



School Orchestra

Meeting the Needs of Advanced Students in the School Orchestra Program

by Michael Watson

Many of us work everyday with a variety of students at a variety of levels. At Oak Point School in Eden Prairie, the students in my sixth-grade orchestra range from one to five years of playing experience. In addition to the range in years of study, the students have a variety of music education backgrounds. Some students have had piano experience; many take lessons outside school and some play in orchestras outside of school. In talking with several colleagues I have found many ways that we can meet the needs of both advanced and less advanced students in our school orchestra programs.

How you choose repertoire and how you teach it can be done so as to accommodate all students' ability levels. Connie Aiken, orchestra teacher at Chippewa Middle School in Mounds View, emphasizes bowing and musical expression in rehearsals. "This way all types of students are challenged and we can repeat the pieces several times while looking for new and more musical ways to play the pieces," she states. If students are advanced, they are challenged to think about the sound they are making and how they are making it. At the same time the less proficient students can learn how to play the notes and rhythms as they repeat sections of the music several times. Connie usually chooses several pieces that all students are capable of playing easily along with one piece that will challenge even the most experienced player. This helps to keep all the students challenged and motivated.

Having students learn a secondary instrument can also provide a challenge. Especially if the student is taking private lessons and playing in other orchestras on the primary instrument, learning another instrument can help them develop new musical skills. This usually works best if a violinist plays viola or a violist plays violin. This can also work with cello or bass students, but not as easily. Nancy Bjork has had some of her bass students switched to cello to provide them with a challenge.

She suggests that it would be better to have these students play the cello or viola parts on bass instead of having them learn another instrument that is quite different from the bass. Faith Farr told me about one of her students who played viola parts on the cello and everyone benefited. "She learned a new clef; got experience playing in the upper register; and the orchestra got a big sound from the inner voice." Many teachers tell me that by the time these students get to high school these types of accommodations are no longer needed, and the students are adequately challenged and motivated.

Another way to meet the needs of advanced students is through small group lessons. Groups can be divided based on experience and education. Whether you choose to use different method books or the same, the way you teach can be focused to meet their playing and reading skills. Some programs also offer chamber music instead of method books during the lessons to the advanced students. Connie Aiken is teaching a middle school group in this year that is working on the Boccherini Quartet during lessons. While the instrumentation of the group is not typical and there is doubling of some of the parts, this still provides a great musical experience for the students.

Some teachers, including myself, have used fiddle music to challenge advanced students. Fiddle music has the added benefit of developing a deeper understanding of chords, scales and intervals. Last year in my sixth grade orchestra, a couple of students did so well at improvising that they performed their improvisations at a concert while the orchestra played back-up parts. The *Fiddler's Philharmonic* series contains an excellent collection of fiddle tunes that can be customized to fit the abilities of the students and instrumentation. Julie Schmidt, at Fred Moore School in Anoka, also uses these books so that her sixth grade beginning students have simple enough parts to play while the experienced sixth

grade students are able to play the more challenging break parts and improvise. In more traditional music, advanced accompaniments and obligato parts can provide additional challenges. For example, Julie has written obligato parts for *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star* that experienced students play while the beginners play the tune.

Many schools form chamber orchestras that meet outside the school day. Bert Strassberg, from Eden Prairie High School, has a group that meets twice a week before school. These students play in the orchestra class, but learn additional music in the chamber orchestra. Because Eden Prairie's orchestra program is new, there has only been one orchestra for ninth through twelve grade students. Some high schools with more established programs, such as Stillwater High School and Mounds View High School, have more than one orchestra. At these schools, the director auditions students for the top orchestra. These directors also provide opportunities for their advanced students to perform concertos with the orchestra. Connie Aiken has even provided concerto opportunities at the elementary level. One year she had an excellent pianist in her fifth grade orchestra who had learned to play a Mozart piano concerto. She arranged a simplified orchestra accompaniment with easy bowings and simplified rhythms, and they performed it at one of the orchestra concerts. The students were very proud about being able to play the piece and showcase one of their classmates.

Experienced students in a beginning music class can also make great teaching assistants. In the orchestra at Oak Point and at Fred Moore School in Anoka, experienced students help adjust student's posture and bow holds. This helps the teacher meet the needs of the beginners while at the same time emphasizing the importance of good playing habits for the experienced student. This can be a great experience, but it can also be a bad one if the student assistants are not properly instructed on how to help

their peers. It is also important to consider the personality of the student assistants. You do not want students to develop an attitude that they are superior to their classmates.

It is very important to have these experienced orchestra players in the program from elementary through high school. Ed Schaeffe told me about four students from the Blaine High School orchestra who made All-State Orchestra last year: two had begun

in 2nd grade with private lessons while two began in the 6th grade orchestra program in the Anoka schools. The students who started in 6th grade credit the example and leadership of the more experienced students with helping them become proficient on their instrument. These experienced students can make our orchestra groups sound better, but even more importantly they are leaders and examples to the other students

and can help them to get to attain a higher level of musicianship.

Michael Watson teaches elementary and intermediate orchestra in Eden Prairie Schools. He also teaches bass at Hamline University and at his home in North Oaks. An active freelance musician, he has currently performs with the Minnesota Opera and Plymouth Music Series. †