

# It's All about Tone: Using the Concept of *Center* as a Teaching Strategy

By Al Corley, Ph.D.

One of the problems plaguing young players (and their respective ensembles) is the lack of strong, soloistic tone quality. Almost every band director considers tone a top teaching priority, yet many students make little to no improvement in tone quality throughout the high school years. Unfortunately there is no “end-all” approach to solving tone problems! But there is a teaching strategy that engages students in the process of achieving better tone quality and analyzing tonal problems...the process of *finding center*.



The concept of “finding center” allows directors to describe an otherwise complicated problem. In virtually every band hall in the country, directors use words like “loose, pinched, soggy, bright or honky” to describe poor tone. In fact, directors will use virtually any descriptor or euphemism that comes to mind. Unfortunately, teachers sometimes forget that there is a good deal of variability in how those descriptors can be interpreted. Furthermore, the use of such terms can sometimes be unintentionally upsetting for students. For example, what does it really mean to have a “flabby” sound? Students need simple descriptors for tone that are less likely to cause confusion or embarrassment.

*Center* as a description of tone implies that the many variables needed to produce the sound are all in sync. Airspeed, embouchure, oral cavity, facial tension and posture are properly addressed. Reeds, mouthpieces, ligatures and instruments are all functioning properly. In contrast, *above center* suggests tension, tightness and restriction, while *below center* suggests looseness, weakness and lack of support. Rather than “pinched, tight, sharp, bright, or thin”, directors can simply say *above center*. Rather than “flabby, loose, weak, puny, or unsupported”, directors can say *below center*.

## **Start from the beginning**

Teachers have listened to hundreds of auditions, concerts and recitals, all of which have helped them form a concept of good tone. On the other hand, students have very little first-hand knowledge of characteristic tone. If a student doesn't have an aural image of a good tone (a “center”), they will not be able to identify if they are playing above or below center. Jagow (2007) suggests that students need continual reminders through recordings, master classes and live performances of good tones before they can begin to assimilate the concept into their own playing. Directors need to plan assignments and assessments that require students to gather information about good and bad tones on their instruments, using the terms *centered*, *above center* and *below center* as descriptors.

## **Identify the variables**

After students have developed an aural image of *center*, *above center* and *below center*, they need to learn the many variables that affect the tone. Many directors consider air and

embouchure important variables for an individual's tone (Casey, 1993), but other variables are also important. Among those are:

1. amount of mouthpiece
2. oral cavity
3. posture
4. facial tension
5. reeds
6. mouthpiece
7. instrument

Still other factors can affect students' tones, including the color and texture of a particular musical selection, ensemble blend and balance and the director's concept of tone. (Jagow, 2007) It is the director's responsibility to help identify the variables most appropriate to each student's ability and experience. Those variables should then be addressed in terms of *center*.

The following chart identifies how certain variables may affect tonal center:

VARIABLE	ABOVE CENTER	BELOW CENTER
Airspeed	Excessive	Weak, minimal
Posture	Rigid, tense	Slack, slumped
Facial tension	Tight, contorted	Excessively, slack
Mouthpiece choice	Tip opening too closed	Tip opening too open
Reeds	Too hard	Too soft
<b>Embouchure variables</b>		
Top and bottom lip firmness	Excessive, squeezed	Loose, no gripping
Bottom teeth pressure	Strong, biting	Minimal
Bottom lip over teeth	Mostly rolled in (no red showing)	Mostly rolled out
Corner pressure	Squeezed, tight	Leaking air
Chin	Bunched, distorted	Relaxed, loose
Mouthpiece angle (clarinet)	In too close, pulled down	Too far out, up
Amount of mouthpiece	Too much in mouth	Top teeth near tip
Oral cavity (jaw)	Back teeth too close	Back teeth too open
Oral cavity (tongue)	Arched too high	Dropped too low

### **Teaching the concept**

Section rehearsals are a great place for teaching center. Directors need to hear each student play individually. Students need to be held accountable for producing a centered sound and should be encouraged to manipulate the variables in the chart in order to find their fullest and most vibrant tone. Likewise, they should learn to analyze and describe possible causes for poor tone. After some experimentation and encouraging words from the director, most students will begin to sharpen their problem-solving skills and will respond to the simple suggestion: "You are playing a little above center today." Such a comment encourages students to engage in the diagnostic process and determine for themselves what is causing the problem - which may be different from day to day.

During full band rehearsals encourage full, vibrant sounds from each player. Reinforce the concept of “center” throughout warm-ups and training exercises. If students have a mature, centered tone, acknowledge it to the class and use it as a model for the other students. Be very careful not to stress “blend and balance” too soon. Unfortunately, some directors may inadvertently sacrifice good tone quality by employing such tactics as “taking out the highs” in an effort to achieve better ensemble blend. This sort of rehearsal strategy often results in young players producing tones *below center*. If students are not given the freedom to play fully and vibrantly, they will never learn to refine and strengthen their tones.

Along the same line, some directors think that all players in a given section should have identical tone quality. Given that every student has different lips, teeth and oral cavities, a better strategy is to help each student find his or her *center*. Even if the individual tones are slightly different, the overall tonal spectrum will be enriched by the slightly different tonal colors. In short, good *center* corrects many “balance and blend” problems.

### **Reaping the benefits**

A well-planned strategy for teaching tone is worth the time and trouble. The approach outlined in this article provides a positive, student-centered vocabulary for addressing the problem, while encouraging students to be active participants in the diagnostic and problem-solving process. Directors may have to develop new activities, assignments and assessments, but that is a small price to pay for the increased maturity in the sound of the ensemble. Imagine the sound of a young clarinet section when over half the players begin finding center! Intonation and technique begin to stabilize, and before long, doors open to musical expression and interpretation that had previously been nailed shut. It is an exciting prospect and a very obtainable goal. The lack of a good tone does not have to be an ever-present problem; it can instead be a springboard for an engaging learning process...the process of *finding center*.

### **References**

Casey, J. (1993). *Teaching techniques and insights for instrumental music educators*. (Revised). Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc., pp.359-365.

Jagow, S. (2007). *Developing the complete band program*. Galesville, MD: Meredith Music, pp. 34-45.



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