

A Discussion of the *Watkins-Farnum Performance Scale*

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There *are* objective ways to evaluate instrumentalists' accuracy and progress, but that wasn't always true. Now (as of January 2021), *Smartmusic*[®], *Sight Reading Factory*[®], *NoteFlight-SoundCheck* and other emerging assessment technologies can provide what we sometimes need: a numerical, objective measurement of performance. *Objectivity* is helpful for monitoring technical skills, rhythm, sight-reading, range, articulation speed, and more. Even if the artistic aspects of performance are more difficult to "score" – and usually require subjective, opinion-based rating – we nonetheless often need *objective scores* for acceptance to advanced groups, seating placement, tie-breakers, benchmarking, growth assessment, qualification for "levels", etcetera.

The Watkins-Farnum Performance is one such objective measurement device, with a long history of documented reliability and validity. This short essay will describe the test, and will offer a general guide for how it might be incorporated into your Band program.

A simple web-search tells us that: **The *Watkins-Farnum Performance Scale* is a standardized achievement test for: year to year progress records, band tryouts, seating placement, sight reading test, etc. Simple to administer and easy to grade with a minimum of paperwork, the *Watkins-Farnum Performance Scale* promises to be an invaluable aid to the instrumental music instructor.**

The assessment is provided with:

1. a **booklet** of test etudes, which also contains all of the specific instructions for giving the test, and
2. a **pad of scoresheets**, edited for all wind instruments and snare drum, on which the instructor writes the notations in terms of codes (described below).

The *WFPS* (from here on) is designed in two equivalent versions - **Form A** and **Form B**. The two forms are nearly the same in all respects, and have been tested for reliability. The differences between *Forms A* and *B* are enough that *students cannot memorize the etudes* (which could skew the results), but all of the same skills and elements are tested. For grading, the band director listens to the performance, marking each incorrect measure with an error-code. Most codes are single letters, and they are all logical to use and to read for review later. They'll provide you with a nice record of students' strengths and weaknesses. Examples: **R** is a rhythm error, **P** a pitch error, and **E** an expression error, along with others. I recommend retaining the scoresheets to track the students' progress over time. You'll easily see if a student understands the concept of cut-time during sight-reading, for instance, or whether the student recognizes and applies important markings at sight.

Probably the most important characteristic of The Watkins-Farnum Performance Scale is that it is highly objective. Its design helps to ensure that any given student's performance would earn almost *the same score from any judge*, regardless of who listens to it. The instructions allow the grades to be both standardized and consistent. Any scoring inconsistencies are small. These differences can arise because of subtle choices made during ambiguous moments like, "I think I heard the student add a slur there, but maybe it was just a very soft tongue", or "I couldn't quite tell if the Snare Drummer broke a tie in that roll." If the test is administered as instructed, it is impossible for two graders to disagree by more than a few points. Even with small inconsistencies, however, a performance scored at 'approximately' 40 would be radically different from one scored at 'around' 60. Note, however, that *The Watkins-Farnum Performance Scale* doesn't address the more subjective errors in music, like non-artistic phrasing or faulty intonation (unless the intonation is so bad

that the listener hears an entirely different note). Without those gray-area topics, this assessment can remain very objective and easy to score.

In my own experience with grades 9-through-12, I'd score *new* students in August and September (incoming Freshmen, transfers, and students returning to Band after prolonged absence), and then *all* students would perform the WFPS at the end of the school year.

Note: If *Form A* was used for the *new* students in September, *all* students perform from *Form B* at the end of the school year; incoming students in the follow-up year take *Form B* and all students then return to *Form B* in the following May-June. Thus, students always *alternate* tests to avoid memorization.

The following is a basic outline of how I used the WFPS with my students for over thirty years.

1. **In September: Administer the Watkins-Farnum Performance Scale to each new student** (*Freshmen, Transfers, and returning players*) Compare the new students' baseline scores to veterans' scores from the previous May-June. If desired, use the test results in a comparative way (for parts, seating order, etc.)
2. **In May/June: readminister the test to *all* students.** (Use the parallel test)

Reading below, you'll see much greater detail if you choose to give the Watkins-Farnum Performance Scale, and about *how to use the scores* in two ways:

- ☞ Use the scores to organize the band (seating order, parts distribution, music-selection, pacing and more). And,
- ☞ Consider using contests, displays and recognitions to motivate students.

The following is a detailed and descriptive blueprint, expanding the plan outlined above:

- **During the first week of school, administer the Watkins-Farnum Performance Scale to each new student:** to the *Freshmen* in my grades 9-12 program, to *transfer* students arriving from another school, and to *returning players* after missing at least a year of Band. This is an effective way to gather data about each new player's skill-level, and to formulate your plans to help everyone individually. A student's Watkins-Farnum test performance gives me essential information, allowing me to personalize my curricular choices for every individual. With those details about students' skills, I can select the best-matched methods, solos, technique etudes, and supplemental activities.
- **Compare the new students' September scores to the veterans' scores from May-June.** Even if this comparison isn't completely accurate, it simplifies the process of choosing repertoire to target the median ability level for the large ensembles.

- **If desired, use the test results in a comparative way.** The scores give me documented evidence from which to design temporary seating placement (1st vs. 2nd chair) and part-assignments (2nd vs. 3rd Trumpet).
- **At the end of the year give the parallel test, this time to *all* students.** If *Form A* was used for the new students in September, follow with *Form B* in May-June. The year-end assessment lets us measure students' growth objectively, even though music is a subjective art. Whether in science, math, management or music, *'that which can be measured can be improved.'* With this cardinal principle in mind, I added a novelty for band students at my school:
- **Display a chart allowing students to compare themselves *anonymously* to others.** I used the test results that I had collected over many years, and created a chart showing *average* scores [below] for our school. The WFPS in its published version is printed with a line-graph on each scoresheet showing the *average scores* earned by each instrument at various times in their development (*scores after studying 1 year, 2 years, 3 years, etc.*). However, I'd caution that those averages were created at a time when educational factors and societal conditions were very different than now. For our school's innovation, I displayed our own averages-chart as an annual part of my classroom environment. The chart is a simple matrix, showing grades (9-10-11-12) at the top margin, and Instruments (Flute, Oboe, Clarinet Bass Clarinet, etc.) down the left-side margin. Thus, a Trombone player in 11th grade can easily compare her own score to that of the "Trombone 11" averages for our school. Since I keep the results confidential, each student knows *only* his/her own score. But then a student can check his/her score against the chart to notice that, for example, *"I'm a Flutist at the end of 10th grade, and I scored 72. I can see on the chart that the average sophomore score at our school is 60.05 so I'm above average. In fact, my score is almost equal to the Seniors' average. I'm doing well!"* If there is only *one* Bassoon player in your program, there's still no risk to that student because this chart shows a cumulative average across more than one year. This type of chart – *specific to each instrument and grade-level* – is important because it is much more difficult for a French Horn player (for example) to get a high score than for Flute or Saxophone players.
- **Optionally, display all the scores for the current year, but list the scores *anonymously*.** In some years, when my time allowed, I'd use an Excel file to display the scores, sorted from highest to lowest. Excel is just one of many options; you can determine if your favorite database, spreadsheet or management software works better for you. *The critical choice that allows this to work fairly is that I use only code-numbers, and not the students' names.* Using my Excel file, I added an empty column, and then fill it with code numbers (use the *'fill series'* command) which I shared with students individually. *I assigned a "secret code number" to every student in my program in September, and then we used it for the entire year for a variety of anonymous functions.* With both the averages chart and the scores displayed, it's possible to maintain the students' competitiveness and encourage them to practice because we're keeping the results anonymous. Anonymity avoids causing any feelings of embarrassment or failure, while allowing intrinsic competitiveness to thrive.
- **Consider using recognitions.** If your students respond well to extrinsic motivation, this sight-reading assessment process with *The Watkins-Farnum Performance Scale* is an innocuous method of offering awards. With just a little typing and a package of certificate paper, you can create attractive awards.

Examples: *Best Sight-Reading Score of the Year* (an *overall* award, plus individual awards for each grade, 9-10-11-12, and for each instrument, Flute/Oboe/Clarinet/etcetera), *Most Improved* from the previous year, and perhaps others of your own creative design. You might include a full-year display of student-honorees' names – this time *not anonymous*, but with the student's full name. In my teaching, I also kept and displayed a running list of the "Top 15 Highest Sight-Reading Scores in School History". Students in many schools are already accustomed to this process in Phys Ed classes, where they can look at the gymnasium wall to see names of students who hold athletic records of all kinds. *Intrinsic competitiveness* works just as well in the bandroom as in the athletic and academic arenas. At the time I retired, students could view the scoring records for their *instrument*, and they knew that the "highest score ever" for our school was 141, earned during her senior year by a flutist now enjoying a music career with the Marine Band.

AVERAGES CHART Sample below >>>

1997-2012 CUMULATIVE AVERAGES

	9th	10th	11th	12th	AVG
Flute	45.46	60.05	69.75	74.90	62.54
Oboe	56.86	68.43	70.00	78.40	68.42
Bassoon	65.00	72.40	83.50	93.25	78.54
Clarinet	50.91	58.51	63.77	70.59	60.94
Bass Clarinet	48.17	57.13	56.43	63.44	56.29
Saxophone	49.20	60.50	66.44	82.27	64.60
Trumpet	43.78	48.84	61.95	64.61	54.80
French Horn	33.57	42.84	50.54	53.33	45.07
Trombone	37.40	51.75	56.13	66.69	52.99
Euphonium	39.38	45.15	46.00	71.20	50.43
Tuba	44.10	54.78	61.00	69.71	57.40
Percussion	56.69	62.48	69.49	69.45	64.53
Mallets	41.13	46.00	53.00	56.00	49.03