



# ORCHESTRA

## State of the School Orchestra

by J. David Arnott

It is now time for a “state of the school orchestra” reflection. As this is the School Orchestra News column, it seemed like a good place to start this essay would be with that most reliable of research sources: Google. A google search of “School Orchestra News” reveals 1,920,00 hits. When refined to Minnesota School Orchestra News, we still get 87,500 hits. When adding “high” to the search terms we get 64,900. Granted some of these hits lead us to sources about High School Musical and the like, it still seems like that much school orchestra news is a good thing. When we further narrow the search criteria to “Minnesota budget cuts high school orchestra news” we unfortunately still have 9,450 hits. This is not the kind of school orchestra news that makes MNSOTA folks happy.

Hopefully those of you in districts with strong arts support are already positioning yourselves and your programs to ride out the economic tsunami in which we find ourselves this year. For those of you who teach in districts with limited support for the arts—hopefully it is not already too late. We have all faced budget cuts and threats of program elimination and most have survived with parental support, letter writing campaigns, booster organizations, increased student fees, car washes, and candy sales.

What can we do once the lean-mean-symphonic-machine is as lean as possible? How do we choose what vital organ we can excise in order to keep our programs functioning? As a tenured college professor at a liberal arts institution, it would seem that job and ensemble security would not be an issue. Music is after all a liberal art, a founding member of the quadrivium (the higher level of the seven original liberal arts).

Even so, I am continuing to work on ways to make my program integral to the institution and indispensable.

Some of these schemes include creating opportunities that raise the visibility of the orchestra. When we have concerts, I make sure that announcements go in the local newspaper, not just on the campus bulletin board. Since we are going on tour this semester, I have made sure that alumni in the locations we are traveling have been notified. We have been playing children’s concerts every other year for K-3 students—partnering with our Fine Arts Programming department, which does the advertising and ticketing for the event. This alone fills up our auditorium with 600-900 young students who have mostly never heard an orchestra perform before. Hopefully these students will remember this when it comes time to choose an instrument. I personally have played music for major donors every year since coming here (at dinners, at donor functions, and even at picnics), and my orchestra has also played for donors. Who can you play for to win influence (and yes, this is indeed about lobbying and influence peddling, and all the things that go into our legislative system)?

When opportunities arise, carefully consider the possibilities, especially if it is an idea that could benefit your program or at least raise awareness of what you are doing. Have you considered the possibility of an interdisciplinary program with the English Department? There are many possibilities for music and literature combinations. A Shakespeare play and music of the Elizabethan Era. The *Great Gatsby* paired with music of the Jazz Age. *A Tale of Two Cities* and music of the French Classical period.

Does your school teach physics? Sending a couple string players into the physics lab (provided they are able to properly explain and demonstrate the physics of the monochord) will delight and possibly entertain as well as enlighten a sector of the school population that might have little or no interest in music whatsoever. Do you participate in faculty functions or do you enter and exit your building through the music wing? From my experience, it is better when all your colleagues know your name.

Of course there are also the old standbys including playing string quartets in the lobby prior to school board meetings, winning trophies at contest, and keeping up with the politics of district budgeting. Knowing who school board members are and encouraging parents of orchestra students to run for open seats on the school board might seem like overkill—but once the budget cuts begin, it is often too late.

We all need to be proactive this time around. The cuts have already begun and this time they will not be pretty, nor will they be limited to districts with marginal programs.

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