



The Large Brass Choir:

Creating a Buzz-Worthy Addition to Your Music Program

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PERHAPS OUR PREHISTORIC ANCESTORS

fortuitously pioneered brass ensemble playing with animal horns and conch shells pressed to their lips. Once established, brass music was typically relegated to civic or martial service until the art of brass was born in 16th-century Europe. A combined Hebrew and Christian antiphonal brass tradition culminated in the magnificent works of the Venetian School, including the first extant composition for brass instruments, Giovanni Gabrieli's 1597 "Canzon duodecimi toni."

The large brass ensemble (or "brass choir") remains one of the least common ensembles in high school and collegiate music programs. This presents an opportunity: The brass choir format offers a means of emphasizing blend, balance, and intonation in your brass ranks while promoting camaraderie and a sense of pride. You can establish a brass choir on an ad hoc basis, with minimal expense and hassle, to develop musicianship and promote a seriousness of purpose among your program's brass players.

Instrumentation and Layout

The typical American brass choir consists of B-flat trumpets, horns in F, trombones, baritones/euphoniums, and tubas. Additional instruments sometimes found in brass choir literature include C, E-flat, and piccolo trumpets,

cornet, flugelhorn, bass trombone, and E-flat tuba. In situations where these more specialized brass instruments are not available, it may be acceptable to transpose or assign the parts to other instruments, although care must be taken to maintain the composer's intent. There is no standardized layout for brass choir. You can pattern the layout to mimic that of a small band or orchestra, keeping in mind the following:

- Tubas should be placed in the center of the ensemble for optimal balance.
- Projection issues require that your horn section be placed in the front right side of the ensemble (as you face it) so the hornists' bells face inward.
- Trumpets work best in a block no more than four players wide but as deep as necessary due to the directional nature of the instrument.

Blend, Balance, and Intonation

Your brass students will enjoy enhancing their tone quality through simple warm-ups, such as a sing/buzz/whistle/play exercise (see Figure 1). Imagine the benefits of even 15 minutes of brass-ensemble work in the development of section blend—benefits that will become abundantly clear when your brass players rejoin the full ensemble. Use a descending chromatic warm-up to teach blend (see Figure 2). This exercise requires the entire ensemble to blend in unison and focus on attacks and releases, intonation, and the development of other good habits. Another way to address blend is to play brass quintets, especially lyrical works and arrangements of Bach chorales.



With entire sections playing parts intended for only one player, students quickly realize the importance of section and ensemble blend.

Balance in any ensemble is an exercise in mindful diversity and should be approached differently depending on the repertoire at hand. Encourage your students to visualize a double pyramid (representing both section-specific and ensemble-wide balance) that is changeable, depending on the style of a particular piece. In his *Effective Performance of Band Music* (Southern Music/J.W. Pepper), W. Francis McBeth provides the following exercise for evaluating and adjusting ensemble balance. Direct members of your brass choir to sustain an E-flat major triad over six to eight slow counts (tubists should play the E-flat root; other students may choose any chord tone). The balance will likely be flawed. Next, discuss the double pyramid and relative balance of chord members, and have your students play the triad again (using the same pitches). Improvement!

Try it once more, adding a crescendo from pianissimo to fortissimo over six counts. The balance will likely be lost as the dynamics change. To alleviate this problem, discuss the importance of maintaining the double pyramid throughout dynamic fluctuations. The lowest instruments should perform the



Holiday concert by the University of Rochester Brass Choir

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Brass Ensemble, and other professional groups. More advanced students will benefit from a basic introduction to pure intonation and the overtone series. Stephen Colley’s Tune-up Boot Camp (www.tuneupsystems.com) breaks down the elements of pure intonation into easy-to-understand explanations and exercises. One of the most helpful components of Collins’s “boot camp” is the inclusion of frequency (cents) adjustments necessary to achieve pure tuning of every interval (a semitone encompasses 100 cents). For example, most students eventually learn to adjust a harmonic major third downward until they eliminate acoustical beats, but giving them a number to remember as they adjust (14 cents downward, in this case) helps them conceptualize it in a less abstract way.

Repertoire

The biggest challenge facing brass choir enthusiasts is lack of repertoire. A wide range is available for British brass band but requires transposition or transcription (several British brass band arrangers, including Andrew Norman of pdfbrass.com, are willing to transpose their music at no additional fee beyond the purchase price). Appropriate beginning repertory for American brass choir is available in two volumes, *Brass*

Recital and Concert Repertoire (available through Hal Leonard).

As a first step, include a brass fanfare in your full band or orchestra’s concert program. Selections like “Fanfare” from *La Péri* by Paul Dukas (Editions Durand) or “Quidditch” by John Williams (Hal Leonard) can be put together in a few rehearsals and can add a festive air while challenging your brass section. High-quality repertoire for high school and collegiate brass ensembles has been written by several skilled composers, especially David Uber, Vaclav Nelhybel, and Eric Ewazen. You’ll find additional performance opportunities in orchestral repertoire that requires extra brass accompaniment, including Shostakovich’s *Festive Overture* and the final movement of Respighi’s *Pines of Rome*.

No brass-choir folder would be complete without a more lyrical piece to round out all the bombast. *On a Hymnsong of Philip Bliss* by David Holsinger (TRN Music Publisher) is an ideal vehicle for this, as are “Hats off to Thee” by John Zdechlik (Kjos), *Mutations from Bach* by Samuel Barber (G. Schirmer), and “Liturgy for Brass Choir” by David Uber (Ensemble Publications). Finally, consider taking time (or even asking your students) to arrange and compose for brass choir. With only five instrument voices, developing new selections for brass choir is a feasible and rewarding endeavor.

Take the Plunge!

Establishing a brass choir at your school is an exciting way to provide an alternative to the traditional large-ensemble experience. In doing so, you’ll also enhance the musicality of your larger ensembles while generating enthusiasm and a more focused atmosphere among your brass students. ■

crescendo fully (a 10 out of 10) and the highest instruments should perform a restrained crescendo (one out of 10), with interior players following suit based on their placement in the pyramid (i.e., horns would probably be a five out of 10, trombones a seven out of 10, etc.). Now, try the crescendo again—success! Occasionally, it may help to intentionally perform these balance exercises upside down (i.e., tubas play softest and trumpets play loudest) just to prove the point. The ensemble’s sound will be much more strident and out of tune when the balance is incorrect.

Brass choir intonation requires special attention, as the absence of rich woodwind overtones can magnify faulty brass tuning. Model the spine-tingling joys of flawless brass ensemble intonation by sharing recordings of Empire Brass, Philip Jones

▼ **FIGURE 1** An exercise to be performed as a call-and-response or on cue. Students (a) sing the four-measure passage while removing mouthpieces from instruments, (b) buzz the passage on mouthpieces alone, (c) whistle the passage while replacing mouthpieces/preparing to play, and (d) perform the passage on instruments. Repeat on a different starting pitch, or use your own melodic patterns.



▼ **FIGURE 2** At the University of Rochester, we call this warm-up “The Remington” after legendary trombone professor Emory Remington. Continue the pattern downward chromatically.

