

Scales

and their role as a toolkit in ensemble rehearsals

Last year I started experimenting with playing scales with ensembles at the beginning of rehearsals. What started as a simple G major scale to assess the facility within a very young and recently formed quartet quickly became a broader experiment incorporating other ensembles. I found that playing a scale together was a settling experience for students who arrive into the room fluttering. I also began to use this scale time to explore gestural movements, having different players lead in or affect an articulation on a particular note. Expanding upon this I decided to explore other ways in which scales can be used in an ensemble setting.

Why Use Scales?

Pros.

A source of common ground -be they shy, nervous or underprepared it's nice to start with something everyone knows.

A nice structured way to welcome everybody into a learning space

A canvas for musical games (Burn the Biscuit, Memory Game etc.)

A vehicle with which to improve gestural movement, intonation, ensemble skills and aural skills.

Cons.

Some students have mental blocks about scales which would be exacerbated by unsuccessful integration.

Scales have a bad reputation and students are suggestible creatures

Some people find scales boring; a point of view I have no qualms with. It's not for everybody.

Benefits of Variation

Intonation

The benefits of scale time can be gathered in two distinct groups. This is by no means an exhaustive list and represents more of a starting point. Within intonation we can introduce many variations to our scales. All are best played with longer notes to facilitate focusing on tuning.

Unison playing

Playing a simple scale together while listening to tuning. If you're about to play a piece with a funny key signature, playing the scale together can help iron out any irregularities.

Canon

Playing a simple scale in canon. A good way to tune intervals

Modes

Cutting the start of the canon to the point where everyone is playing. An introduction to modes?

Contrary Motion

Playing a simple scale in contrary motion. Sound identification. Who's playing that line?

Arpeggios (with a combination of the above)

Harmonic placement within a chord. Who is in unison with me? Am I the root/3rd/5th/7thetc.?

Balance

Any of the variations above represent a good opportunity to explore ensemble balance, and also a canvas on which to practice leading and following crescendi and diminuendi.

Ensemble

In the second group we will focus on variations that concern the beginning moment of the note. These variations do not require long notes, but excessive speed will blur results.

Unison playing

Are we together? Who are we following?

Bowing

Can the ensemble match the bowings of the designated leader as he/she improvises?

Rhythm

Combine playing a scale with a challenging rhythm or syncopation from a piece you will be covering later in the rehearsal. It can fix problems before you encounter them.

Polyrhythms/Cross-rhythms

With young players crotchets against quavers can provide a challenge. With the introduction of triplets and beyond, the exercise scales well for more advanced students.

Accelerando&Rituardo

Much like the Balance variation in Intonation, but this time with tempo.

Articulation as a Catalyst in Scales Variations

Adding articulation including pizzicato, accents and bowing techniques to any of the above reinforces the ensemble skill learning. If your group can play a polyrhythm scale in pizz. Together, while slowing down they'll likely have no problems with composed music.

Hitting Secondary Learning Outcomes

Adding articulations or bowing techniques to variations provides us with an opportunity to explore these articulations as an ensemble. I often find myself looking for a passage in a piece of music where everybody has a particular feature like pizzicato in their part. By integrating these features with scales time we can present them in a clear and accessible way.

Playing to a complicated rhythm with rests, in canon and contrary motion, in pizzicato, slowing down....

The world is your oyster! I usually try to come up with a variation that deals with a feature of a piece that we'll be rehearsing later. If you plan ahead you can lay the groundwork before you've started the piece.

Conclusion

Ultimately, my hope would be that by adopting a time for scales at the start of every rehearsal, many technical aspects of ensemble work can be dealt with in an efficient and meaningful way. So far, at least once a rehearsal, I find myself saying "You know those scales we played at the start...?", before dealing with an issue in what feels like a streamlined and organic way. This has made more time in rehearsals for phrasing and shaping and all the other great ambitions that I have so often found myself running out of time on in the past.

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