



ORCHESTRA

Thoughts on All-State Orchestra

by J. David Arnott

As I write this, my institution is hosting the MMEA All-State Orchestra Festival. There are 131 musicians on stage under the baton of Manny Laureano and they all just barely fit on stage. When considering what it took to get to this place, I am astounded by the coordination of multiple constituencies. When taken in context with the simultaneous choir and band festivals in separate locations, it is almost inconceivable that this festival could even happen—much less run as smoothly as it does. This is all due to the wonderful work of Mary Schaeffle and her team of Vice Presidents. Having now worked with Nancy Stutzman, Deb Sittko, and Mark Gitch (the last 3 orchestra VPs), it is easy to take for granted the effort and experience these people bring to the table to ensure that these festivals are of the highest standard with regard to administration and detail.

The program for the week included the *Overture to Candide*, Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet*, *Capriccio Espagnol*, and the *Ride*

by the middle of the week and by the end of the week most of the winds and brass were able to cut the parts. One of the best parts of the week was Manny's telling of the *Ring Cycle* story to the enraptured orchestra. The stage was so quiet during story time you could hear a piece of gold forged into a magic ring.

As rehearsals progressed, it seemed to me that not all our wind and brass students across the state are prepared well enough in such specifically orchestral issues as the use of A clarinets and C trumpets, transposing horn parts, transposing trumpet parts, and above all the solo nature of orchestral wind and brass playing to name just a few. All of these issues came up during the All-State Orchestra week and all were eventually solved, but not without some gnashing of teeth and rending of garments (and maybe a sacrifice to the Norse gods). Understandably, not every district has an orchestra, and not every district that has an orchestra plays music on the level of All-State, but if we are going to have All-State Orchestras, I think we need to make sure that all the sections are populated with students who are up to the challenge, if not already experienced in orchestral playing. We audition differently for jazz band—after all, we wouldn't put a great alto sax player (think Glazunov Concerto) in the jazz band if that student had never seen a lead sheet. Maybe we should start auditioning differently for orchestra.

I plan to encourage MNSOTA to contact MMEA to suggest that we gather more information from wind and brass players at the All-State audition. Perhaps students could indicate their interest in or preference for orchestra or band. Perhaps questions could be added to the application, such as: Have you played in an orchestra

before? Have you played on ... an A clarinet / C trumpet (etc.)? Do you have access to ... an E \flat clarinet / English horn (etc.)? Can you transpose? I am not saying that if the answer to any or all of these questions is "no" then the student should be rejected for orchestra, just that we need to recognize that the wind and brass students in orchestra are generally required to do more "stuff" than those in band.

I certainly don't want to prevent a student from being assigned to the orchestra because she/he has no interest and/or prior experience—in fact, All-State Orchestra is the kind of program where students find out that they *love* orchestral music. Maybe we need to figure out a way to have a wind and a brass sectional prior to the week of the festival? Maybe we need to pick easier music? Maybe we need to alternate string orchestra year with full orchestra year as long as the orchestra gets first pick in the symphonic years?

I offer these thoughts as what will hopefully be a starting point in a lengthy and fruitful conversation. All in all, it was truly a fabulous week and I hope that this article will spur some deeper conversations about the scope of the orchestra festival, and about new possibilities to improve the All-State Orchestra.

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All-State Orchestra on stage at the Benedicta Arts Center, College of St. Benedict

of the Valkyries. It was a bold and challenging program for most of the students on stage and, under Maestro Laureano's expert direction, it pretty much came together in the end. The learning curve for the week was steep for most and gradual for some. The string players seemed to be in control