



SCHOOL ORCHESTRA

Solfege + Theory —> Great Intonation

by J. David Arnott

Which aural skills, if any, are worth the time, effort, and inconvenience to develop in school-aged orchestral musicians? As music performance or music education majors, we all had undergraduate ear training classes. Why did we suffer through them? Was it simply a hoop through which we had to jump in order to graduate? Or was it the beginning of lifetime journey of developing skills on which we rely during every musical moment of our lives, skills which we must share with our students. (I admit to being biased in this area as part of my current teaching load includes both the 3rd and 4th semesters of our aural skills sequence — but that is not the point!)

How much music theory does a middle school or high school orchestral musician really need to know? Probably not much, as a little bit goes a long way. Teaching the diatonic intervals found in a major scale is great way to begin to fine-tune your orchestra. How hard is it to teach a group the difference between a major and a minor third and the structure of a major or a minor triad? A couple major triads, a couple minor triads, a dominant here or there — and then you can really start to tune things! We all tune chords in our ensembles, but do we ever explain why something is or is not in tune? Does the term “harmonic-function” ever come up?

We already practice scales but do we ever discuss why we practice scales? (“Because composers write them,” is the answer that always works for me.) Do we make it a point to relate our scales to specific issues in our orchestral repertoire? This practice goes hand in hand with teaching triads. How many times have your violas had an F# on the C string in a D dominant seventh chord and played it too low? Do you explain to them that it is out of tune and that they should try again? Or do you say to them that their note is the leading tone of the scale and, acoustically, it must be higher? Do your violas know when they are on the third or the fifth of a triad? Do your violins know when they are playing octaves with the bass? Do your cellos and basses play perfect octaves together?

Is there a practical way to combine aural skills and beginning music theory? Of course, but I believe it requires some singing. Make your students sing. Make them sing often enough so it does not always seem like a chore. Make them sing so much they lose

all self-consciousness about singing. Encourage especially those without any background in singing. For those who profess to not be able to sing, the rule in my studio/ensemble is that as long as you can grunt in tune, you will get by just fine. Sing for them by example.

Claudette Laureano spoke of this at the All-State Teachers Workshop at Gustavus this past summer and it was a great hit with the participants. Teach your students a little solfege; whatever brand suits your comfort level or experience will be just fine—moveable “do,” “fixed do,” note names, or the number system. It really does not matter, as solfege is more a practical means to an end than a process in and of itself. As long as they make a connection between what notes they have and the scale degrees they represent.

An easy piece with which to start them singing is Pachelbel. (Did I really just suggest Pachelbel?) Have your group sing the ground bass using note names (D-A-B-F#-G-D-G-A-D) first and then scale degrees (1-5-6-3-4-1-4-5-1). Teach them the scale degrees of the violin part (3-2-1-7-6-5-6-7-1). Have them sing the parts together. Chart the intervals created by just these two parts (M3-P5-m3-P5-M3-P5-P4-M3-P8). You may certainly take this as far as you like with just about any repertoire, though if the students actually like the piece you will be more apt to hold their attention.

As a fairly active adjudicator, one of the first deficiencies that I notice is intonation. Helping your students with aural skills and the theory behind them is a great step to never losing points for intonation at contest!

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 president of the Minnesota chapter of the American Viola Society. †