

Research Corner

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Using Recordings to Enhance the Ensemble Learning Experience

Morrison, S.J., Montemayor, M., & Wiltshire, E.S. (2004). The effect of a recorded model on band students' performance, self-evaluations, achievement, and attitude. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 2, 116-129.

Before I begin this Research Corner entry, please allow me to digress briefly. Beginning last Fall, I have enjoyed serving as Chair of TI:ME's Research Committee, following Dr. William I. Bauer's tenure in that position. In recognition of the Herculean effort my predecessor invested and the dramatic difference he made in raising the level of awareness about – and practical relevance of – music research within our organization, I would like to thank Bill for his tremendous leadership. We are fortunate to count Bill – and so many other capable individuals – under our TI:ME umbrella and he has left a very large pair of shoes to fill indeed. Rest assured that he is not going anywhere (we won't let him!). He will continue to play an extremely important role in the ongoing development of the Research Committee and, more generally, in the evolution of our organization as a whole.

It is with great pleasure that I take this opportunity to tell you about a very interesting research study that was recently published in the *Journal of Research in Music Education*. As you are aware, there are many technologies available today that can be integrated to varying degrees into the music classroom. It is important to realize that technology need not be “bleeding edge” (or state of the art) in order to have an impact on student learning or to enhance the learning environment, as shown in the study discussed below. One of the most frequently-asked, technology-related questions I hear from teachers is the following: “How can I use technology effectively to enhance the musical learning that takes place in my performance ensemble?” A study by researchers from the University of Washington and the University of Dayton (Morrison, Montemayor, & Wiltshire, 2004) provides an initial answer to this question. The researchers were interested to learn whether playing recordings of pieces being performed by middle school and high school bands would have any impact on the students' self-evaluation of their own individual performance, self-evaluation of the ensemble's performance, perceived level of achievement, and attitude toward the musical selection.

Three middle schools and two high schools, featuring “well-established comprehensive instrumental programs” (p. 119), were selected to participate in the five-week study. Each ensemble director selected two single-movement concert works of equal difficulty that were scheduled to be performed as part of an upcoming performance program. Directors were asked to spend approximately equal amounts of rehearsal time on each piece over the five-week period. Both selections were recorded by the ensemble within

one week of the ensemble's first scheduled rehearsal on them. A second recording of each piece was made within one week following the conclusion of the five-week period. These recordings were evaluated by five experienced instrumental music teachers with four separate ratings: notes & rhythms, articulations & dynamics, intonation, and balance.

Each school was provided with a professional or collegiate CD recording of one of the two selected pieces and the director was asked to play this recording "in its entirety once a week while the band members silently followed along on their individual parts" (p. 119). On one other day each week, the directors were asked to select "a particular section of the recording for the group to hear in conjunction with that day's rehearsal goals" (p. 120). In addition, students completed a weekly, one-page "progress report" for each piece on a day when that particular piece was rehearsed. These reports included five items, affording an opportunity for each student to describe something that they or the band learned that day, identify aspects of the performance that were strong and those that needed improvement, assess both their own individual performance and that of the ensemble, and rate how much they liked the piece.

Though it is impossible to present the complete set of results in the space allotted here, allow me to focus on what would seem most significant to an interested ensemble director. There was no difference in the amount of improvement made during the five-week period when comparing the piece for which a recorded example was played and the other composition. Self-evaluation ratings of both middle school and high school students, however, revealed a more conservative assessment of the ensemble's improvement when considering the piece for which a recorded example was used. Finally, both the middle school and high school students provided greater numbers of comments regarding their progress on the selection for which a recording was available.

On initial reading, you may be wondering why the results of this study should be interesting to an instrumental ensemble director. After all, the research revealed no statistically significant difference in the level of improvement between the pieces for which a recording was incorporated into the rehearsals and the pieces for which no recording was used. If the goal of earning a "1" rating at the upcoming festival is the sole criterion upon which an ensemble director's success is gauged, then many might be tempted to dismiss these findings as evidence that the use of recordings does not enhance the level of ensemble performance. May I propose, as suggested by the authors of the study, that we consider these same results from a different perspective? In fact, though a significant amount of rehearsal time was used for listening activities rather than hands-on performance, the quality of ensemble performance *did not decline*. Performance on the pieces for which a recording was used improved equally to that of the pieces for which the traditional rehearsal strategy was used. In addition, based on student responses, the study provides evidence suggesting that, when using a recorded example, students are more consistent and objective in their assessment of progress made. In providing a greater number of comments, these same students seem to have developed, over the brief period of this study, an enhanced ability to critically evaluate musical performance. Also, in the student responses related to pieces for which a recording was used, there seemed to be a shift of attention from "individual challenges" toward "more complex group-related

matters” (p. 127). These capabilities provide extremely valuable enhancement to a music student’s level of *musicality* and will be of much greater and longer-lasting benefit – dare I say – than the celebratory congratulations following the receipt of a “1” ranking, though the pleasure associated with the latter is undeniable. Wouldn’t it be terrific if your ensemble could both earn a top rating *and* enhance the musical learning that takes place during rehearsals? The study by Morrison & his colleagues (2004) provides evidence that using a small amount of rehearsal time weekly to listen to a professional performance of pieces being performed and providing students an opportunity to evaluate performance – both their own individual performance and the ensemble as a whole – has no adverse effect on the amount of improvement made by the ensemble and concurrently does appear to improve the students’ critical evaluation skills.