

THE BENEFITS OF WIND QUINTETS FOR YOUR BAND STUDENTS

By MICHAEL BURNS

This article is intended to encourage band directors to organize their talented woodwind and brass students into chamber groups. There are several advantages to your band program to be gained from such a venture:

1. The players will develop a stronger sense of ensemble as they learn to balance voices, blend, play rhythmically together without conductor, etc.
2. The players will get to play one on a part instead of in a section of many as with flutes and clarinets or being doubled by numerous other instruments and perhaps not really hearing themselves as with the double reeds. This will in turn develop their sense of pitch and intonation (there is nowhere to hide!), and their sense of playing soloistically at times and as accompaniment at others.
3. The players can experience some new and fun repertoire and perhaps find repertoire that better fits their level of expertise than is always possible with a full band arrangement.

There are several options available for wind chamber music. Probably the most common ensemble and that which is easiest to find repertoire for is the standard wind quintet (also sometimes called the woodwind quintet even though it includes the horn) of flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, and horn. There are, of course, many other varied types of wind chamber ensembles but for the purposes of this article I would like to concentrate on the quintet.

The five instruments comprising a wind quartet are quite diverse and this leads to challenges that must be faced and overcome by the players.

By contrast, a string quartet is essentially homogenous in nature. The three different instruments (two violins of course) all work in the same way and are basically smaller and larger versions of the same instrument.

The brass quintet is also more homogenous in nature than the wind quintet. Even though the trumpet and trombone are both cylindrical bore and the horn and tuba are conical, the method

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of playing and the essential playing characteristics of the brass instruments are very similar.

But the woodwinds, they are quite a different kettle of fish. The two double reeds probably have the most similarities in playing characteristics. Both are naturally loudest in the low register and get softer as you ascend. The flute, of course, behaves in the exact opposite way. Its lowest register is softest and it gets naturally louder as you ascend. The clarinet is different again. It has different volume characteristics within the registers but behaves quite differently from the other woodwinds. That darn cylindrical bore that is stopped at one end which produces the characteristic overblown 12th is a big part of the reason that the clarinet acts so differently from its woodwind colleagues. Then there is the horn, which, as the lone brass

instrument in the group, has quite a different method of producing the sound than the other instruments.

Players in a wind quintet have to deal with very different pitch tendencies from note to note within the group. A note that tends to be low on one instrument may well be high on another. When the group crescendoes some instruments tend to rise in pitch while others simultaneously go flat. The five instruments have very different abilities in terms of articulation: flute is great at multiple tonguing, oboe and bassoon are great for a brittle staccato but getting all five instruments to match an exact articulation and note length can be quite tricky.

Dynamics are another area of diversity in a wind quintet. The poor horn player feels like they can never play above about *mf* for fear of drowning out the rest of the group. Clarinet can tape away to a whisper whereas the double reeds may be left high and dry, unable to diminuendo further without losing the note altogether. This list is not intended to be a complaint or to dissuade people from ever trying to play a wind quintet. Rather, I think that learning to deal with and overcome these many diverse challenges can be one of the most rewarding aspects of playing in a quintet and your players will certainly become stronger musicians in the process.

If you have a talented player available on each of the five necessary instruments to form a wind quintet then I strongly recommend doing so. These players will learn skills that can then be brought back into the band as they sit within their sections and lead by example

ABOUT THIS AUTHOR

Michael Burns, Bassoon, holds a BM with Honours from the Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, an MM from New England Conservatory, Boston, and a DMA from the College-Conservatory of Music at the University of Cincinnati.

Currently he is an Assistant Professor of Bassoon at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and the Bassoonist in the Eastwind Ensemble. He has held teaching positions at Midland College in Texas, and Indiana State University in Terre Haute.

As a performer, Burns has played Principal Bassoon in the Midland/Odessa Symphony Orchestra in Texas, the Cincinnati Chamber Orchestra, the Richmond (IN) Symphony, and numerous groups in his native New Zealand. In addition he has performed as a member of the Cincinnati, and New Zealand

Symphony Orchestras. Currently he performs regularly with the Greensboro, Charleston, North Carolina, and Charlotte Symphony Orchestras.

Burns' principal teachers include William Winstead, Sidney Rosenberg, Sherman Walt, Leonard Sharrow, and Colin Hemmingsen. Burns is a Yamaha Performing Artist who recently completed a concert tour of Australia and New Zealand, and he will co-host the International Double Reed Society convention in Greensboro in June, 2003.

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It is no accident that many professional symphony orchestras have a wind quintet formed from within their ranks (often comprised of their principal players) as part of the job description also. The players learn to work as a team, independent of but supplementing the orchestra (or band). Don't forget about the possibility of substituting other instruments for the double reeds if you don't have those players available also.

SOME SUGGESTED QUINTET REPERTOIRE

The following pieces are all of a difficulty level that should be at times challenging but achievable for a group of somewhat talented high school students. Of course the more proficient the players, the more artistic demands can be placed on them.

- Suite by Robert Washburn
- 8 Dances by Liadov
- Six Cuban Dances by Cervantes arr. Lesnick
- Five Easy Dances by Denes Agay
- Three Short Pieces by Jacques Ibert
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