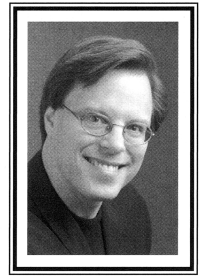


Pathways to Knowing the Score: Note Grouping, Piano and Charting

by Robert Rumbelow



It would be unreasonable to think that a single article could cover the multitude of ways to study a score, and absolutely ludicrous to create a “list” of how to study a score without knowing the specific work at hand. The fact is that score study is personal to the score itself with possible implied techniques based on your knowledge of the composer, era, compositional type, and so on. In short, composers construct a work (hopefully of some degree of depth), and conductors work to deconstruct the composition in the study stage so that we understand more deeply how it works and what creates excitement, desire, or interest for us in that discovery process. Herein lies a very important path to informed performance colored by your personal musicianship and affinities for certain discoverable realities of the composition. Aide from the imprint of your personal attractions on performance, an obvious analogy would be to truly understand your car you should be able to take it apart and put it back together again. Of course, we can’t do this with everything in life. I like my computer a great deal, but I have no real idea how it all works . . . and that’s okay with me (unless I get stuck on something—then I wish I did). However, music is my area of expertise. Conductors must know more than the surface elements and the pedagogy of teaching individuals and ensembles if we hope to engage real musicianship and connection. We need to know “how” and “why” (or at least have strong beliefs), or we may lack the passion to truly express the connection of the work at hand with ourselves, our ensemble, and ultimately to listeners. Assuming that we are all in concord with this rather general statement that could be expanded into its own article, I’d like to share three techniques of score study that bring interesting and noticeable results in performance. However, I feel compelled again to note that a substantial musical

work must be in some way unique, and therefore certain discovery techniques don’t yield fruit. These three techniques are what I refer to as “second layer” techniques. I think we are all pretty familiar with the first layer. Your answers to the “how” and “why” questions in your score may change as you study, and these processes yield significant enlightenment that directly affects performance.

NOTE GROUPING

Note grouping is a technique that is absolutely necessary in the vast majority of compositions. In note grouping, we have the potential to discover hyper-rhythm, large and small-scale phrasing, note and phrase shaping, harmonic rhythm, and even articulation style in some instances. Note grouping is, in one way, described as the technique of thinking about groups of linear notes (or harmonies) without the complication of the bar line or meter. In many ways, it is purified listening. Where is the true fundamental pulse (not always on the metric level)? How does the phrase or section feel in augmentation or diminution? What is the shape and feel of the uninterrupted melodic line? The questions in this domain go on for some time and are indeed logical as we consider the “fundamental truth” to a grouping of notes and their physical feeling. Our pedagogical minds often get in the way of realizing the true music. Conductors think about necessary items such as gestural clarity, how best to address certain written difficulties on various instruments, how to introduce challenging passages in healthy ways, and so forth. In fact, many of us jump so quickly into the “how” that we jump right over the “why.” Thinking about melodies, harmony and other linear progressions first as “why are these notes together?” or “what are the realities of this note order or rhythm or collection” and

working to answer in the ideal will often yield different answers than if we started with the “how to teach” questions. One must clearly answer those questions as well, but I would argue that knowing exactly “what” you are teaching before strategizing teaching techniques is the fundamental place to start. Who knows, you may decide that the depth of the composition is in question and elect not to use that work at all. To work with note groupings, sing melodies, play progressions, experiment with different tempos including double time and half time to really assess the shape. Look/listen for leading tones and chromatic alterations. Do they infer anything about the pace, shape, or relationship to another phrase? Find the core pulse. Young children are very good at that. Play a work written in a fast 3/4 and see if they clap in 3 or in 1. They don’t know how to read music, but they do listen in a pure way. The purity of listening is the key to correct note groupings. Correct note groups lead to mature phrasing decisions (shape, relationships, length) well beyond what is marked on the page. Notice also that after you have worked to group linear material that you will have many of the pedagogical answers you were tempted to skip to first...and they may be different. One thing is for sure, decisions will be more informed and more natural to the fundamental nature of the music. Since phrases have shape, rather than simply being passages between breathes, your time with note groups will define those important shapes as well. To create an elegant, organic and appropriately shaped phrase is a reward in itself. It is also a way to bring your ensemble and listeners “into” the music rather than relegate them to simply “watching/listening” to the surface.

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USING PIANO (don't be scared)

Using the piano is a rather scary and time-consuming score study process for many conductors. That does not, however, diminish its effectiveness in detail discovery. In fact, it has been my experience that conducting students with below average keyboard skills profited the most from applying this process. Conductors are often amazed at what they find with works they had previously conducted many times before! The reason is rather simple. After conducting/teaching and working for a while (especially on a successful level) we learn to read scores quickly. In fact, we gather base information so quickly that we miss VERY important details. Trying to play groups of lines by phrase, measure, or section on the piano slows down the process enough to really discover details. Idiosyncrasies such as a missing third in that chord or, every fourth time this figure changes, or the harmony is consistent until this moment, start to uncover real decisions by the composer that are critical to performance and understanding. After working with graduate students and working directors who take occasional lessons with me, I find that assigning piano time is one of the most fruitful processes in getting conductors to really read everything (rather than how we have taught ourselves to speed read). In fact, it's really the same result. Speed-reading can give you the story at a very time-efficient pace, but detailed reading offers the depth that makes the colors more vivid, the shapes more severe, and the soul of a well-written passage very deep and personal. This is exactly what we want from our music isn't it? Time at the piano working through groups of lines, pages, or phrases will deepen knowledge of the score without doubt. Added advantages include increasingly fast transposition, "seeing" harmony on the piano (making sense of enharmonic spellings in the score), hearing all of this in tune, and defining logical pairings to manage playing at the piano which will, in turn, influence rehearsal tactics/groupings. These and more advantages will allow for many fundamental/truthful imprints to be made that the conductors can take directly into rehearsal for application. It's truly

amazing. The time spent doing this will make you more knowledgeable about the realities of your score (past the obvious "rights and wrongs"). I'm a strong advocate of this tool in conjunction with other processes.

CHARTING

This technique is probably not new to anyone, but may not be something that every conductor thinks about employing during a concert preparation cycle for a rehearsal or two. It's very much like the one-page form chart that you were assigned to do in your freshman theory class. However, this chart goes a bit further because it will ideally show you all the "necessary" big picture information you need to know to run a musical rehearsal on your selected composition—all from one page. The chart usually has levels with vertical lines defining the form of the work (macro and micro) and horizontal lines defining items like harmony, motives/melodies/themes, specific ID (identification) rhythms, rehearsal letters or numbers, phrasing, harmonic information, orchestrations, solos, dynamics, musical character, and so on. You will know if you have spent the proper time memorizing the major elements and sequence of a score and created an adequate one-page chart if you can run a rehearsal on that composition with the chart alone (no score). Although you may not be able to answer if the third clarinet has a B-flat on the fourth beat of measure 92, you will be prepared to listen to it and define if it is likely correct or incorrect. Charting is a wonderful way to get in touch with the big picture, rely on your study, and really use your ears and mind. It can truly be a liberating experience to be "all ears and knowledge" and "no page turns." This is not a true memorization project, but rather a way to gain confidence based on preparation, then putting it to the test in a rehearsal.

It may seem that the details of the piano exercise and the charting technique are opposite methods, but rather they are perhaps two sides of the same coin, and the gifts of truly knowing detail through the piano technique, feeling confident about phrasing/shape through note grouping

work, and honestly feeling free to listen and react from the charting technique put the conductor in a fantastically exciting place to create music from the realities of the score. All three techniques work well together and apply to most scores in one way or another. These are not the only techniques, and the deciphering and reassembling of a score can take many roads . . . particularly dependent on your knowledge of compositional practices, but all three of these techniques dramatically affect performance and musicianship starting with the conductor. ■



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Before joining the UI School of Music, Rumbelow was Conductor and Director of Wind Ensemble Activities at Columbus State University (CSU) Schwob School of Music in Columbus, Georgia. Under his direction, the CSU Wind Ensemble partnered with world-renowned musicians, recorded internationally respected CDs for the Summit and Naxos labels, and gave world premieres for numerous compositions. His annual conductors' workshops gathered an international student base, and featured world-class faculty. Previous to his appointment at CSU, Rumbelow was Associate Conductor of the Eastman Wind Ensemble and Eastman Wind Orchestra.

Rumbelow is recognized as an exceptional conductor, clinician, arranger, composer, and lecturer throughout the United States and abroad. He has earned international acclaim for his compositions, orchestral performances, and wind band performances, some of which have been broadcast on major networks such as NBC, CBS, ABC, PBS, NPR, NHK Japan and the BBC. Dr. Rumbelow's many commissions and consortia have resulted in new compositions by composers Christopher Theofanidis, Shafer Mahoney, Alfred Cohen, JM David, and Dorothy Chang, among others. Kjos, Ludwig/Masters, Warner Brothers, Alfred Music, and C. Alan publish Dr. Rumbelow's compositions that are performed internationally. He has received many noteworthy commissions, and has authored articles and chapters within a wide array of music publications. Rumbelow is a recipient of several notable accolades including national and international conducting prizes, an annual recipient of American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP) Awards, National Band Association Awards, and praise from critics for both recordings and live performances at statewide and national conferences.