

# All-State: Everything I need to Know — Perspectives from a Youth Orchestra Conductor

presented by Amir Kats; reported by Clare Chopp

Amir Kats came to the Twin Cities just last year to conduct the GTCYS Symphony. He began his session by talking about a few basic philosophies that he follows. He works on a vibrant and full sound at all times. He wants cohesive phrasing and expression in playing, and he never stops pushing them. He also expressed the importance of giving praise when justly deserved. The problem arises when you tell them how good they are when they are not. It is about finding something that is good and praising that but never praising what shouldn't be praised. Amir talked about how Marvin Rabin helped shape his concepts of teaching and conducting. It is surely a sign of age when so few others were around in Marvin's heyday. He had great ideas and you only had to go to Madison to find them. He, like Amir, believed that every student should have an interesting experience at *every* rehearsal. Now if that isn't a challenge. (If only professional conductors either worked toward that or at least towards a "moving" experience there would be less grumbling in the ranks. The nice thing about continuing to perform *and* conduct is that you keep reversing roles and can appreciate each side's view. It helps keep perspectives in check.) Marvin and Amir take special attention to make sure to address each section of the orchestra at each rehearsal and to pay special attention as well to talk to the back of the orchestra. He even talked about stepping off the podium. I like the thoughts of not always worrying about being brilliant but just to be involved. Amir is anxious to pass the ownership of the group to the students by asking them questions and letting them find the answers instead of the conductor always telling them. It is more about discovery of the music together. This gives them ownership and a better understanding musically also. In order to do this though you really have to have a handle on the score and not be sight-reading as the conductor. You also need to have a plan in place for this to happen and it cannot be just about trying to work through difficult sections but also about the music itself. He talks about how students want to sound good

and they want to succeed; we have to teach them the difference between what is good and what is very good. That brings back the idea that Manny Laureano brought up with his musical experience about being exposed to greatness, not just great music. Students love music because they have heard greatness and that is what they want to emulate. Amir also talked about passion and being open and sincere, giving the truth and always turning negatives into a positive spin instead of a complaint.

One of the big ideas that Amir had for us was to tie everything into expression. Rhythm, intonation, technique, and color are a few examples of all the things we need to put into the language of expression. He also really hammers away at rhythm since it is the heart of everything and we need to feel the pulse. Once rhythm is fixed lots of other issues are solved. Breathing is something that should be constantly reminded. If we are passionate about rhythm then students will be. If we breathe and encourage a breathing gesture then students will follow. If we tie technique and color into phrasing, then we can solve up-bow and down-bow issues. If we work dynamics from day one as expression, then music is interesting and we can talk quality of sounds and color. Since strings are the core of an orchestras color, then we need to really work the bow technique to help produce the effects. They are capable of phrasing if we demand it and guide them to it, teaching them how to keep the flow of energy and vitality throughout.

If we work these ideas with the students we will get them listening more intelligently and better. We will then have them actually playing with each other and making music instead of just playing music and that is a big difference. The more experience they have like that the less baton technique a conductor really needs but on the other hand then the better the baton technique the more nuances that can be interpreted and played by the students.

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