

BETTER SOUND TO ELEVATE PERFORMANCE

BY STACY HANSON



PRACTICE, it has been said, makes perfect. But many practice spaces are far from perfect. And all of the practice in the world can't help the musician overcome interior acoustic problems. The size, shape and surface materials of a rehearsal area all play key roles in defining the acoustics of the space. Some rooms are too loud, or it's hard to hear with echoes, flutters, hot spots, dead spots, or excessive vibration.

Wenger's Matt Hildebrand doesn't diagnose the problems, but often helps present the solution. As Acoustics Product Manager at Wenger Corporation, he sees a number of issues in practice and performance spaces. "We'll often look at using panels, drapery or other tools to accommodate a variety of performance needs," Hildebrand explains. "But sometimes the best solution is electronically enhanced acoustics."

Many schools have chosen Wenger's VAE system: an active acoustics solution that includes a system of microphones and speakers to help project sound among musicians and into the audience. It's been used in practice and performance spaces alike. The system helps students improve intonation, articulation, balance, blend, interpretation, and critical listening techniques.



Some of the many benefits include:

- Creating a more flexible classroom by optimizing acoustics in multi-purpose spaces – from lecture and jazz to orchestra and choir rehearsal.
- Its ability to overcome a low ceiling. It provides a supportive yet hearing-safe environment in rehearsal spaces with inadequate room volume.
- Accelerated learning – the system allows for several acoustical



environments to help musicians develop critical listening skills and adjust to a variety of venues.

“Most schools can’t afford to have a different venue for every different acoustical need, so a system like this can satisfy everyone,” Hildebrand says. “It’s high-performance and offers great flexibility.”

Hear It to Believe It

Band Director Matt Weidner at Gunnison Valley High School in Gunnison, Utah says he uses the system to prepare for festivals and concerts. “We have our festival performances in a very live hall. In rehearsal, I’m able to choose the medium or large concert hall setting – or somewhere in between using the level setting – and adjust it so it’s really close to the hall where we perform for festivals. I listen to our festival recordings and try to match that sound in our room.

COVID has imposed additional space constraints on some

schools, making it harder to assemble the entire band at once. Tami Goss, Band Director at Bridge City High School in Bridge City, Texas is able to prepare her students virtually, half at a time. “Getting my middle school band classes together to rehearse for a concert is difficult. We usually just get one 30-minute rehearsal with everyone on stage. To prepare for our spring concert, we recorded one of the largest classes – trumpets and clarinets – playing the music and the other two classes could play along later, hearing the other parts and fitting together. This made preparing much easier and I thought our concert turned out much better too.”

Some teachers like to keep their students on their toes by switching the settings. “Sometimes I don’t tell my students; I like to see if they notice a difference in the way they feel when singing,” says Jacquelyn Vondette Choir Director, West Lake Middle School in Humble, Texas. She also uses it to hone critical listening and evaluation skills. She asks her students to listen to a recording of themselves and offer positive feedback, along



Microphone set ups



with specific things they can improve upon.

Responding to music is an important component of the National Standards, which involves emotional and psychological reflection. Mark Gitch, Orchestra Director at Wayzata High School in Plymouth, Minnesota likes that his student musicians have the opportunity to respond artistically with an immediacy that promotes understanding and retention, encouraging them to ask themselves, “Are we telling the story we want to tell? Are we taking the composer’s intent to heart and communicating that intent to one another and to our audience? If I’m not moved as a musician, how can I expect the audience to be moved?” Wrestling with such questions is a core element of the musical experience.

Finishing Touches

Once the band, choir or orchestra has had time with the system, Hildebrand can come back and make small adjustments that cater to their needs. “We typically let the school use it for a while, and then go back in six months and see if anything needs to be tweaked. It takes time to get a sense of what it is and how to maximize the settings,” Hildebrand says. The whole point is

to enhance the sound for performer and audience, and make the most of the space, no matter its shortcomings. **T**



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