

Southwest Civic Winds

Small Ensemble Direction & Best Practices [FA2022]

A Comprehensive Guide for Engaging Community Musicians in a Small Group Ensemble Setting

SWCW Introduction & Background

Vision

The Southwest Civic Winds is a community wind ensemble made up of players from throughout the Four Corners. We perform two symphonic concert series each season, along with free outdoor community concerts in the summer. Concerts are held throughout the Four Corners, including Durango, Bayfield, Cortez, and northern New Mexico.

The Southwest Civic Winds continues from a long tradition of community bands. Early immigrants from Europe brought with them their custom of village band music. From this, military and community bands were formed all across the United States. Today, there are an estimated 2,500 such bands throughout the country, including the Four Corners area.

The Southwest Civic Winds couldn't exist without our regular donors and concert attendees. Our 501c3 nonprofit organization is 100% volunteer based.

Our Mission

The mission of the Southwest Civic Winds is to provide a cultural resource that offers a musical program of the highest standard so that area musicians may rehearse and perform quality wind band literature for audiences to enjoy at very affordable prices.

The Southwest Civic Winds is proud to be preserving the rich heritage that community bands have long provided by entertaining the general public through live performances and by serving as a source of cultural pride for citizens of the Four Corners.

We enrich the lives of adult musicians in the towns we serve by providing them with an opportunity to use and develop their musical talent as part of a cohesive ensemble, and with the satisfaction of performing the finest in symphonic band repertoire.

While many members of the Southwest Civic Winds are professional musicians and music educators from across the Four Corners region, this band is an all-volunteer, membership organization. Members perform for the pleasure of making music for the community where they live and work. Many concerts also feature side-by-side student musicians.

This comprehensive guide is meant to serve as reference material and a foundation for a volunteer community musician, SW Civic Winds member, or other music enthusiast to serve in a leadership/point-person role in a small ensemble setting. Please read and take note of the following ideas and guidelines:

I. Small Group Ensemble Fundamentals

First and foremost, our small and large group ensemble leaders should foster a safe, positive (fun), and effective rehearsal & performance environment. From this starting point we can work to add ideas and strategies to our leadership “tool-kit” to create an environment where our community musicians can succeed. The following are examples of key strategies for maintaining a positive experience for small group ensembles:

1. Set the Tone

I love author John Maxwell’s analogy: “Your attitude determines your altitude.” The direction a pilot points the nose of a plane is known as its “attitude.” That, of course, determines the plane’s altitude. When you step up to lead an ensemble, your attitude sets the tone for the rehearsal. If you begin with good tone, a positive attitude, and well thought out structure for a rehearsal, the results typically follow that same direction. Conversely, if you bring negativity (especially if there are personal items which invade the rehearsal space), the tone is downtrodden, not positive, and generally folks don’t have a good time and a meaningful experience. I don’t mean we shouldn’t enjoy our time with community musicians but realize it’s much more difficult to derive positive results when all we do is criticize or fail to acknowledge individuals when they’ve been working hard.

Every musician in a leadership capacity has to be comfortable in their “own skin”. Use your personality strengths, but—in general—I suggest you bring four overarching attitudes when leading an ensemble:

- **Be positive** – While it is sometimes easier to be cynical, the old adage rings true, “you attract more flies with honey than vinegar!” Which would you prefer: an ensemble leader who treats you with respect and maintains a positive, hopeful attitude while challenging you to be your best - OR - one who mostly criticizes you and complains? Our members feel the same way.
- **Be businesslike** - Express your intentions with eagerness that we all have a job to do. Invite each musician, with positive reinforcement, to dig into their practicing and refining the music.
- **Be passionate** - Passion is contagious and your enthusiasm will usually rub off on the group. Be sure to let the ensemble know what excites you, whether it’s a composition you’re rehearsing, the collective ensemble efforts, or even what you did over the weekend.

MOST OF ALL...

- **Be thankful** - When we acknowledge that community musicians are taking time out of their day, especially after working a full-time (or even part-time) job, lugging their instruments into the rehearsal space, knowing they voluntarily chose to be in our ensembles, it should humble us. Look for opportunities to thank them for taking the extra time to do what we all love to do. Whether it’s a flute trio or a brass choir, their efforts are our reward. Remember to celebrate!

There is much you can do to set the tone for the rehearsal you want. Community musicians will take their cue from you.

2. Utilize Purposeful Routines

Just like with our large concert ensemble, punctuate smaller ensemble rehearsals with a handful of helpful routines such as:

- Allowing for a few extra minutes as folks catch up with each other, but then quickly getting into the warmup.
- Employ simple breathing exercises to focus everyone and bring the rehearsal to a start.
 - During the first 2–5 minutes of each rehearsal work through a series of warm-up exercises (i.e. long tones, scale and interval exercises, etc.).

3. Be A Proactive Planner

Be proactive, not just reactive. Identify in advance scheduling, musical, and logistical challenges.

- Develop your rehearsal schedule at least three months in advance. Juggling multiple players' schedules and working to get them all in the same room at the same time is extremely challenging. Do this as soon as humanly possible.
- Program literature which is challenging but that is NOT out of the reach of the ensemble.
 - Note: When working to choose literature, especially if you're unsure about the level of musicianship, remember that there are other leaders in the SWCW and they have lots of experience working with the musicians. Engage them as a resource for what might be appropriate, not too easy but also not too difficult to perform in the allotted time frame.
- Logistics can be a nightmare. Be sure to plan for the following:
 - Rehearsal/Performance Space
 - Time of day – rehearsals and performance
 - Equipment – do we have everything we need?
 - Communication between the players and yourself – schedules, email addresses, phone numbers, preferred methods of communication, etc.
 - Associated costs – discuss this with the board or the artistic director for helpful hints.
 - Literature – What is in the SWCW library? Do we need to order music? Etc.
 - Etc., etc. etc. – The board of directors is always your first and best resource. Talk with them and get their feedback. They can help you plan and set you up for success.

4. Raise All Boats & Lead by Example

Whether in a leadership role or just playing as a member of an ensemble, we want to make sure everyone is supported in their musical efforts together as a team. The following “Be” phrases are examples of the SWCW mindset and attitude when leading a musical ensemble:

- Be Prompt
- Be Prepared
- Be Polite
- Be Respectful
- Be Ready
- Be Resourceful

5. Play More, Talk Less

One of the main reasons community members signed up to be in an ensemble was to make music. Limit the length and number of times you stop the ensemble for explanations, or to work with a small subset of the ensemble. Remember that the more prepared you are in knowing the different parts of the music, the better off the ensemble will be. Always encourage them to listen across the group and know at least one other part besides their own. The more you play, the more fun the group has together as a team.

II. Community Engagement: Best Practices

Our local community has some pretty amazing people and resources. Take some time to familiarize yourself with the many community connections we have and be sure to talk with other SWCW leaders. They know the musicians in the local area and can help to provide you with contacts, support for your ensemble, equipment, etc.

Some of the resources and people you might engage include (but are not limited to):

- Local school district educators
- Fort Lewis College Music Dept. Faculty
- Local area professional musicians from around the Four Corners area
- San Juan College Music Dept. Faculty
- School district music equipment
- Stillwater Music School
- The iAm Music School

The list literally goes on and on. Make the time to meet with people, get to know them and work together to achieve your goals. Your small group ensemble will reap all the benefits of the networking you do behind the scenes.

As you begin to network and make those connections with local area musicians, always keep in mind that you represent the Southwest Civic Winds. Your conduct not only reflects on you but also on the organization. Developing positive, long-lasting relationships is what helps to drive the success of the SWCW. Our musicians come back to rehearse & perform because they have a fun, positive experience and because they are growing as musicians.

The following best practices (strategies) should be employed when making engaging with our local musical community:

- Always treat everyone with respect. This should go without saying, however there are times when, inevitably, working with other musicians is challenging. We've all experienced working or playing next to someone who is uncommunicative, disregards others, or isn't following through with their musical commitments. Remember that it is more important for you as an ensemble leader to stay positive, communicate clearly, be respectful, and meet people where they're at rather than trying to "drag them through the mud". Speak with a member of the board or the Artistic Director to address your concerns about an individual or members of the group.
- Talk with other leaders about their rehearsal & performance strategies. Keep an open mind and try new ideas with your small ensemble. Just because something has been done the same way for years and years, doesn't mean that's the way it has to be done. New ideas, rehearsal concepts and techniques work because not everyone learns the same way. Be open and communicative with your group and ask for their feedback on their learning styles. Ask how you can best serve them both in and outside of rehearsal.
- Professional musicians, educators, and "ringers" are usually happy to help and work with you and your ensemble. If you engage with someone who is a very "high level" educator or performer, remember that they are usually willing to work with or even join your ensemble if they have the time. Work to foster positive relationships with these individuals. We have many positive connections with the "pro's" in the area and can help to provide you with strategies for communication, engaging with a professional musician, and how to work through unforeseen challenges, should they arise. Keep the "rule of three" in mind and always work together with someone (either a board member or the Artistic Director) who already has an established connection with a local area educator or professional musician.

III. Performance Strategies and Conclusion

Once the literature is well rehearsed and the group is ready to perform, it's always a good idea to keep the following in mind:

- You are the link between your small group ensemble and the audience. Develop good communication skills to engage with your audience, acknowledge the crowd and thank them for coming. Remember to introduce your group and to introduce your performers by name and instrument. Small group ensembles are unique in that there is usually one person on each part, and they deserve to be recognized for their hard work.
- Have fun with the performance! The energy you receive from the audience comes from the energy you give them. Encourage your performers to smile and always give credit where credit is due. Your group has worked hard and they deserve to be praised.
- Take time to rehearse standing and bowing together. This is a great way to conclude a performance and it always looks sharp when a small group bows together as a team.
- If there is time, always do your best to engage with your audience after a performance. Encourage your group to take time after a concert to shake hands and meet people. It is in those moments when we inspire someone who hasn't played their instrument for many years to pick it back up and join us for the next performance. It is also safe to say that we might even meet someone who wants to show their support beyond attending a concert. Most times they are curious how they can work with us to further the SWCW mission either by giving of their time or monetarily.

We always strive to perform at a high level. To ensure that the quality of the performing ensemble adheres to Southwest Civic Winds standards, all members interested in putting together a small ensemble need to have the Artistic Director's approval.

Above all, HAVE FUN. Remember that we musicians “play”. We don't “go to work”, we go to “play”, and it is in this simple concept where we find ourselves enjoying not only the music, but the comradery and social aspects of the ensemble experience. Share your passion with your small group ensemble and let them know how much you love what you do!

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