

CHAMBER MUSIC FOR BEGINNING STUDENTS

Quartets-a-Plenty

by Brian Cole

History

The Chamber Music Program for our Moorhead Elementary Orchestra started rather simply nine years ago during my rookie year as 5th and 6th grade orchestra teacher in the Moorhead, Minnesota, Public School District. Following an inspiring performance by the Ying Quartet at our school, two students approached me and asked if they could start their own quartet. Having never given chamber music a thought for second year string players, I was taken aback. I approached a collegiate professor seeking his wisdom and he responded that I should take the lead of my students and get planning. During that first year I formed one quintet that met before school on Thursday mornings. After one of the rehearsals a student said to me as she was packing up, "Quartet is the best part of my week!" It was at that point that I realized I needed to corral that energy and excitement and form more ensembles for the coming year.

The following year, three sixth-grade quartets/quintets were formed. The ensembles met once a week for 25 minutes on Friday mornings. I did all of the coaching and the students were given a supplemental chamber music packet to practice. Students were chosen solely on ability; i.e. the best players in the grade were put in quartets. The quartets had a few gigs around town but for the most part their performances took place during the school day. They would go and play for the office staff; they would play holiday music for the special ed. kids; they would play during talent shows etc.

That following summer I attended Ohio State University's string teacher's workshop and one of the sessions that Bob Gillespie led was on chamber music. He said something that has left a deep impression on me and that I will remember as long as I teach. He said, "You may be tempted to put only your best players in chamber groups, but the truth of the matter is, it is often the weaker players who will benefit most from the chamber experience." Those words spoke volumes to me. I knew I had to change my paradigm and begin looking at chamber music in the elementary setting as a necessity for all, instead of enrichment

for a few.

Thanks to the lessons learned and applied from that workshop, this past year participation in our chamber music program has evolved to include all of our 102 members of the sixth-grade orchestra.

Scheduling

All of our district's sixth graders — 330 of them — are in one building. Each class has a 50-minute music/gym time each day. Thanks to wonderful and flexible general music and physical education teachers at our school, the students are pulled out of their music/gym time to come to their chamber coaching. All chamber groups meet on Friday mornings and the coachings last for 25 minutes (half their gym/music time). As a side bar, regular orchestra group lessons are done during music/gym time Monday through Thursday. I like having Friday as chamber music day as it is a wonderful way to end the week.

Coaching

Earlier in our program I was able to do all of the coaching, but as our chamber program has grown from five or six chamber groups to nearly twenty I have needed coaching help. Thanks to local college music majors and high school students, I have had little problem in finding quality coaches who are willing to come in and work with the students on a weekly basis. Some colleges offer their students credit for coming. At the end of each term I give the coaches a small honorarium.

There are four groups of quartets. They are broken up into either an "Orange" quartet, a "White" quartet, a "Silver" quartet or a "Black" quartet. (School Colors!) Outside my lesson door is a marker board that lets the students know where each of the "colors" are meeting. One week I'll coach the Orange quartets, the college music major will coach the White quartets, and the high school student will coach the Black quartet. The following week we will switch so I am able to keep close tabs on all of their progress and needs. And there are often some weeks when only two of the quartets are able to meet.

Repertoire

During the first several years of our chamber music program, I made up special music packets for the quartets/quintets. I felt as if they should be working on "harder" music. Over the course of the last three years I have grown away from giving out extra music to the chamber groups and instead I use our existing large ensemble repertoire for the chamber repertoire. I do supplement their music with challenges every now and then, but I feel strongly that if the student comes to quartet with the notes learned from our large ensemble repertoire they will be able to begin the process of becoming true chamber players. The mantra by which I often teach is: "Don't just play the notes — rather feel the music."

First Rehearsal

Before passing out any literature, we begin by playing open strings. I often share with them stories about passed sixth-grade quartets who have had to play at weddings, or parties, or meetings, and I tell them that I'm not there to conduct and get them started. We then discuss their role of cueing and breathing and looking and swaying etc.!! They go around the quartet cueing one another on open strings by breathing or nodding their scrolls. And of course they are all a bit nervous and giggle a bit. I would say the first day of introducing chamber music to the students is one of my favorite days of the year.

I then tell them that they need to come up with their own quartet name. I'll read them examples from Musical America's directory and then I instruct them to give me their group name before the next rehearsal so I can make up business cards for them. (We laminate them and pass them out to the students who in turn then share them with their parents, neighbors, relatives, etc. so they can get gigs.)

I then pass out the following three pieces: *A Joyful Chorale* by John O'Reilly from *Strictly Classics* published by Highland Etling, *The Doxology* arranged by Robert S. Frost from *Sacred Settings* published by Kjos, and *Classic Sinfonia* by Elliot Del Borgo. These pieces work well for the first few rehearsals before we begin working on

the large ensemble music.

Benefits

#1 Confidence — The students cannot hide when it is one on a part. We often talk about how if you make a mistake or get lost in large group the piece goes on. But in chamber music, if you get lost or don't know your part, the group suffers and we are all about being a team so we must know our music.

#2 Ensemble — 100% of our sixth-grade orchestra students are in a quartet/quintet/trio. When I ask for the cellos in our large group rehearsal to cue their entrance and 24 eleven-year-old cellists nod

their heads and breathe simultaneously...its awesome. Since the majority of their quartet repertoire is what we play in large group, they have an intimate knowledge of what is going on in the larger sense of the piece. I have found that the students can become more emotionally involved in the music because of quartets.

#3 Community Awareness — This past year our chamber groups performed at more than 30 area functions. It is a wonderful vehicle to promote the music programs in the schools. The gigs are usually for a parent's business or party and so that parent is usually willing to take charge. I usually don't attend the gigs as I have found the

students take greater pride when they know it is their show.

Coda

More than anything, I want chamber music to have a positive affect on the quality of my student's life in our school. There is nothing I would rather do than work with young musicians and be able to share with them the joy of chamber music. What a treat!

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