



# ORCHESTRA

## Always Make the Most of What You've Got

by J. David Arnott

I recently had opportunities to work with two different groups of high school students on programs that had to be assembled and performed on very short rehearsal time. The first was the Central Lakes Conference Honors Orchestra (all high school students), which was held in Alexandria in the spring, and the other was the Upper Midwest String and Chamber Music Conference Chamber Orchestra (mostly high school students but some younger) held in July. Each group met for the first time on Monday and played concerts just four days later on Friday. One group received music in advance, the other did not. One group was selected by their school teachers based on merit, the other group was assembled based on interest (and to a certain extent on economic means as well).

As I was a late replacement conductor for the Central Lakes Conference Orchestra, I inherited the programming selections (*Finale* from Tchaikovsky's *Serenade for Strings*, first movement of Grieg's *Holberg Suite*, and the *Saraband* from Britten's *Simple Symphony*—three very popular works from the heart of the string orchestra repertoire. Each work on the program provided opportunities for pedagogical study and the final product was well presented and enthusiastically received.

The program I chose for the Upper Midwest Orchestra included Paul Hindemith's *Fünf Stücke* (of which we played *vier* of them), the *Minuet* from John Ireland's *A Downland Suite*, Robert Washburn's *Sinfonietta for String Orchestra*, and Jean Sibelius' *Romance in C for String Orchestra*. I also selected a "just in case" work because at String Camp (summer) we are never certain what level of playing ability to expect. After the first rehearsal Monday I decided that we did not need the back-up plan! I chose this program with the hope that none of the students would have played any of these pieces before. One of the bassists had previously played the Ireland, but for the rest it was all new repertoire. As expected, there was apprehension and reluctance at first (too

many accidentals, too much dissonance, slow tempi, B-flat minor???) but as the week progressed and the accidentals became second nature and the sounds of dissonance became expected, the subdivision of beats in the slow movements became automatic, the music came alive. By the concert I had made converts of most if not all of them to the possibilities of twentieth-century music. Granted, we were not playing Peter Maxwell Davies or Morton Feldman, but these were pieces that challenged someone expecting Mozart or Tchaikovsky. If we do not make an effort to program and diligently prepare 20<sup>th</sup>-century music, our students will never learn to fully appreciate it.

I present these two experiences as examples of how to make the most out of any situation regardless of what you are given in terms of players, repertoire, limited rehearsals, difficult performing spaces, and whatever other unimaginable challenges come your way. Through comparing two groups of different size, origin, playing ability, and origin, it is my hope that more similarities will shine through than differences. In comparing the size of each group, the Central Lakes Orchestra was quite a bit larger (20-20-17-15-8) than the String Camp Orchestra (12-12-7-5-2) but that really made little difference in the end. What made the most difference were the rehearsal techniques I was able to use for each group and the way I was able to use every minute of each rehearsal to our combined advantage.

At Central Lakes there was a rehearsal on Monday evening which netted only about two hours of quality rehearsal time, three days off, and then a couple hours on Friday and then an hour in the performance space (a converted gymnasium). Knowing that there would be little in the way of rehearsal time for the Central Lakes group, I took the time and effort and sent bowed parts early enough that they were copied in the parts sent to the students (I even added a few fingerings—though not for the very largest instruments). I had a plan for each rehearsal set before the week began and

was ready to adjust it as needed. Having done these works many times before, I knew which hard spots would improve with rehearsal and I knew which hard spots would not get better no matter how much time we spent. In the end, it was a solid pedagogical experience that also managed to be fun.

The String Camp Orchestra met for two hours and twenty minutes and also had a 45-minute sectional each day Monday through Friday. The students were also given specific practice spots (though at string camp practice time is not so easy to find). During rehearsals I was not only able to employ a wide variety of pedagogical practice techniques, but I was also able to reinforce them each day for the week. As we had the luxury of time, we were able to experiment with bowings as well as some different fingering strategies: ("Violins, you are not seriously considering doing that on the E string now, are you?") We were able to do a good bit of sub-division practice and some really great work on the pizzicato movement of the Washburn—to the point where they were able to play the movement (in  $\frac{6}{8}$  no less) without me and without rushing. After a week of playing Hindemith (after the Friday night performance of it) the students realized what a wonderful expression of emotion Hindemith has left for us.

So in organizing my thoughts about these two experiences I have come up with the following: Knowing who your players will be is helpful although not completely necessary (especially if you have a contingency plan). Having a rehearsal schedule is absolutely necessary (though most teachers would call this a lesson plan) even if you are forced to punt occasionally. It is absolutely possible to "sell" students on works that do not sound particularly charming at first read-through, especially if you are prepared to work seriously and diligently and keep from smirking until you are safely ensconced in the privacy of your conductor lounge. We should never lose sight of the pedagogical aspects of why we do what

we do and always plan for the best and be prepared for the otherwise.

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