

All-State: Bergonzi is a Delight!

By Sonja Elling & DeeAnn Helfritz

If you are ever presented with the opportunity to attend a string session with Dr. Louis Bergonzi from the Eastman School of Music, by all means take advantage of it. We attended his sessions at the 2000 Minnesota Summer String Teacher Seminar in St. Cloud and came away energized and ready to implement the wonderful skill development exercises he shared with the group.

Musical expression, rhythm, sound production and ear training are important and essential elements of a student's orchestral training. Louis Bergonzi points out that the development of these skills can easily be done within an orchestra rehearsal and prove to be an exciting and rewarding experience for both teacher and student.

Bergonzi suggests that rhythm should initially be experienced physically, aiding students to feel the tempo and beat within themselves. The ability to internalize rhythm is important and ultimately necessary for the students so that they may understand and respond to conducting gestures.

An activity involving movement to music is the first step towards the process of internalizing tempo and meter. This activity may simply involve keeping the beat on one's lap to a recorded piece of music. Other ways to keep the beat may be by marching, blinking one's eyes, clapping, snapping, waving, etc. . .

Once students have had some experience following the teacher and his/her various ways of showing the beat, the teacher can work towards making the activity student-led. Asking everyone to make up their own pattern moves the class towards independence and improvisational skills. When students gain a higher level of confidence, the teacher may ask for volunteers to lead the class through an entire piece.

In addition to keeping the beat, students need to develop the ability to keep the tempo in their heads, even when not hearing the piece. This process is called audiating. Bergonzi uses a technique similar to the song *Bingo* in that he asks the students to clap and count an 8-beat pattern. Once the pattern is established with a steady tempo, they take away one beat each time they go

up the pattern, i.e. "1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8, 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 *, 1 2 3 4 5 6 **, 1 2 3 4 5 ***," etc. Even when the students do not say or clap the "missing beats," the beats are still there, acting as "rests."

Another way to help the students audiate the music and rhythm is to play the "mute" or "radio" game. This can be done initially by listening to a recording in which sections of the piece are silent or muted. (This may be pre-recorded or the teacher can simply turn down the volume.) The students need to continue keeping a steady beat, even through the silent sections. Once the volume is raised, students check their own accuracy by seeing if they are still on the beat. This game can also be used when the students are playing a piece by turning the imaginary volume up or down.

Bergonzi addressed intonation two ways: 1) "horizontal intonation" — the ability to play in tune relative to your own instrument, and 2) "vertical intonation" — the ability to play in tune with other players. Both are relative to an established tonal center. For long-term skill development, we were taught to play in and out of tune at the same time. As we all played a unison note we were encouraged to focus and blur the pitch (slide in and out of pitch) until we truly matched pitches.

Later, we progressed to pillar tuning (unison, fourths, fifths, octaves) matching our pitches to Kodaly hand signs. One of the fun exercises we used was to stroll around the room playing a simple song in a unison major key while trying to find the one person who was assigned to play in a minor key! For short-term application, Bergonzi maintains that

doing patterns for warm-ups is sometimes better than doing scales. Students need to hear the progression within a harmonic framework. This also gives the winds something to tune against.

Bergonzi's lesson on sound production began with functional posture and instrument and bow position. He suggests that to maintain good posture in the classroom we should remind our students to "sit the way I conduct." (That really does place the responsibility on us as they mimic what they see!)

To illustrate the expression of a musical phrase we were asked to play the "violaphone", a body instrument that allows each player to bow and maintain air stream simultaneously. This "instrument" is played by extending the left arm and placing two fingers on the shoulder which will slide down the arm as you make a vocal sound (pitched or unpitched) to match the movement, dynamics, or style of the phrase. Bergonzi stressed that students need to learn proper sound production skills in order to learn to play expressively.

And what is it we so often leave to the last? Why, musical expression of course! It's so easy to focus on mastering all the other elements of music first. Bergonzi suggests that at least one "musical moment" be planned for every rehearsal. For example, to capture musical expression through balance you could assign each section a note to any chord. Then, as they play their sustained note, direct one section at a time to play louder or softer. Or, tell a story while the orchestra plays a sustained note with the understanding that they must match the dynamic level of the storyteller. Their reward is to be



Louis Bergonzi leads All-State Workshop participants in ear training exercises

able to hear a great punch line!

To develop expression using articulation, use word associations with initial/final consonants and vowels of real and nonsense words. Have students match sounds on their instruments from soft to hard, ex: h, dg, j, d, k, and t. And finally, help students learn to phrase a musical line with tension and release, direction, and energy. Bergonzi suggests having

the students play the phrase as if the dynamics were equal to punctuation — end the phrase with a “!” or a “?”. They can also compare the musical line to the expressive elements of a spoken phrase or sentence.

While these activities are not intended to take up an entire class period, they can serve as wonderful warm-ups. There are a variety of ways to include

students' current repertoire in these lessons as well. While the time used in these activities each day is minimal, the musical results will be nothing less than remarkable!

Sonja Elling teaches at Fairmont High School and DeeAnn Helfritz teaches at Blue Earth High School. Both violinists live in Fairmont. ‡