



SCHOOL ORCHESTRA

Conducting Workshops: Something for Everyone

by J. David Arnott

Several years ago I had the opportunity to attend a three-week conducting workshop in North Carolina. I had not intended to write about this but the brochure for this year's workshop came in the mail this week and it has a nice color picture of me on the podium being grilled by Paul Vermel, an incredible conducting pedagogue. It led me to think about the variety of summer conducting programs available for pretty much all levels of conducting ability. We are, however, talking about tuition driven programs here, which range from a couple hundred dollars up to several thousand dollars.

The workshop I attended lasted three weeks and provided me with 8 minutes of podium time each day. Participants had their own VHS tape that was inserted prior to mounting the podium each day. Those 8 minutes on the podium went by very quickly and it is hard to believe that after three weeks I had a 2-hour tape as a tangible proof of the progress I made from the beginning to the end of the workshop. Having only 8 minutes with which to show everyone there that I was clearly the finest participant in the class took a heavy toll on my preparation each day. I have never been so prepared for such a short rehearsal time. What if I am asked to sing the second clarinet part from memory? Was it clarinet in A or in B \flat ? What if I am asked the history of the work, of the composer, of the genre...? It was a fascinating experience from which I took home many positive ideas and new techniques. It forced me to concentrate on every aspect of my motions both on and off the podium.

When I decided to attend graduate school, I let myself be convinced to do a

DMA in viola performance and pedagogy rather than in conducting. I have never once regretted this decision, as I was able to study conducting all through graduate school and serve as the assistant conductor of the university orchestra as well. Still, I have always felt the need for credibility as a conductor and attending one of these programs seemed like a painless way to achieve that.

I was impressed at the variety of participants at this particular festival. They ranged from students just out of high school, to undergraduates, to high school orchestra directors, to college professors. Everyone had their 8 minutes in the spotlight and I am sure several of them will make it as conductors some day soon. One of the best conductors was a woman from Saratoga Springs, New York, a high school orchestra director! There were many women involved in the workshop and they were treated with the same respect and guidance as everyone else. I was able to network with several participants and have opportunities for podium exchanges with several of them.

Although this program was expensive, I believe it was well worth the effort. In the end, I was able to get a faculty development grant to pay for most of the expenses including tuition, room, and roundtrip airfare to South Carolina. It would definitely be worth seeking professional development funds to cover something like this. At worst, this would be a tax-deductible expense for most of us!

How does one find an appropriate program? You have to decide several things before you begin your search. Do you want to have an opportunity to work

with professional musicians or with really great students? Do you want to travel far from home? There are several programs in Europe that are expensive, but you get more podium time. Do you want a quality videotape when you are done? If I had it to do over, I would bring my own camera and tripod. As it is turned out, I was unable to use any of my 2 hours of tape for any kind of audition material. There are many sources for information about summer institutes as each of these programs thrives on participation (read "tuition dollars"). The union newspaper, *The International Musician*, carries advertisements usually beginning with the December issue; The Conductors Guild (<http://www.conductorsguild.org>) carries information regarding workshops and competitions in their publication. Most colleges receive mailings and posters from these kinds of programs and a visit to the music department bulletin board will yield a variety of results. A google search on "conducting workshop orchestra" yielded 86,000 hits, less if you narrow your search to the mid-west.

As we strive to better our conducting skills, it is always worth seeking the opinions of others as well as analyzing the minute details of our own work through the vigilant videotaping of ourselves.

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. 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. †