



SCHOOL ORCHESTRA

Teach your Orchestra Musicians how to Practice

by J. David Arnott

Writing this column seems to bring out a confessional spirit in me. This time the confession refers to orchestral musicians and their practice habits: that is, getting your musicians to practice outside of orchestra rehearsal. As I write this, we have a concert in three days and there are several passages with which my first violins are still struggling. They have been struggling since the first rehearsal and I am not sure I offered them enough assistance to get the job done. I gave them fingerings that I felt were the most easily achieved and sent them off to practice them. But I fear that was not enough. I failed to teach them how to practice.

One may hope that one's musicians will take responsibility for their own parts, but in the case of my college students, that has not been the case. I usually finger a set of parts and give it to my concertmaster and principals; (I have no librarian). I am always amazed at what the parts look like after we are done with them: some have all the markings, most have very little marked, and a few have no marks at all. They all know how much I like to hear the pencils hit the stands after I give a bowing or fingering suggestion from the podium, but apparently all they do is drop the pencil on the stand for the sound effect.

Sectionals are a helpful tool if you have the space and the help to pull them off. In my remote part of the state I am lucky to have a great colleague on faculty and several friends who help me once a concert cycle or so. With a list of spots that need attention and work, a sectional coach can make a great difference in a short amount of time, if for no other reason than to play through and demonstrate the spots for the students to hear.

Short of scheduling playing tests, I believe there are still several ways to achieve results, some positive and some negative. Here is a test: which of the following methods have you employed in your conducting? Which methods have been most effective? Have any caused anguish and resentment?

1. Intimidation: have them play the most difficult passages individually in front of the whole group. Besides being against union regulations, this digs deeply into their inner feelings of self-consciousness and will either make them practice or make them quit.
2. Fear: frighten them into practicing by threatening to play whatever music is two or three difficulty levels below their own level. If you actually hand out the parts in a rehearsal, that gets the point across really fast. This will either make them practice or make them quit.

3. Guilt: remind them that, even though their parents love them unconditionally, parents will still be able to hear the difference between a good performance and a pitiful one. Tell them that you will explain to their parents that, "While your child's intentions seem good, he/she is just not quite up to the challenge of a musical instrument." This is a good way to make them practice (or quit).
4. Teach by example: be prepared all the time. I once played for a community orchestra conductor who, at first rehearsals, boasted that he, too, was "sight-reading." What a horrible example he set for his orchestra. Explain what happens to musicians who show up at gigs/work unprepared. We all have stories about friends who lost gigs due to lack of preparation. But also tell stories about musicians who are prepared for any and all circumstances as well.
5. Teach in a positive and constructive manner. Show them how to make exercises out of passages that are difficult (Sevcik-ize them). Teaching them how to practice and how to tune is so much more important and effective than just telling them to practice. Demonstrate from the podium if you are able.
6. Teach the value of personal responsibility: I know this sounds like a very Libertarian approach, but consider this an opportunity to instill a sense of responsibility in your students that transcends music.
7. Program appropriate repertoire: there is nothing more frustrating than watching a group struggle with repertoire that is way above their means. This is not to say that group should not be challenged; it should not be given an impossible task. Finger and bow parts in a reasonable and playable manner or have someone you trust do the job. In my wildest bouts of megalomania, I still would never consider fingering a cello or bass part on my own!

There is a great saying about how there are two kinds of musicians: those who practice so they get it right and those who practice so they cannot get it wrong. I have been laying this line on my group for the last few weeks. We will soon see what kind of musicians they will turn out to be.

J. David Arnott is an Assistant Professor of Music at The College of St. Benedict/St. John's University where he directs the symphony orchestra and teaches violin and viola. ♪