

All-State: The Young String Orchestra, A Powerhouse of Sound: Rehearsal Techniques

presented by Sandra Dackow

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Tuning

Steps students should follow for tuning:

Step 1. Listen to the first tuning note for five seconds. Dr. Dackow suggests tuning only one string at a time and using a sustained tone, such as a tuner or a student helper, not a piano.

Step 2. Decide your string matches that tuning note, and quit playing immediately to help others who still need to hear the tuning note.

or Step 3. Decide your string doesn't match that tuning note and fix it. To find the center of the pitch, tune your note like you tune in a radio station.

or Step 4. Determine it's not getting better after fixing it, so you raise your hand for assistance. Dr. Dackow suggests keeping kids in their seats, and having the teacher come to them. She says it helps kids develop a tuning ear by hearing the string come into tune under their own ear, and it keeps the student more involved in that they are constantly producing the tone on their own instrument. It also helps develop a positive self image as they can remain independent.

This procedure is continued on each string. These steps force students to think about what they are hearing, rather than simply playing an out of tune string for a few minutes. This method should teach tuning independence more quickly than tuning for students, so that in the long run the tuning process should take less rehearsal time. Dr. Dackow's rule of thumb is that students should never surrender their instruments to anyone after elementary school.

Rules for ensemble players

1. As long as the conductor's hand is up, you're in playing position. Don't ever let your position collapse.
2. Your eyes and brain are one with the conductor. All attention is on the stick. If everyone watches all the time, we stop about 17 times less per 8 measures rehearsed.
3. Be ready to *tell the conductor* the reason why we stopped.
4. Never make a sound that you are not

actively evaluating.

Rehearsal Techniques

Dr. Dackow advocates a high-energy, fast-paced rehearsal to hold the attention of the students. We conductors need to be clear and precise with our gestures, but most importantly we must insist that kids follow our every nuance. Dr. Dackow had the students clap to her conductor's beat, becoming alert to both the rhythm and style of the piece. She compared this activity to the "Inner Game of Tennis." In the "Inner Game of Tennis" players say "hit" when they hit the ball and the word "bounce" when the ball bounces. Players have a better feeling of where the ball is going and a better preparation for the rebound. In having the students clap to the conductor's beat, the students anticipate the motion of the beat and capture the style in which the conductor wants them to play.

Her philosophy on running a rehearsal is that it should be similar to boot camp. The director is the drill sergeant and the kids are the new recruits. In other words it is not a democracy, but instead a method of producing musicians who are efficient under duress. Students need to be over-trained to think fast, watch the conductor and respond to those "orders." The skills the students will have to fall back on will save them in a performance. Even when it seems like a lot of hard work, we must remind ourselves and the students that when they "feel the burn" the most learning is happening.

When making an orchestra, the focus must be on the conductor. Dr. Dackow drilled students watching and following the conductor, such as asking the students to clap on cue (with or without dynamics) or stopping in the middle of a phrase to see who is paying attention.

As soon as a conductor feels the group is not watching, he or she must stop the rehearsal. Continuing at that point only encourages bad habits to creep into the ensemble rehearsal. Dr. Dackow explained that as a conductor she insists on "holding" the sound, and if she senses that it has escaped her control, she will always stop and restart.

After her session, Dr. Dackow emphasized that we must teach students that as a member of a *group* their greatest responsibility is to the group, not their individual desires or needs. As students work as a group, they achieve together what none can achieve alone. This is what makes being in orchestra not only desirable, but irresistible. Insistence on orchestra group protocols weans students off attention to their personal needs and steers them to feel duty to the group. As students make this transition, they learn to make music in a much grander, communal fashion than on their own and thus learn the great joy of playing in this wonderful ensemble, the orchestra.

Conducting advice

Always use a podium and pull it back from the orchestra a bit so players on the sides can see.

Your baton is the focal point. You need to keep attention and intensity there. Your body acts as a backdrop for it.

Try not to be a moving target. Don't move your head on upbeats; don't move your body most of the time. These motions usually take attention away from your baton.

Don't use too much wrist. It shows students two ictuses (the stick and your wrist).

Eye contact is very important. In the *Dance of the Tumblers*, look at the basses when they come in on the beat to make sure it is solid (don't worry about the people coming in on the off beats. If the bass is correct, the others will follow).

On soft passages, really get small, or if passage is the same dynamic for a long time you can get smaller as you go. Then you have somewhere to go on the crescendo.

Conducting one with varied offbeats is very difficult. You must show an ictus and keep your pattern steady.

All beats are not created equal. Ensure that students won't play on rests by making those beats much smaller. For beats that need more emphasis, consider moving in different directions (front to back instead of side to side). When all beats look the same, students tune you out. Keep their

attention by doing something different once in a while.

Time beaters are the undertakers of music. Have a clear idea of what you want the music to say before your first rehearsal with your students.

For conducting help and info go the website conductorsguild.org.

Sound production

Get kids hooked on a big sound. Dr. Dackow believes that a big sound is captivating to both the audience and the students, and helps us better compete with the sounds generated by the bands in our schools. We should always strive for a big orchestral sound as kids find it very rewarding and they view it as something they are incapable of as individuals.

Which is the most important hand in orchestra? The right hand is because it is responsible for being in the correct time and tempo, and for performing the correct articulations and dynamics. The right hand

is also important because it produces the tone. “The RH is the brains of playing. Keep the RH correct at all costs. Let LH go, but keep RH in rhythm” were lines that she used to define her priorities.

Dr. Dackow got a big bite sound by asking students to pretend they needed to get a wet match to light as if their life depended on it. (She alluded to the motion picture *Cast Away*.) She also had the kids find the breaking point in their tone, or the place where it sounds gritty. Then she instructed the kids to play just less than that. Another comment was to try to make the floor shake. She also used the Jackie Chan karate chop analogy to get kids to use lots of bow for a big, explosive sound. “Resistance is power” was a favorite phrase. Her analogy to using the bow in “bunt” position, in the middle of the bow instead of the frog, made a definite visual image that students responded to.

Dr. Dackow contends that many posture and intonation problems “fix them-

selves” with proper attention to sound production. She believes that students often don’t adjust pitch because they are working with “too little information” because the articulation and tone are not clear enough to focus on intonation. By insisting on clear and precise sound production, posture improved very much without discussion.

After this two and a half hour rehearsal the kids were tired but proud of the way they sounded. Afterwards Dr. Dackow said she does not change her expectations for varying levels of student orchestras. You have the same expectations for all the groups. Some groups won’t progress as fast as others, but all the kids will be able to do it eventually. After you set a high standard and push them towards it, they will never want to go back to the way it was before.

Sandra Dackow is a conductor and composer of teaching pieces for string orchestra. †