

PERFECT PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

(How to train a student orchestra)

presented by Claudette Laureano, co-music director of Minnesota Youth Symphonies

* **Pick music that is skill appropriate for your orchestra.** Choosing music that is challenging but attainable is fundamental for the final outcome.

* **Play a scale in the key of the piece.** First, play it straight through to make sure that the students have the correct notes. Then play “following” games so that they learn to watch you. For example: speed up, slow down, staccato, legato, style, loud, soft, diminuendo, articulation, etc. Be creative so that you are not predictable. Your baton should indicate what you want. You really should not need to say anything if you train your ensemble to watch and understand the purpose of your baton.

To instill these types of skills over the year, you can focus on one skill at each rehearsal. Do not be afraid of repeating skills throughout the year. Everyone learns by repetition and you and the orchestra will be excited as you see the progress as time goes on. Always remember that if you are excited about their progress, they will be excited too. Enthusiasm is catching!

* **Before reading through music** — discuss key signatures, time meters, tempo changes, and give metronome markings so that the students know what tempo you expect by performance time. Even when you reach your goal, if it is a piece that should be played at break-neck speed, push them even further, tempo-wise. Sometimes you will be amazed how much faster they are able to play by concert time. Before sight-reading, discuss and rehearse transitions and difficult passages.

* **The read through.** Reading through should be done with as few stops as possible and as close to tempo as possible in order to give them a true sense of what the piece is like.

* **Rehearse backwards.** For example: start at measure 200 and go to the end. Then start at measure 160 and go to the end. Then start at measure 120 and go to the end, etc.

* **Sing!** The best way to work on phrasing is to sing. Singing allows a student to

express their musical thought without the technical difficulties of their instruments.

* **The reason that we became musicians and we train musicians is to make music.** Always speak to your students in musical terms. Students respond to that and it is the most critical aspect of teaching music. I like to tell my students that the notes are not as important because anyone can play notes. It is what they do with them that sets them apart from everyone else and what makes them unique.

* **Play recordings of the music for them.** I like to play several recordings of the same piece and then have a discussion with them about what they noticed and what they liked and disliked. It sometimes amazes me how perceptive they are and how well they listen. I love it when they get ideas and try to incorporate these ideas into their own playing. I also love to show them videos of pieces we are doing and if they are funny videos, including cartoons or comedians like Danny Kaye, all the better. It makes it that much more enjoyable and gives classical music a less “stuffy” reputation. Music is supposed to be fun!

* **Intonation.** I rarely work on intonation until the last 3 or 4 rehearsals. Intonation tends to improve as the students become more familiar with the music. When you do work on intonation, isolate the problem and work only with the students who are involved.

* **Prioritize.** Focus and work on one thing at a time. If you choose to work on intonation, then do not worry about the dynamics. You can work on that another time.

* **Jump on rhythmic problems and wrong notes from the beginning.** Remember that change is a process, not an event. If they learn something incorrectly, it will be more difficult to correct and change after it

has been ingrained in their playing.

* **Musical Games.** I like to play games when the music is well learned. I will whisper to a section (example: flutes) to start at letter T. As they play, the other students need to find their place in the music and join in.



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Once we were learning a waltz and my students could not get the swing of it, so I brought in a recording of the piece the following week, and everyone picked a partner and for 15 minutes, my orchestra learned to waltz. They had a blast and by the next week they had a better understanding of how to play and dance to a waltz.

* **Tempo.** Keeping tempo can sometimes be very difficult. Here are some strategies that deal specifically with tempo problems:

- Use a metronome even with a full orchestra. Have them play softly and plug the metronome into an amp so that it can be heard clearly.
- Subdivide and conquer. Learning to subdivide is an important technique in keeping a tempo steady. I often set the metronome on the subdivision if we are having problems keeping the tempo steady.
- If they are slowing down, ask them to play their notes shorter
- If they are rushing, ask them to play their notes longer.
- If the tempo consistently slows down because the notes are difficult, you must choose a slower tempo that they can execute with full control, and then move the metronome up one or two notches at a time. This can be a slow process but it is a steady one and the results are often good.
- Practice in different rhythms.

Control is the key to success!

* **Students love a challenge** and they are excited and proud when they meet that challenge. Always go to the next step, be it with tempo, dynamics, phrasing, etc. Never

*“Those who can, do.
Those who can do more, teach.”*

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settle for anything that is less than their best.

* **Shut up!** As tempting as it is, and as much as I do it, try not to sing when you conduct. It does not allow you to listen objectively to what your students are playing.

* **Fess up!** Admit when you are wrong or when you have made a mistake. It allows the students to know that you are human and that it is okay to make mistakes. We learn from mistakes. I love to tell the kids, "If you never make a mistake, you'll never make a discovery."

* **Continuity.** Start to run through the program about three weeks before the performance. This is extremely important in order to get the flow of the piece and to make sure that all of the transitions are smooth and correct.

* **Record.** It is amazing what you hear when you are not physically involved in the music. Mark your score as you listen so that you can make corrections and changes at the next rehearsal.

* **Objectivity.** Have a trained musician sit in the audience and listen for balance and invite them to give you feedback on the orchestra's performance.

Let someone else conduct and you sit in the audience and listen.

Invite guest conductors to work with

your orchestra. It is wonderful for everyone to get a new perspective on the music and it is an excellent way to continue training your students to watch and follow.

* **Concert etiquette and presentation.**

Concert etiquette is extremely important and before the audience hears a note, they will see you and the orchestra. It is a good idea for the final two rehearsals to discuss and practice tuning, standing, sitting, and bowing so that it is done together and it looks professional. Students need to know that their appearance does influence the audience's perception of their performance. I like to tell my students that the audience will often listen with their eyes. My friend and colleague Paul Grustans always tells his students, "The way you look is the first note the audience hears."

* **Dress rehearsal.** Dress rehearsal is best used by not tiring the musicians right from the start of the rehearsal. Rehearse passages that have been problem spots in the past. Rehearsing transitions is always recommended. After you have gone through your selected passages, do a complete run-through. Rehearse walking on stage, tuning, standing, sitting and then finally playing through the program in order from beginning to end. Do not forget to rehearse the bows when you have completed each piece.

Students do best when they know what to expect and that includes solo bows and shaking hands. Leave nothing to chance. Even exiting the stage should be practiced at least once.

* **Have fun.** Enjoy what you do and whom you are teaching. You have the power to make or break a student's day. You can change lives. You are role models for these young people and you have the ability to make them better people, not only better musicians. Anyone can accept correction when they know that it is done with care and understanding. These young people look up to their teachers and if you set the example on how to view life and treat others, then eventually they will emulate those examples. Teachers make a difference. My favorite quote in life is, "Those who can, do. Those who can do more, teach."

Claudette Laureano has been co-music director of Minnesota Youth Symphonies since 1988 and has developed MYS into one of the leading youth orchestra programs in the United States. A sought-after guest clinician, Claudette has conducted for the National Suzuki Conference and the MNSOTA Honors Orchestra. †