

USING THE HAND SIGNAL CHORD SYSTEM

Score Below

A Hand Signal system can be used for any instrumental or vocal group. Once your ensemble is able to switch between each signal (column) without music, you can very quickly check tuning, create basic chord progressions, and even create some very dense harmonies by implementing the suggestions below.

HOW IT WORKS:

Hold up a particular hand signal, both hands up high so everyone can see them, and then give a downbeat - away you go. You can then hold up another signal, and upon giving the downbeat, the ensemble changes to the appropriate note or chord. Using 1, 4, 5, and 1 fingers creates a I-IV-V-I progression in Bb. 4, P, 1, 4 makes a I-IV-V-I progression in Eb, etc. There are many combinations possible - it's up to the conductor. Mixing and matching gives the conductor the chance to work on tuning whenever needed (I often went into different hand signals at the end of exercises during warm ups).

OPTIONS

Split the ensemble (high/low; left/right; WW/Brass; etc.)

- Hold both hands in front with one hand above the other assigning one group to each hand signal.
- 1 over 2 creates an Ebmaj7,9 chord (Bb over Eb)
Hold 1 while other group goes 3, 2, 1, then switch. (Bb pedal - F, Eb, Bb moving)
- Leave one group on a chord and turn to the other and do a progression over their pedal
- 3 over 1 creates Bbmaj9; 5 over 2 = Eb6; 5 over 3 = F7, 9, 11
- 1 over 4 puts a Bb chord over an Ab chord - then resolve Ab up to the Bb. Be creative.
- While one group holds a Bb (1) chord, other group cycles through G (3), F (2), Bb (1), then switch.
- Many possibilities. Putting the hands back in front cancels the split.

OTHER POSSIBILITIES

Different tonal centers

4 - p - 1 - 4 is Eb, Ab, Bb, Eb

4 - 2 - p - 1 is a I-vi-IV-V progression in Eb

Of course 2 - 5 - 1 is as expected.

- I've thought about making an alternate 2 that would be C major.
- This would open up a lot of possibilities around F major

SWEEP IN CHORD CHANGES.

- Once a chord is established, hold a different sign out to either side, and as you pass each member in a sweeping motion they change to the new chord. (So while a Bb chord is being played, you can 'sweep in' and Eb chord from one side across to the other).

SWEEPING IN DYNAMICS.

- Similar to above, except point to the beginning of either side, and you pass each member while sweeping, they come up to forte and then go back to normal volume once you've passed them. (this turns into a 'wave' type of effect with volume).

SPACE CHORD

- Hold your hands as 2 fists one on top of the other (touching). This indicates members pick any note they wish, creating a 'white noise' effect. Encourage students to be purposeful in picking accidental notes that truly clash with those around them. This is a great balance exercise. Try sweeping dynamics to really test balance and listening. Other signs could include:

LETTER T, go down chromatically from the chord you're presently on.

- This is for more advanced ensembles.
- Once I've established the T to whoever it's intended for, I turn my pointer finger in and go either up or down stepwise by raising/lowering the finger. For the whole band my pointers would be turned in towards each other.
 - You could keep half the band on one chord while the other half goes up/down chromatically. One hand would hold the chord signal while the other hand would have the finger pointed in and raising/lowering as desired. Going back to fingers up cancels the T.

USING HARMONY TO TEACH BASIC CHORD CHANGES, OR IMPROVISATION.

- Do hand signals in blues form (I-IV-V-I; IV-b7-I-IV). Have the ensemble repeat as needed.
- Perhaps attach a rhythm to each chord to establish background riffs.
- You can also give a prescribed chord progression ahead of time (write it on the board) or have students come up with their own.
- I also let students conduct hand signals but limit who is capable (Honors Band, Drum Major, Seniors, etc.)

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:

- Percussion may be involved with hand signals, as seen on this chart.
 - This requires everything to be in tempo.
 - In this case, before switching to the next chord, give the signal ahead of time, and then when ready give a downbeat in tempo to make the switch. I give a 'heads up' signal before changing chords anyway. This is helpful when students are still getting familiar with their assigned notes.
 - I also make an O with my hand to percussion ahead of any downbeat (and chord) and they know to go to a buzz roll/fermata (no matter what the chord is) to 'end' the pulse.
- Vocal groups could also incorporate hand signals. Assign Soprano voices to Flute part, Altos to Oboe part, Tenors to Trombone, and Basses to Bassoon part (or re-orchestrate the chords to fit your vocal ensemble's particular instrumentation, range, or vocal limits).

Other ideas? Send them along to Jeff at: jeff@bolducmusic.com

Hand Signal Chords for Band

Conductor
Signals

Letter	Thumb	Thumb	fingers -->					Pinky
C	Up	Down	1	2	3	4	5	

The musical score is arranged in two systems. The first system includes Flute 1, 2; Oboe 1, 2; Clarinet 1, 2, 3; Bass Clarinet; Alto 1, 2; Tenor 1, 2; and Bari Sax. The second system includes Trumpet 1, 2, 3; Horn 1, 2; Trombone 1, 2, 3; Bari/Euphonium; Bassoon/Tuba; Mallets; and Snare. Each staff shows a sequence of chords corresponding to the hand signals. Below the staves, the chord names and their fingerings are listed.

Instrument	Conc.	F/Bb	Bb/Eb	Bb	Cm7	Gmi7	Eb	F	Ab
Flute 1, 2	Unison	Root/5th	4th/Root	I	ii	vi	IV	V	b7
Oboe 1, 2	Unison	Root/5th	4th/Root	I	ii	vi	IV	V	b7
Clarinet 1, 2, 3	Unison	Root/5th	4th/Root	I	ii	vi	IV	V	b7
Bass Cl.	Unison	Root/5th	4th/Root	I	ii	vi	IV	V	b7
Alto 1, 2	Unison	Root/5th	4th/Root	I	ii	vi	IV	V	b7
Tenor 1, 2	Unison	Root/5th	4th/Root	I	ii	vi	IV	V	b7
Bari Sax	Unison	Root/5th	4th/Root	I	ii	vi	IV	V	b7
Trumpet 1, 2, 3	Unison	Root/5th	4th/Root	I	ii	vi	IV	V	b7
Horn 1, 2	Unison	Root/5th	4th/Root	I	ii	vi	IV	V	b7
Trombone 1, 2, 3	Unison	Root/5th	4th/Root	I	ii	vi	IV	V	b7
Bari/Euph.	Unison	Root/5th	4th/Root	I	ii	vi	IV	V	b7
Bassoon/Tuba	Unison	Root/5th	4th/Root	I	ii	vi	IV	V	b7
Mallets	Unison	Root/5th	4th/Root	I	ii	vi	IV	V	b7
Snare	Unison	Root/5th	4th/Root	I	ii	vi	IV	V	b7