



ORCHESTRA

Learning from Festival

by J. David Arnott

On February 20, I acted as site host for eleven middle school orchestras as they competed to advance from Tier 1 to Tier 2 and a chance to play in Orchestra Hall. After trying to host this event last year and getting snowed out, I decided it was worth another shot—and it was definitely worth it. Since I am sure that with a little effort you all would be able to figure out who played at my site, the details will have to remain sketchy at best in order to keep a sense of anonymity. I was able to make many observations over the course of the day relating to how different groups treated the day and their opportunities with regard to preparation for their performances.

Each group had a 30-minute warm-up immediately prior to their performance, a performance on stage, and a clinic immediately following the performance. The only difference is that some groups listened to other groups prior to their own performance, and some groups listened to other groups after they performed. While each group obviously tuned, some groups spent much more time and care tuning than others. Some groups spent so much time tuning that they had very little time to actually “warm up.” Some groups had help tuning from parents and assistants, some groups were assisted by my college students (they were there for the asking throughout the day and stepped in where they could). In general, groups that spent the most time tuning were the groups that played best in tune.

Some groups were still “practicing” and working on fixing things right up to the end of their warm-up times. One of my favorite musical sayings is appropriate here: There are those who practice until they get it right, and then there are those who practice until they can’t possibly get it wrong. The groups who were still practicing up until their performance did not play as well as those who practiced until they “couldn’t get it wrong.” What should happen in a warm-up time? In the best of all possible worlds, it is a time to mentally prepare for performance. It is a time to remind everyone why they are

here and why they have worked so hard. It is a time for reflection, a time to review the two or three spots to remember something special and a time to review performance etiquette and stage presence. Starting movements and running difficult transitions are definite possibilities. Reminding the group about “tendencies” prior to performance is always a good idea. (e.g. “Remember not to rush in the pizzicato passage.”) Above all, it is time for a last minute encouraging and positive pep talk, a time to remind students of the joys of performance. It is much too easy to instill in them a fear and loathing of performance.

Across 11 groups and 8 hours there was a wide array of postures and positions displayed on stage. Oddly enough, the groups with the best playing positions (left hand, right hands, as well as sitting posture) played the best. It is hardly possible to play well with a poor playing posture and it is one of the most important lessons we can teach young string players. It is much easier to correct poor position and bad habits at an early age (middle school) and nearly impossible to do so at a later age.

Uniform uniforms. It is not always better to look good than sound good and there is certainly no grading category for attire, but the groups that looked “uniform” seemed to play better. Uniform uniforms seem to make students take the whole process seriously. And uniforms need not necessarily mean black pants with velvet stripes and frilly blouses—uniforms need only be uniform!

Instrumental Balance. It was interesting to see the wide variety of instrumentation over the course of the day. We had schools with combined grades and we had single grade orchestras. We had groups with 35 violins, 6 violas, 6 cellos, and no basses, and we had a group with 15 basses. The bottom line seemed to be that, while it is always nice to have a perfectly proportioned group of strings from violins down to basses, that particular aspect of instrumentation did not matter in assessing quality.

The level of parental involvement over

the course of the day was very encouraging, though I was not able to witness any connection between parental involvement and quality of playing. I am sure that parents who are able to tune instruments are a definite bonus when trying to get ready for a performance!

As I stated above, the only difference throughout the day involved whether groups listened to other groups before or after they themselves performed. Is it better to listen to other groups before you play or after?? I am not sure what the answer is. I do know that when I am in audition situations, I hate hearing other people play before I do, especially if they are playing the same repertoire that I am. What does make me glad is that we are encouraging our students to listen to other groups. We can learn much from those groups who play better than we do as well as from those who are not as experienced. What a great way to learn!

While all the groups behaved very well all day long, the groups who exhibited the highest level of discipline off stage also displayed the highest levels of discipline on stage. This was fascinating to me. One of the groups had the students sit in every other seat in the auditorium to listen to other groups. This eliminated the urge to chat and whisper and was amazing. I believe another group saw this and had their students do likewise! In general, the groups who exhibited the most discipline throughout the day—played better.

In general, the choice of repertoire over the day was appropriate to the age level and playing ability of each group, though it was obvious which groups were enjoying the repertoire choice more. While I certainly do not advocate choosing only repertoire that makes students happy, in this day and age, it is certainly easy enough to find pedagogically meaningful music that helps students develop technique and musicianship skills without boring them to tears (or ourselves—meaning that I never ever want to hear *Palladio* ever again).

It was a long and wonderful day and I

congratulate all the groups at all three sites and especially those who advance to Tier 2. I close with one final pithy saying: If you are going to keep score then you should want to win.

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