



SCHOOL ORCHESTRA

Training Musicians—Training Audiences

by David Arnott

We are facing a crisis today that has been building for at least two generations. We are failing to develop audiences to appreciate orchestral music. The major symphony orchestras in this country have been warning us of the “graying” of classical music audiences for years and have been exploring different methods of attracting a younger audience. Opera companies have been doing an exceptional job of attracting audiences through a variety of methods including commissioning new and exciting works, the use of supertitles, as well as encouraging a casually dressed audience.

As music educators we are training musicians to play instruments, to play solos, and to participate in our ensembles. At the same time, and in the same process, we are also training audiences. In a time of seemingly never-ending budgetary cuts, we are constantly defending what we do, defending why what we do is so important, and defending how our students’ lives will be incomplete without it. But we must stop and ask ourselves what “it” is that we are really doing. Sure, the ability to play an instrument is a gift for life but we must also consider that we are instilling a passion for music as an art form.

I am lucky enough to play in one of the fully professional orchestras in Minnesota and am always pleasantly pleased by the number of young people in attendance at our concerts. Several of the school music teachers play in the orchestra and I am sure that that makes a difference in the attendance numbers of young people. The orchestra administration tries hard to welcome younger audience members and also serves as the administrative body that runs the youth orchestra.

At the college where I teach, the Minnesota Orchestra comes to play three concerts each academic year and you would think that we might see 300 students at

each performance (just 10% of our student body) but we are lucky to see 40 (not for lack of strong advertising and advocacy on my part). What would it take to get more students to attend? I regularly invite Minnesota Orchestra members to conduct master classes on the days that they are on our campus. I am sure many of you already invite professional musicians to visit and work with your groups. This is such a valuable contact for young musicians. When these people are in your midst, ask them what they think will be the future of “classical music.”

You need not visit the Twin Cities to hear great orchestral music. If possible, organize field trips to see regional orchestral performances. There are orchestras all over our state from Duluth to Fargo, Rochester, Mankato, and Bemidji. Every corner of the state seems to have an orchestra!

Our public schools in Central Minnesota see to it that all fourth grade students hear a performance by the St. Cloud Symphony and that every fifth grader gets taken to see and hear the Minnesota Orchestra. Even this is not enough to ensure the future of symphony orchestra audiences. Forced participation at a young age is no guarantee of future subscription sales as an adult! How do you instill the desire to hear live performances in students? Getting them there is the real battle — few if any will ever be sorry that they attended.

Who attends your middle school and high school orchestra concerts? Parents of the students attend of course, but does anyone else? Do you encourage band and choir students to attend the orchestra concert (if you do not put on joint performances)? Do you try to put the choir and the orchestra together for at least one joint piece each year?

Have you ever invited a humanities class to an orchestra concert? Have you ever

programmed a work that would interest the poetry club? Is there a way to involve any other discipline in your program? Have you explored ways to include and attract a wider audience to your programs?

We, as music educators, do not exist to produce musicians to fill the seats of major orchestras in this country and professional orchestras do not exist to promote music education in our schools (though many do an amazing job of this). Somehow we need to symbiotically coexist so that our young people begin to develop the habit of supporting the fine arts while they are still young. We should make every effort to assist in this process using every tool available at our disposal.

If a high school, on average, produces just one student every other year who attempts a professional career in music, then that is great. If that same high school produces one music teacher every year — terrific! An even better scenario would be for that same high school to produce 20 symphony orchestra subscribers and a dozen future community orchestra members. As we each look toward having great music programs in our schools, we must always remember why we chose music, what music provides intellectually, and the many different societal benefits reaped from our music programs.

J. David Arnott is an Assistant Professor of Music at The College of St. Benedict/St. John's University where he teaches violin and viola and directs the symphony orchestra. He holds degrees in viola from The Philadelphia College of Performing Arts, The Curtis Institute of Music, and The University of Southern Mississippi. Dr. Arnott is currently a member of the viola section of The Duluth-Superior Symphony Orchestra and is the second violinist of the Tresca Quartet. ♪