



ORCHESTRA

Progress or Status Quo?

by J. David Arnott

While trolling the depths of the school orchestra archival articles, I stumbled upon a number of articles from anywhere from 40 to 75 years ago and I thought it would be interesting to see how far we have progressed since then. As I discovered, we have made progress in some areas, and in others we have remained in a perpetual state of status quo.

Through a variety of school orchestra articles published between 1922 and 1961, I found issues ranging from orchestra programs competing with band programs for talented students, to the benefits of student orchestras having contact with professional musicians, to selecting quality music for junior high school programs. The point of this is to see what progress, if any, we have made in the last 75 years.

In an article from 1952, a gentleman from Ohio stated that, "In order for a small school to have an orchestra the music teacher and administrator must have a desire and see the need for such a program." (Fred Roberts, *Music Educators Journal* 39, no. 1, Sept/Oct. 1952: 59.) This certainly rings through to today, though the issue of funding the program seems to be much more of an issue today than it did back then. I don't believe districts back then were requesting levies from voters and threatening to dissolve music programs in the process. Where exactly do administrative desires for string programs and financial support of such part ways? For me, living in a school district without a string program (for which I am perpetually embarrassed) is disheartening and leads me to question other aspects of district policies. Do my local administrators have desire for a program and cannot fund it? Do they see a need for a program and are not desirous enough of it that they are able to discover a way to fund it? The band and the choir are both quite successful...is that enough? Apparently it is. History shows that orchestra programs were introduced into school curriculums before bands were. How is it that bands seem to have gained the upper hand? Better lobbying? Better

music? Cooler instruments? (All fodder for a different kind of article, I am afraid.)

In another article from the early 1950s, the question was raised as to whether orchestra and band programs can successfully coexist. The answer was a fairly resounding yes—as long as there was adequate instruction and especially if the string students got a head start of a year or more on the band students. The author recognized that band directors without string experience need string teachers, and even then there were in many localities string teachers willing to teach during school hours for a reasonable fee. I believe that we have made improvements since that time—at least in districts with string programs. It seems that now it is much rarer for a "band teacher" to be teaching the string program. It surely is the case in smaller districts, but at least these days, music education degrees include at least a minimum amount of experience learning about all the instruments. As a teacher of an instrumental methods class (strings), the most important thing I get across to my non-string students is that if they find themselves having to teach strings, that they should get help immediately!!

One author proposed that a good orchestra program makes a better band program. The reasoning behind this statement was that early instruction on string instruments leads to an easier time learning band instruments later and that there will always be crossover students—students in both band and orchestra. I have several crossover students in my own ensembles, and not just the traditional crossovers: I have a clarinetist playing in my violin section, a violist in my horn section, and 3 or 4 string players in the sax section of my pep band. I have found that crossover students are beneficial in both my ensembles. My favorite quote of this research was found in this particular article: "After three years of violin study, the saxophone is simplicity itself." (George Toot, *Music Educators Journal* 39, no. 1, Sept/Oct 1952: 52.) (As some of my dear readers might already know, saxophone is my third instrument, and as stated above, I direct the CSB/

SJU pep band.)

An article from 1961 discussed the benefits of having members of a professional orchestra come and coach young people. This was valuable in 1961 and it remains valuable today. Recent experience in Minnesota shows that the All-State Orchestra has had Minnesota Orchestra and Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra members coach sectionals and give master classes. I believe GTCYS and MYS do too. Whenever possible, I have Minnesota Orchestra members work with my group. It is absolutely amazing how willing they are to give their time and energy to young people. Have any of you asked for this kind of experience for your group? It is usually just a phone call away. In this area we continue to do well, but are we doing enough? (Louis Wersen, "The Pros Can Help Your Orchestra," *Music Educators Journal* 48, no. 1, Sept/Oct 1961: 54.)

The last article to discuss (dating from 1954) was written about the relationship between community orchestras and school orchestra programs. It discussed the findings of a study of six community orchestras in Michigan and their relationships with the surrounding school programs in terms of children's concerts, educational outreach, community and school support for such ventures, and orchestral offerings for older students. (Charles R. Hoffer, "Common Efforts of the Community Orchestra and the School Music Program in Providing Listening Experiences for School Students," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 6, no. 1, spring 1958: 32-42.) The research found that community orchestras played an average of about one concert a year for elementary students and did little or nothing to promote orchestral music to students beyond middle school. The study recommended that students attend four concerts a year (pretty ambitious, no?) and that programs and opportunities should be created targeting older students. Here again, we find that we are at status quo.

The time will soon be here that we will no longer have an audience for what we do

and love, either on the community level or the professional level. Fifty years ago we had little or no organized program for exposing older students to orchestral music. Today in my neck of the woods, the local community orchestra offers one children's concert to fourth graders every year, the local school district brings all the fifth graders to the Minnesota Orchestra, and then...that's it.

Kids can grow up around here with exactly two chances to hear "our music." I challenge us to change this state of affairs.

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