

# All-State: Ensemble Skill Development: The Long and Short of Rehearsal Strategies

presented by Dr. Louis Bergonzi  
reported by Kevin Martin

*Dr. Louis Bergonzi has established himself as a premiere voice in string education. His work as a clinician and author has provided many valuable ideas for string educators. Of particular note is his contribution to Teaching Music Through Performance in Orchestra, which has been helpful to many educators.*

I attended a clinic with Dr. Bergonzi at the MNSOTA All-State clinic in 2000, which was the summer before my first year of teaching. I was impressed with the presentation, and I was able to incorporate many of Dr. Bergonzi's ideas into my novice teaching, and I still use many of the same strategies. This year's "Ensemble Skill Development" clinic contained some of the same concepts as the 2000 clinic, but there were many new things as well. I found it particularly helpful to participate in this clinic as an orchestra member: actually trying the strategies put forth in the clinic.

The clinic was divided into four parts: Rhythm, Sound Production, Intonation, and Musical Expression.

## Rhythm

Dr. Bergonzi began his clinic with movement to music. He recommended a variety of physical movements that demonstrate note values (especially subdivision) and reflect the style of the music. The movements that reflect style can also be used to teach form. Each of a number of students could lead a movement representing a part of the song, and as the piece is played the participating students could lead the movements in their particular section. The order of student leaders would then reveal the form of the piece.

A rhythm idea that I found more interesting is the BINGO concept. Students clap a certain number of beats or measures, and then insert rests to replace claps. Eventually rests replace all of the claps in a particular sequence. This exercise can lead directly to the "Internal Clock" activities presented by Dr. Bergonzi. "Play on the next downbeat" and "Play on 'X'" both involve the conductor giving a tempo to the orchestra and the orchestra members counting a specified number of rests before breathing together and coming in.

## Sound Production

Two techniques highlighted the sound production portion of Dr. Bergonzi's clinic.

The first was "the Big Sneeze." Dr. Bergonzi compared starting the bow on the string to a sneeze, with the point being that we don't force sneezes, and shouldn't use tension to force the bow on the string. This sneeze concept can apply both starting above the string and starting on the string. The idea is simply to start with a good amount of bow speed without tension in the bow arm or wrist, especially in the "sneeze" starting on the string. Bow fingers are kept very loose for this action to work well. This is an idea to which younger students (in my case 6<sup>th</sup> graders) might relate. It will help them to keep their bow fingers and thumb relaxed, which can be a rather challenging feat for young students.

A second idea offered by Dr. Bergonzi to improve sound production was the "violaphone." Each individual musician can create the violaphone by holding out his or her left arm with the palm down, and sliding the right hand back and forth on it. Sliding the right hand at different speeds gives the impression of varying bow speeds. Grabbing the shirt and then letting go suddenly to slide the hand down depicts strokes that start on the string, particularly the *martele* stroke. The idea is to introduce students to the movement in an accessible way before doing it on an instrument.

## Intonation

Dr. Bergonzi provided a variety of ideas to improve orchestral intonation: *focus/blur*, "remote control mute button," and counterpoint tuning.

According to Dr. Bergonzi, *focusing/blurring* intonation can apply at every level, from elementary up through collegiate. Rather than adjusting the pitch of every player, the conductor can blur the pitch of the entire section by having all of the players slide their fingers up and down. At that point, all of the section will be out of tune. At a gesture from the conductor, the orchestra should hold the correct pitch while listening carefully to match within the section. According to Dr. Bergonzi, the

correct pitch always emerges.

The mute button idea involves singing, or a combination of playing and singing. From a singing only perspective, students could sing a scale or passage from a song. At some point, the conductor "presses the mute button" and the singers stop singing but continue to keep the pitch internally. At some point the conductor asks for a resumption of sound. The goal is for the ensemble to have accurately internalized the sound, thereby landing together on the correct pitch. The playing version of this exercise works the same way, only with played notes followed by the mute button, followed by singing.

Counterpoint tuning is a bit tricky from the conductor perspective, but it can be a useful exercise in interval training. The entire orchestra starts at a unison pitch, but different parts move up or down by half or whole step, as indicated by the conductor. The conductor can therefore form major, minor, and perfect intervals, as well as forming and resolving dissonances.

## Musical Expression

Dr. Bergonzi believes that musicality should be incorporated from the first rehearsal of a new piece. He offered ideas in developing dynamics, articulation, and phrasing.

Two ideas stood out regarding dynamic development. The first involved a small number of designated people maintaining a loud dynamic while the rest of the orchestra *decrescendos*. Surrounding students must listen for the students who did not match the orchestra. The second idea involves the conductor talking to the orchestra at a variety of volume levels, while the orchestra plays at a volume just below the conductor's volume.

For articulation, bows can imitate a variety of consonant sounds in starting notes. Dr. Bergonzi placed consonant sounds on a continuum from hard to soft, and all can be imitated at various times as necessary. An additional suggestion was to use sounds from other languages.

The phrasing portion of the clinic

received the least attention, as time was quickly concluding. Dr. Bergonzi's premise was that music could match spoken language. Just as the same phrase spoken with different punctuation (Good morning. Good morning? Good morning!, etc.), the same phrase can be played any number of different ways. An additional idea is to use students to represent notes and then group them in different ways to demonstrate the way the same notes can be phrased in different ways.

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Hand signals create a rhythmic duet.