

MMEA: Partnering with the Community through Performance

The Owatonna High School Dinner Ensemble

by Mark Gitch

The Owatonna High School Dinner Ensemble is a co-curricular ensemble, a string orchestra hybrid of our Jazz Band and Pep Band programs. We are similar to the Jazz Band in that we can explore a variety of musical styles not easily accessible to larger ensembles due to programming values or a wider range of abilities, and similar to the Pep Band in that our aim is to provide an atmosphere that will engage the gathered

string program. They are selected based on their ability to represent the orchestra, school and community in a professional manner. For this type of student, performance is often its own reward. These students also value the opportunity to work faster and more independently. Although not all are comfortable in the role of soloist, all recognize the personal and musical growth gained from being “one on a part,” a

on short notice or may not require the full ensemble, it is a realistic target. Lettering has a higher standard: 80% rehearsal and 75% performance. Setting this target higher, would change the make-up of the group. Because we run all year, most students will come up against significant scheduling conflicts with a sport, play or other school activity over the course of the year. I prefer to be flexible when considering these opportunities and not demand that Dinner Ensemble always be their first priority.

Selecting competent pianists is probably the most important task – they can make or break a performance. Good classical chops are nice if you can get them, but the ability to read chords is much more important in this style of music. Most student pianists have not played this style, or have not played piano in an ensemble, and will need time to adjust. I either audition the pianists or seek multiple references regarding their abilities. Both pianists this year are from the band (although they play in the orchestra wind section as well), which poses some communication challenges. If you can get students from within the orchestra it will be much easier, but it is more important to have the right students, not your students.

Like other co-curriculars, students in Dinner Ensemble are required by the district to pay an activity fee (currently \$45). Performance attire is also their responsibility. We use the same basic black formal attire that we use for our school orchestra.

We generally play 35-40 performances a year. By being flexible with size (from a quintet with piano to the full twenty member troupe) and creating opportunities to be visible, you begin to build a reputation for being just the right group for any occasion. In addition to playing at the Homecoming Coronation, we'll play for a number of spaghetti dinners, senior citizen functions, and award ceremonies. Most performances are about an hour long, and nearly all of our performances are local. We do not play much during the Christmas season because of our OHS Carolers group. When we do play, we will use sight-readable holiday arrangements.

I post a sign-up in a convenient location as soon as a call is received. Students have a few days to indicate if they are available for the performance. It is rare that at least



Mark Gitch rehearses the Owatonna High School Dinner Ensemble

community and energize their active participation in the event at hand. This yields: 1) a positive performance experience that promotes individual responsibility and leadership, and 2) an opportunity for powerful and persistent engagement with the many stakeholders involved in our community.

From the student perspective, there are many challenges and rewards. Music must be learned quickly, performance venues vary from intimate parties in elegant homes to gatherings of hundreds in large, noisy rooms, and schedules can change on very short notice. Possibly the greatest challenge comes in recognizing one's role as an accompaniment to an event, not the event itself. One learns to take pride in the fact that the room would be quite lifeless without the music, even when applause is not readily tendered.

Students selected for Dinner Ensemble are the current and future leaders of our

common occurrence at our performances.

I do not audition students, although this certainly could be done. Before setting the roster, I consider: 1) performance skill, 2) leadership skills and/or potential, 3) class balance (Dinner Ensemble should look proportionally similar to the top orchestra; try not to graduate both pianists or more than half a section each year, etc.), 4) ability to commit to a flexible and demanding performance schedule, and 5) ability to maintain individual preparation even during extended group inactivity. I set the roster in the spring so that we can begin rehearsals immediately in the fall. I often have music (and sometimes recordings) available in August for students to take home and learn before the first rehearsal.

Students must attend 60% of all rehearsals and performances to maintain their membership. This may seem low, but because many performances are scheduled

one person from each section cannot attend, although I have occasionally sat in to cover a part. I try not to schedule too many performances in close succession.

Students are responsible for bringing a stand and their music. Determine if a piano is available (and in tune!) before the performance. Have a good portable keyboard for times when there is no piano available. A small keyboard will not sound good; quality counts.

Although there is no charge to “hire” the Dinner Ensemble, many organizations and individuals like to give an honorarium. Any money received is deposited to a school account, and then allocated to student fund-raising accounts or to scholarships. Last year, students used some of their earnings to cater dinner for their parents, and this year we are going to the Chanhassen Dinner Theater.

I do not allocate the money until the end of the year. At that time I total all of the honorariums and divide by the number of rehearsals and performances to determine the value of a “share.” A typical student may earn \$75-100 in a year.

To select repertoire, maintain a balance of easy and challenging, fast and slow, old and new, know your audience, keep the students happy, and stay under budget. Owatonna’s Dinner Ensemble has been around long enough that we have a lot of music. In recent years I have let the students

vote on their top six to eight selections, and then I select an additional four to six pieces. Each year, from half to three-quarters of the music is the same as the previous year. We need this cushion to keep us prepared for early season performances (often as early as the second week of school).

The students quickly know the difference between popular titles and good arrangements; so don’t just buy according to title. With a growing emphasis on jazz in the string curriculum, there are obvious opportunities here, but keep variety in the program. We frequently play for senior groups, and the familiar songs spark comments like, “I guess not all of the kids today are so bad!” The professional crowd is more familiar with current movies and Broadway revivals. Selections like the Turtle Island String Quartet series are in the folders to challenge the students, but nevertheless grab the audience’s attention. I look for two or three new titles to buy each year, and also look back into the archives for lost gems. If this were a more “legitimate” chamber orchestra, with only a couple of performances each year, the repertoire would be more challenging, but I look to have about half of the pieces ready to perform within three rehearsals.

Although rehearsals of new music usually look pretty traditional, I try to move into more of a chamber music coaching session as soon as possible. In performance, the

group is student-led. I watch and listen, visit with the hosts (if appropriate), watch and listen, very occasionally sneak an appetizer, and watch and listen some more. As needed I offer balance suggestions or encourage less down-time between selections.

Scheduling rehearsals is a challenge. These are the best and the busiest students in the school. To start the year we rehearse almost daily, usually with one long (2-3 hour) rehearsal thrown in for good measure. Then we try to find a consistent time for the next four months to have a short (40 minute) weekly rehearsal. Rehearsals trail off in January and are called as needed for the remainder of the year. The students usually know the music pretty well by then, and there is a need to balance preparation while avoiding burnout.

The OHS Dinner Ensemble is part of our Master Agreement, and is compensated similarly to Jazz Band and Pep Band. Typically, this position requires at least 75 hours a year. I attend about 95% of the performances, but I am comfortable letting the students manage their own performance if necessary.

Mark Gitch is Director of Orchestras at Owatonna High School. He has served as Out-State representative for MNSOTA and is newly elected as MMEA Orchestral VP. ‡