



Senior High Orchestra

Melodic Ear-Training in the Large Group

by Mark Gitch

Here in Owatonna, almost all of our students learned to read music as they learned to play their instruments. And although we have certainly found much success using this traditional approach, a resultant problem is the almost total reliance on the printed page in order to perform. Encouraging memorization of repertoire has helped to reduce this reliance to some extent, but the page is still the prerequisite starting point. And while they may sight-read quite well, our traditional students simply lack the ear-training background of Suzuki students.

The answer for many teachers in this situation has been to teach improvisation. But, speaking as someone with only a fledgling jazz collection and poor figured-bass and ornamentation skills, teaching improvisation feels awkward even in my best attempts. Each time I have tried, my students look at me as if to say, "At least he means well!" Now don't get me wrong, we've played the Turtle Island arrangements and had a great time, but when we get to the improv sections I get cold feet. It'll happen some day, but I realized I couldn't wait until the Jean-Luc Ponty in me came out to put the music away and work on melodic ear training.

The search for a safer point of departure took me no further than my Kodaly-trained, Suzuki-raised wife. She helped to write the following lesson, which I use for the first rehearsal of my freshman orchestra each year. The students enjoy the challenge, and the safety, of learning in unison. I vary which instrument I use to play the melody so that the basses learn to hear the pitch from the "screeching" violin and the violins learn to discern pitches from the "rumbling" bass. If using a piano, vary or double the octave. Singing also works well. This particular lesson uses the melody *Viva la Musica* from *Classical Canons*, although any round or canon would do. Another good

source for material is *Round and Canons*, edited by William Starr and published by Summy-Birchard. It is important that the teacher has the tune memorized before trying to teach this lesson.

Have everyone stand up and play sol-fa-mi-re-doh (in the key of the round) a couple of times. Then have students fill in the blank:

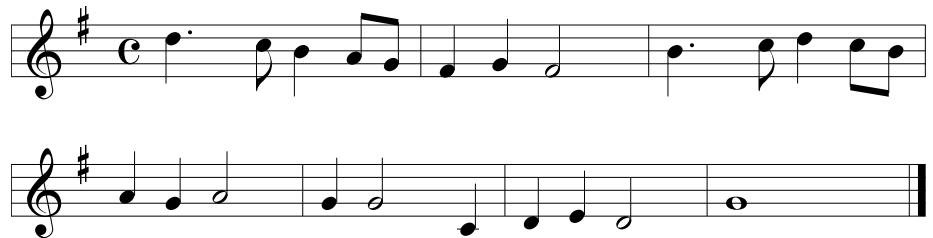
"Will you please sit _____ (Down)" (Sol fa mi re ... doh)

Follow by repeating and asking the student to do the actions as they sing them (actually sitting down). Then do it without the words, playing with the tempo like a game of musical chairs (my wife took a Dalcroze class, too). Then ask the students to identify if the notes move

the conductor.

By now the students should know these notes well enough to add rhythmic variation, taught in a call/response format. Using the same descending pattern, play: ♩ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ Emphasize the first note and incorporate phrasing concepts right away. Then play: ♩ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ Then add the next note (ti): ♩ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ Finally, finish the first phrase: ♩ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ | ♩ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ | Continue this pattern for the next two phrases, and then piece the whole melody together. Depending on the group, this may take a half-hour or two days.

Always demand musical playing and beautiful tone from the bow and left hand. Once learned, use these exercises



Viva la Musica from *Classical Canons*

by step or leap (answer: by step), and have them imitate that step-wise motion in their actions. Play the pattern again; the students should move steadily to the seated position. When ready, reverse the pattern to an ascending line (doh sol). If they don't catch on, prompt them with "Will you please stand _____ (up)." Finally, in a last burst of Dalcroze, alternate the pattern direction and tempo a few times, finishing on doh.

Next ask the students to work in pairs to find the notes of the descending pattern on their instrument. Have them watch for a predetermined signal to bring the group back to attention. Then, play the pattern in unison, first in quarter notes, then in notes of varying lengths as led by

for unison conducting exercises and playing in canon.

I also used this approach to teach *Aura Lee* out of the Starr book for a performance at one of our concerts. The students spread out in the auditorium and played the four-part canon without conductor. Unison ear-training also works well for full orchestra warm-ups. And while I hope to "graduate" to teaching improvisation in the future, rote learning with older students has proven to be a rewarding first step.

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