

Chordal Warm-ups

Minnesota Brass Inc.

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Minnesota Brass Summer Music Workshop
MUSM 595
St. Cloud State University
8/18/08

My name is Nathan Mitchell and I'm a 23 year old trumpet player from Newport, MN, a suburb of St. Paul, MN. I graduated from the University of Minnesota Duluth in July 2007 with a B.M. degree in K-12 Instrumental (Band/Orch) and Classroom Music Education. While in college I participated in most of the instrumental ensembles, including Jazz I (substitutions), Jazz II (lead trumpet), Jazz Combo III and IV, Wind Ensemble, and the Symphony Orchestra (principal spring '07). I also performed and experienced music in different cultures by traveling to Brazil and Turkey. Currently I'm a substitute teacher in South Washington County ISD 833 looking for a full-time middle or high school band position. I have had success as a private lesson teacher and freelance musician, doing performances for churches, festivals, and leading my own brass quintet, and I compose and arrange music. I had no marching band experience prior to joining Minnesota Brass Incorporated (MBI). MBI has given me the opportunity to gain that knowledge for my field as well as have the full drum corps experience at the same time.

One of the warm-ups MBI includes in our routine are the Chorale Studies. This warm-up is my favorite because it gives the corps a chance to blend together and work on ensemble sound. It is used in either the arc, circle, or block formation (Figure 1). The Chorale Studies are chordal and dynamic changes through the use of specific hand signals with either hand. This means each chord and dynamic used in this warm-up has its own signal that the corps recognizes, and parts in each section have specific notes to these chords as well. The main difference between the signals for chords and ones for dynamics is direction of the signal. Dynamics are vertical hand signals that range from numbers 1-5 (Figure 2), 1 being the softest and 5 being the loudest. Chord changes are specific horizontal hand signals with no particular pattern (Figure 3). Looking at Figures 2 and 3 you can see where confusion between the two changes could occur if a performer was not careful.

There are three different ways the changes can occur: a ripple effect, conducted chord, or dynamic change on next chord change. The director may (and usually does) use all of these ways in the warm-up. A ripple effect is defined as the musical director starts on one side of the corps with a chord or dynamic change and “brushes” across to the other end covering all players. If going to the left the right hand is used and going to the right the left hand is used. Each performer changes the chord or dynamic when the signal is pointing at them (Figure 4). The conducted chord is where the musical director gives the next chord change with a prep and everyone changes on the downbeat to that next chord. Lastly, the dynamic change on next chord happens when the musical director will give the new dynamic which will be changed on the next chord change. All these different ways make the warm-up more interesting.

All these signals and changes are tools used by the musical director to make sure the corps is doing everything right. There are some specific things the director looks and listens for. The first things he watches and listens for are the breathing and attacking of the performers. If the corps doesn't breath together in time we won't attack together. This causes an unclear “popcorn” effect in the sound production. They make sure each performer is taking a deep breath from the “stomach” so the sound is relaxed, dark, and easier to tune as a group. Shallow breathing means tense sound and off tuning. I can say that at times I am guilty of shallow breathing. So when the director tells us its not dark enough I relax, take a comfortable deep breath, and let the air produce the sound. This always works for the corps. Another thing they rely on is everyone paying attention.

A lot of the players like to talk more than they should, and sometimes I'm guilty of that as well. The music director may only give a chord or dynamic change to half the group, either by a half ripple (stopping in the middle) or by directional conducting (pointing to range of players and conducting the new change) while the others would stay the same. Also, if a change is conducted making sure

everyone changes at the same time. Players not ready could come in late and cause the attack to be off. If this happens it is very frustrating to the director and to the players who are attentive.

Making dynamic changes consistent between levels is difficult. Thinking evenly throughout the levels is a tough thing for anyone to do. This is probably the topic that is focused on the least. I think if the director would just take time to practice this either on tuning C (concert Bb) or G (concert F) the corps could have a better idea where dynamic 1-5 are. 1 and 5 are the easiest because its the softest and loudest you can play, but its figuring out where 2, 3, and 4 feel like that's difficult.

Another concern is paying attention and keeping up with the speed of the director. They may use fast changes, slow changes, or a mix of both. Getting used to a certain speed could (and usually does) lead to a laziness during warm-up. I think this is fantastic but they don't do it hardly enough, in my opinion. Finally, when the director changes routine the corps is caught off guard because they just don't do it much. If the director did it a lot the corps would be on its toes more and ready for it when it comes.

The last thing the director listens for is tuning. Each performer is responsible for tuning within the group during ALL warm-ups, not just Chordal Warm-ups. If the musical director notices something wrong with any of these topics he will cut off the group and tell them what happened. On a few occasions they will tell the corps what they need to do to fix it. Otherwise its the corps responsibility to figure it out.

Throughout the warm-up, the sound as a corps doesn't blend as well until the chordal warm-up. The hand signals makes everything easier because, as a player, I can focus on my breathing, sound production, and meshing with the other members instead of looking at what note to play next. It also allows me to pay complete attention to the director. Incorporating this along with other warm-up routines would be very beneficial to any marching program. The signals are easy to remember, plus not all the signals need to be used. A program could use only the C, F, and G signals and have a lot of success.

Other warm-up methods adopted by Minnesota Brass Inc.:

- Lip Slurs {3, 4, and 5 partials; 0, 2, 1, 1-2, 1, 2, 0 fingering sequence}
- Long Tones {low C, G, and C; down all seven fingering patterns and back up}
- Power Chords {FΔ, GΔ9, AΔ9, BΔ9, CΔ9; in order going up}
- Caruso Study {note phrase given by director (attack note softest, crescendo to end of note)}
- Preliminary Warm-ups {up and down 3 and 5 scale degrees; each degree of C Major scale with their respected major scales (C Major, D Major, E Major,...)}
- Clark Studies {#2, repeated 3x: slur, legato, staccato}
- Stamp Symphony #3A {C-**D**-C-G-**A**-G-C; Bold means 2 counts, Bold and Italic means held until cut off; notes go down chromatically each time to low Db}

Figures

Figure 1- arc, circle, and block formation

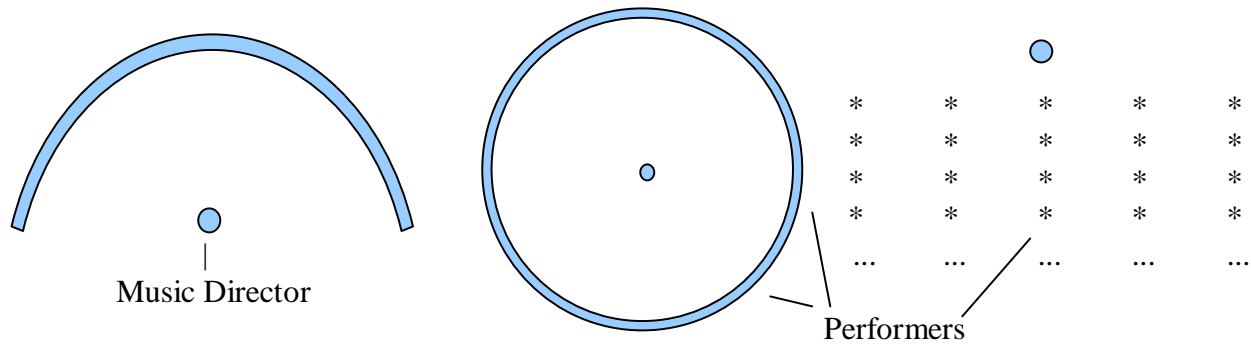


Figure 2- Dynamic hand signals

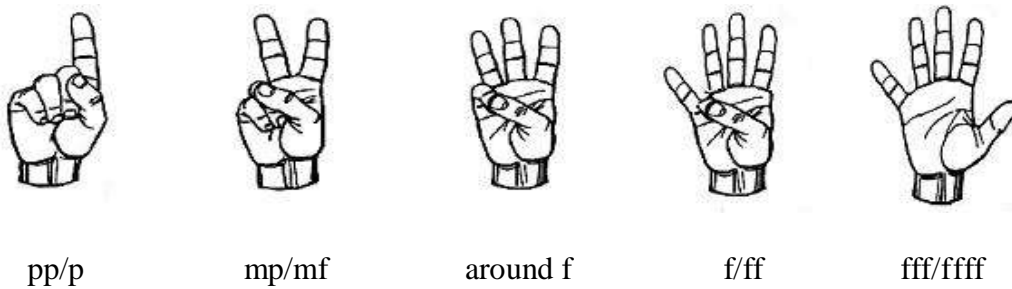


Figure 3- Chord hand signals (MAJOR and minor; taken from trumpet I, II, and III; *mostly used)

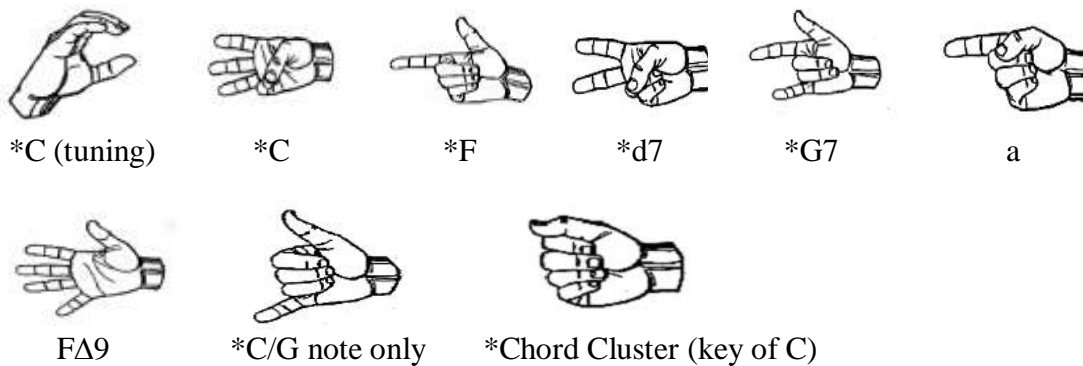


Figure 4- Chord change in a ripple (above view in arc; from C to F, right to left)

