

# C Band at the University of Delaware

by Robert Streckfuss

In the early 1960's I played in the University of Michigan Symphony Band under William D. Revelli. Dr. Revelli was famous for many things—and one of them was his belief that a player had to be able to sing the music in order to play it accurately. I can still hear him saying, “If you can't sing it, you can't play it.” I'll always remember the rehearsal in which he asked me if I could solfege the euphonium solo in Arnold Schoenberg's Theme and Variations, Op. 43A. I couldn't. Revelli was first trained as a violinist, and as any violinist who plays in tune will tell you, your inner ear must guide you in placing your fingers on the fingerboard. As a brass player, I realized that Dr. Revelli was right, but when I became a teacher I didn't have a systematic method to develop this essential skill in my students until many years later.

Over the past 32 years I have taught many music education students at the University, and some of them have had difficulty hearing and singing the music they were reading and conducting in my methods classes. In 1991 I attended a Jump Right In workshop taught by Richard Grunow, co-author of *Jump Right In: The Instrumental Series*, published by GIA Publications, Chicago. During this workshop I was introduced to the Music Learning Theory\* (MLT) of Edwin E. Gordon. Here was a step-by-step sequential method to develop the ability to “sing it before you play it” or to audiate. (Audiation, a term coined by Gordon, is the ability to hear and comprehend music when the sound is not always physically present.) Since that workshop, I have tried to integrate more and more MLT into our music education curricula, and the results have been very gratifying. We want our students to be musically literate—so that they hear what they see in notation and see in notation what they hear.

One way in which we develop audiation skills is through singing and playing secondary instruments in a class we call C Band. Our music education freshmen take a two semester sequence of woodwinds methods classes in which they play flute, clarinet, sax, and double reeds. In the sophomore year, music education students have a two semester brass class where they play trumpet, horn, trombone, and euphonium/tuba. These secondary instrument methods classes meet M-W-F for an hour. On Friday, all the woodwind and brass students meet together in C Band. (The name originated long ago when we had two concert bands, A & B, and we jokingly referred to this class as C band.) Every Friday I set up 65 chairs for C Band on stage in Loudis Recital Hall, but I don't have to set up any music stands because we play everything by ear. We begin by singing three or four note tonal patterns outlining I, IV, V<sup>7</sup> in major and minor and i and VII in dorian. We add the solfege to these patterns, and then play them on our secondary instruments in a number of different keys. We use movable *do* with a *la*-based minor, a *re*-based dorian, *sol*-based mixolydian, etc. Once the students have acquired a repertoire of patterns that they can sing and play on their secondary instruments, we progress to learning whole songs, by ear, in a variety of keys, tonalities, meters, and styles. This is accomplished by having each student teach a song of their choice to the class. My role is

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\* For an introduction to Gordon's Music Learning Theory see: <http://www.giml.org/frames.html>

to help them when they have difficulty remembering their resting tone—the tonic pitch for their song—or to assist them in singing the song they have notated in their lesson plan.

The procedure we use for teaching a song aurally consists of the following steps:

- The teacher establishes tonality by singing a tonic pattern followed by a dominant pattern—as in *do-mi-sol-fa-re-ti-do* or *la-do-mi-re-ti-si-la*. These are sung with neutral syllables (on bah or bum) and the class responds by singing the correct solfege syllable for the resting tone.
- The teacher sings through the entire song on a neutral syllable.
- The teacher sings it phrase by phrase on a neutral syllable and the class echoes each phrase.
- The class then sings the whole song on a neutral syllable.
- Then the teacher sings each phrase on a neutral syllable and the class responds with solfege. When students can do this, it indicates that they are gaining mastery of the solfege language and the sound that the syllables represent.
- The class sings the whole song through using solfege.
- We play the song on our secondary instruments. Since we now know the song in solfege, we can transpose it to another key.
- Whenever the class sings, the teacher does not sing but listens to evaluate the progress of the class.
- By following this procedure, all of the students, both those engaged in learning and playing the song and those who are teaching, are acquiring and mastering essential skills.

After playing the song, the class members write down the song (after class) in musical notation and keep a notebook of all music learned aurally during the semester. I don't have to supply students with suitable song material; they bring a great variety of music to class. Last semester's songs included *La Bamba*, *Windy*, Michael Jackson's *I Want You Back*, *Marianne*, Bizet's *Farandole*, *Pange Lingua*, *California Dreamin'*, *Hey Jude*, and *Viva la Companie*. Songs like *My Favorite Things* and *We Three Kings* are particularly interesting because as the melody unfolds, the resting tone changes from *la* to *do*. Occasionally I'll play my trombone and teach a song like *Moanin'*—which uses the blues scale exclusively. I'll play it phrase by phrase—and the class will sing each phrase and then play it.

Do the students enjoy C Band? Probably as much as any class that meets at 8:00 a.m. on a Friday. Several of my juniors, who are no longer required to attend, have volunteered to come teach songs to C Band this semester. They enjoy it most when we can add a bass line or harmony part. Are the students succeeding? I see them becoming more familiar with solfege and more confident in their singing. It's gratifying to see the sophomores presenting a good musical model for the freshmen. There were about 30 of each in this semester's C Band.

When music education majors have finished with the secondary methods sequence of woodwinds, brass, strings and percussion, and they have completed four semesters of C Band, they take my two consecutive clinical methods courses in instrumental music—Music in Elementary/Middle School and Secondary Methods and Materials. Each class meets on campus for two hours per week where we continue to develop aural skills by playing songs by ear and by improvising on familiar tonal patterns and chord progressions. The clinical component of these two courses has our students in the schools for four hours each week. We are fortunate to work with generous and skilled cooperating teachers in the public schools who will allow our students to teach their classes—usually from 8:00-12:00 on a Tuesday. We visit Claymont Elementary (Sheila Jackson), Gunning Bedford Middle (Steve Breffitt), Hanby Middle (Donna Bell), Avon Grove High (Dwight Weaver), and Newark High (Jon Wittman). At each school our students get to conduct large and small ensembles. I have my students buy the scores they conduct at each clinical placement. We study them and play them in our campus methods class so that our students become familiar with them. At the end of each semester I ask each student to sing melodies and harmony parts from these scores. The aural skills developed in C Band and reinforced throughout our clinical music education courses have enabled more and more students to succeed.

I am pleased to report that our music education students are learning to audiate. They realize the need to hear what they see and see what they hear. When they have a new musical problem they are beginning to use solfege to solve it. They realize that solfege will enable them to become musically literate—to look at music and hear it before playing or conducting it. I am grateful to William D. Revelli for his “If you can’t sing it, you can’t play it” maxim, and I am thankful that Edwin Gordon’s Music Learning Theory has provided a sequential plan to develop the audiation skills that every true musician needs.