Another related strategy is to provide financial incentives for these instruments e.g. reduced or no instrument hire fees, special lesson rates (if applicable), etc.

### 4. PROACTIVELY “DISSUADING” OVERLY POPULAR INSTRUMENTS

If you are going to have instrument demonstrations so that students and parents know what their instrument options are, there are some important considerations to ensure you are using these to also level the playing field. For example:

- \* Be sure that demonstrations of the less popular instruments are the most impressive (and consider making the sax, flute, drums, etc., less so! — remember, you have to make up for the inherent bias in student knowledge and ideas of what instruments are “cool!”). Try and have the jazzy, cool demo pieces on the instruments that need the promotion and less exciting examples on the ones that need less promotion.
- \* If you are going to do “blow-testing” where students try out instruments, I know some teachers who use harder reeds on sax than clarinet, use newer, shinier instruments for those being promoted more etc. Work the process to maximise your balance!

### 5. RECOGNISE GENDER STEREOTYPES AND AIM TO “DEBUNK” THEM

Students tend to think brass are predominantly “male” instruments (especially trumpet, trombone, tuba) and woodwinds are predominantly “female” instruments (especially flute). You can help to debunk these myths by demonstrating with genders that work against the stereotypes.

### **IN SUMMARY**

By doing all things possible toward a better balance in instrumentation you will be providing a learning and music-making environment that will provide a far richer experience for all involved. It is well worth the effort!

ADVOCACY:

<http://www.childrensmusicworkshop.com/advocacy/>

<http://www.musicforall.org/who-we-are/advocacy/quick-facts>

<https://musicaustralia.org.au/advocacy/>

<http://musictrust.com.au/music-education/advocacy-argument/>