




# PREPARE

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# PRACTICE

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# PERFORM

**By Marjorie LoPresti, Digital Content Manager, MusicFirst  
and Scott Casagrande**

**I**T'S THE TIME OF YEAR when most scholastic educators are moving toward the finish line. Music teachers are also making sure that their students shine in the final performances of the school year – festivals, concerts, parades, and ceremonies, like graduation. But every seasoned teacher knows that it's never too soon to plan for summer and fall, even if only with mental notes, if not sticky notes, or tools like Notebook, Evernote, or Google Keep.

You've probably already selected some of your repertoire for the new school year. For marching band, this may even include custom arrangements. What if your students could arrive at band camp with most of that music learned? Imagine that your chorus, orchestra, or wind ensemble students have mastered the notes and rhythms for

your fall concert less than four weeks into school? It's not a dream—it's a matter of preparation. Several online tools can help accelerate note-learning and free up valuable rehearsal time for music-making. With some preparation on your part, chorus, band, and orchestra students can practice more efficiently, rehearsals will focus more on artistry, and it is more likely that the ensemble will give a stellar performance.

#### **PRACTICE MATERIALS AND COPYRIGHT**

Using any number of types of music software, you can convert your music to useable practice material with one big caveat: copyright. During the heart of the pandemic, many publishers granted temporary electronic distribution rights for educational use. That

## Louisiana All-State Concert Band



permission is being rolled back. If using custom arrangements of copyrighted works, your agreement with the publisher/arranger should include the right to distribute audio renderings for rehearsal purposes. As soon as you plan to distribute copies or tracks of someone else's arrangement, be sure to have permission. If the source music is in the public domain and you've arranged it yourself, no agreement is needed.

### PREPARE: PRACTICE MATERIALS

Back in the day, we made practice tracks with live audio recordings using select students for the performance model, or just with the teacher singing or playing. Those tracks were

shared with students via cassette tape or CD. Piano keyboards with recording capabilities and music software like notation programs and digital audio workstations (DAWs) made that task more precise. Even now, anyone can download a notation file of a public domain work from a public domain music library like IMSLP.org or CPDL.org, then import it into a notation program or DAW. After arranging the music as needed, best practices include creating versions for each section by boosting the volume of individual parts in the mixer, or muting parts for a "music minus one" effect. Practice tracks like these can be shared with students easily via platforms like Google Classroom, Schoology, or PowerSchool.

In a recent issue of the *In Tune Monthly Teachers Edition* (Vol.19, No.3), Dr. Jim Frankel outlined some options for “Getting Your Music Off the Page” by going from print music to useable electronic practice files. Dr. Frankel outlined various scanning options and a relatively new software option called Newzik. With Newzik, you can upload a PDF and Newzik converts it to MusicXML for playback. Once uploaded, you can mark up the score and/or embed external audio, MIDI or YouTube videos. Students will see and hear the score, control the playback tempo, and balance track volumes with an included mixer - and even record themselves. For music ensembles, especially choirs, this is a game-changer. Newzik has partnered with several publishers, so you may be able to purchase copyrighted arrangements and use them with this powerful tool.

**PRACTICE: BETTER & FASTER STRATEGIES FOR STUDENTS**

Hearing is believing. Recording technologies have revolutionized music performance and music learning. Even now, having students listen to a recording of a lesson or

rehearsal provides the imperative for corrections and improvements needed. Practice tracks, recording programs, DAWs, Newzik and even Noteflight Learn provide opportunities for students to record and self-assess in the context of a correct musical model. Programs like PracticeFirst and SmartMusic go beyond student self-assessment, providing immediate objective feedback on accuracy. Users receive specific guidance on what sections of the music need more work. The case study below provides evidence that providing students with such an effective practice tool before rehearsal, with support and instruction on how to use those tools, makes a difference.

**FROM PRACTICE TO PERFORMANCE**

In February 2022, MusicFirst Educational Consultant Scott Casagrande conducted the Louisiana All-State Concert Band and initiated a program enabling students to learn their individual parts prior to the start of the festival. The students were given complimentary subscriptions to PracticeFirst, the practice and assessment software available through MusicFirst. The goal was for students to learn their music prior to the first rehearsal, allowing more time for cultivation of

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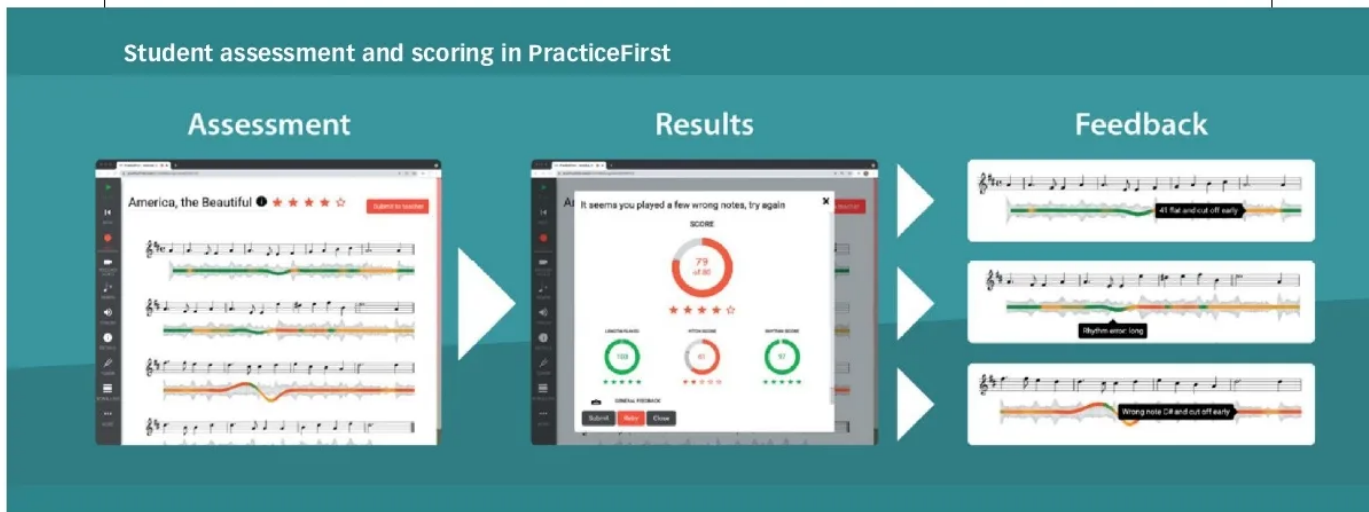


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musical detail and artistry, rather than spending precious time learning notes and rhythms. Students met with the conductor and organizer via a Zoom during which the process of how to use PracticeFirst and prepare for the concert was explained and demonstrated. A written handout with instructions was shared with students, and the organizer communicated directly with any students unable to make the meeting.

As with some groups of teenagers, several students missed the meeting, did not read the instructions, or forgot the instructions and then asked many questions, so their process of learning the music was slower. A few students did not practice at all ahead of time and they struggled during the first rehearsal. However, because everyone around them was confident in their parts, they learned the music very quickly. Some directors were concerned about the additional practice required for participating students, but the quality of the concert calmed their objections.

From the first hour of rehearsal, the band addressed musicality, precision, fundamental sound, and intonation. The Louisiana All State experience was richer and had a lasting impact on the participants, thanks to the preparation of students prior to the first rehearsal. The same can be said for how PracticeFirst can make an impact for any ensemble wanting to move their in-person music-making to the next level.

**PREPARE – PRACTICE – PERFORM**

You're already preparing by reading and thinking about the next school year. You may also be thinking that preparing those practice materials seems like a lot of work. Start with one or two pieces – perhaps a piece that you use frequently, such as your school Alma Mater or the Star-Spangled Ban-

ner (in the public domain and easy to find online). From there, add a public domain work you plan to perform, or maybe something for which you already hold or have purchased the appropriate use rights. If you have student leaders or others who are adept with music notation files, enlist their help too. If you can allocate some of your budget, subscription products like PracticeFirst and SmartMusic offer libraries of fabulous pieces, and their affordability may surprise you. Your future self, your students, and their audiences will thank you for time well spent to build a better performance, and ultimately a stronger program. ¶

**SCOTT J. CASAGRANDE** is an Education Consultant for MusicFirst, Music Education Consultant for Music For All, and an administrator for the Dr. William P. Foster Project which supports bands in under-served communities. He is a frequent guest conductor, Past-President of the National Band Association, and was a member of the NBA Executive Board from 2012-2020. Mr. Casagrande was Director of Bands at John Hersey High School in Arlington Heights, IL for 22 years, and retired in June, 2021 after completing 33 years of teaching in Illinois public schools.

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