

All-State: Deb Sittko on Training Winds to Play in the Orchestra

by Janie Maly

There are good reasons to involve wind players in middle school orchestra. It is true to the music; orchestral music is really not just strings. It raises the level for string players by broadening their focus. For the wind players who are impatient with band repertoire, it opens up orchestra literature. Bassoon, oboe and horn are three significant voices in the full orchestra. Their use in band is limited and so these instrumentalists miss hearing their own unique timbre in the symphonic context.

When to start? How to find and recruit competent wind players? How to find the time to meet the extra needs of the wind players? Beginning in middle school forms a bond between winds and strings, and training is incremental. Involve string players in recruiting the capable wind players. String players know whom among their friends to invite to join them in performance. This increases the enjoyment for both groups of students. This results in the band parents seeing and hearing the orchestra experience. This translates into greater visibility, stability and support for the orchestra program.

Some of the difficulties encountered when the two groups begin to rehearse are: intonation, performance dynamics, and the technical challenges of each instrument.

Intonation problems occur when temperature and humidity change the string intonation as a group in the same direction, but after initial warm up the winds are not as affected. Use mini training sessions to help wind players adjust their tuning. The winds need to learn the new fingering patterns of new key signatures. Transposing must be introduced in a training session. If the sound is good, self-esteem rises and

the wind player who feels very much exposed will return for more.

Performance dynamics names the frightening reality for the select players who are unused to soloing over a group in new, difficult key signatures where the intonation problems make the soloists sound dreadful. One solution is to use music for early winds. During rehearsals, help the wind player who anticipates entrances with dread. (After counting many measures of rest, the nervous wind player is just about to enter when the conductor often stops and returns to the previous section so the counting begins all over again.) Let wind players become familiar with the total work and see how their part fits in. There are also endurance problems, but they can be obviated if string and wind players get to know each other. When first adding winds, double everything, especially oboes, bassoons and horns. Beginning level players' comfort level rises with partnering. Students can compare notes on the technical details, help each other count, remember details such as rehearsal times and back up for each other in the event of glitches. This also provides opportunities for more players to learn how to play with strings.

The technically challenging aspects of each instrument pose the question to the string director, "Whose job is it to train the wind players?" The band director usually does know how but may not have had orchestral experience. Ms. Sittko recommends that wind players study privately. Consider inviting members of the civic symphony to help train the winds. Setting up permanent wind quintets establishes a venue for preparation, independent part reading and honors these hard working performers. Interviewing can easily replace the audition

unless there is a strong group of winds and the audition is a tradition. If your counterpart in the band department is not interested, Ms. Sittko suggests assuming the responsibility of training the wind player, adopting a non-threatening stance and carrying on with or without cooperation.

It is crucial to carefully select the music. In the beginning, choose music where winds are doubled. It helps winds learn to phrase with strings, play in tune, breathe with bowing patterns, and compare articulations. Tutti playing minimizes missed entrances. Then as winds are ready the music can include separate parts. Start with compositions in the key of d minor. It bridges the gap between flat keys and sharp keys. Avoid pieces with long rests; choose newer arrangements that feature doubling and fewer solos. Keep the range on the staff as much as possible. For high school students, begin as for middle school. As you gradually move to more independence of parts, be aware of the orchestrations of the periods of music and choose carefully to make sure there is something musical for everyone.

Offer wind players parts within ability as well as fun and/or challenging music. Have them play often, but not all long tones. Don't ask them to play exposed until they are ready. Keep them in familiar keys with adequate warm-up, tuning on B \flat . When directors show appreciation and respect by including wind players as equals in the orchestra, being considerate of time and effort, it really helps to balance the stress factor.

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