



Viola

Studio Help for Orchestra Parts

by Jim Bartsch

Annette Caruthers asked if I would write an article in her space this issue. Annette has several students who play in the Minnesota Youth Symphonies (MYS) orchestra I conduct. We have been talking about ways studio teachers can use Youth Orchestra repertoire in their teaching, and about whether there are specific things teachers can do to help with preparation of orchestra music.

Knowing that studio teachers already have a long list of things to cover without working on orchestra music, I'd like to suggest two things you might want to consider as supplemental to what you already use with students.

1. Rhythm.

Most conductors will say that rhythm is the most important factor for a good ensemble, and that teaching students to subdivide the beat is crucial. As we audition students each year for MYS, we hear brilliant performances of solo pieces, well-prepared scales, and often very weak sight-reading. Even relatively advanced players, when sight-reading, will sometimes hold quarter notes and half notes the same length of time, or fail to move from eighth notes to quarter notes correctly. It is such a pleasure to hear the sight-reading part of the audition when the student is obviously subdividing, even if the overall tempo is slow. Just as it would be ideal for every orchestra rehearsal to include sight-reading for this reason, it would be great for studio teachers to work on correct rhythmic reading in lessons whenever possible.

Working specifically on the orchestra music a student may bring to their lesson, offering help on awkward rhythmic passages, in addition to awkward

technical passages, would be greatly appreciated by conductors. We constantly stress subdividing, not just listening to everyone else in the orchestra to figure out "how the piece goes." Passages with rests can be the trickiest for a student rhythmically, but may not look hard at first glance. Reinforcing the importance of subdividing in these passages would be very helpful.

2. Fingering

Many teachers help students figure out good fingerings for especially high, fast or exposed passages, and this is *very* much appreciated by any conductor. Sometimes, though, students can use help on passages that do not seem terribly difficult at first glance, or that students do not indicate as problem spots.

For younger violin students, simply reinforcing the idea that open E is often better replaced by fourth finger would be helpful. Students might not hear open E as a problem, but in an orchestra with 40 or 50 violins, the conductor (and audience) will appreciate the studio teacher who teaches students how to use fourth finger.

Younger and intermediate players may see not a problem with playing awkward passages completely in first position, even when second or other positions would be much better. Conductors do not always have or take the time to drill fingerings such as these with students, and if this is a new concept for a student, it is better taught by a private teacher. It is very helpful when studio teachers keep an eye out for this kind of passage in orchestra music, even if the student doesn't indicate it as a problem spot. Second position is often very helpful for orchestra music, but

may not have been covered yet in the student's solo or etude material.

Advanced students can also use help from studio teachers in passages that may not seem difficult at first glance. Often, staying up in a higher position and crossing strings is preferable to constant shifting up and down on one string. Some students, most comfortable in lower positions, will shift up and down unnecessarily rather than staying in position. They may not see this as a problem, and may not identify it as a place where they need help from a studio teacher. As conductors, we can drill fingerings to a certain point, but can't always take the time with large groups to make sure that every student completely understands each fingering. Keeping an eye out for passages such as these would be greatly appreciated.

Studio teachers are the people who bring students to the high levels of playing we have in this community. Orchestra music, obviously, is not the only material to be covered in lessons. Looking for challenging passages beyond those the students indicate as problem spots may offer you some good teachable material, and will certainly raise the orchestra skills of the student and the performance level of the group.

In addition to conducting for MYS, Jim Bartsch is the Education Director for the Minnesota Orchestra and a free-lance violinist/violist. He previously taught 5th grade and high school in Red Wing, and was on the faculty when the Red Wing Schools received the MNASTA Meritorious School Orchestra Award in 1997. †