

Clinic: It Takes a Village to Raise a Musician

presented by Claudette Laureano — reported by Faith Farr

What does it take to teach children how to play a musical instrument so that they will love it, learn to express themselves through it, and eventually make a career of it? There are many ways to train children. However, if conductors and teachers were to work side by side with one another to give their students the tools they need to become successful, we will have achieved the ultimate goal! Since most professional string musicians become orchestral players, it makes sense that teachers incorporate ability-appropriate excerpts along with all the other essentials that make a string player proficient. As a result, they will be helping to set that child up for a better chance at having a career in music. Orchestral excerpts have loads of musical and technical challenges and can be an important part of a student's weekly lesson. Teachers and conductors would serve their students well by helping them to set reasonable goals and teaching them how to achieve them. We all came together today for basically one purpose and that is to learn from each other. Our goals are one and the same, how to best teach, support, and nurture our students in the most effective ways possible to make them successful musicians.

Claudette Laureano

At her fall clinic presentation Claudette Laureano told us about her training and how it has influenced her perspective as a music educator and conductor. Claudette started playing toy piano at age 3, and studied ballet as a child. What she loved about dance class was not the dancing so much as listening to the pianist play Chopin. In grade 5 Claudette began instrumental music, and chose violin, dreaming of becoming the next Heifetz.

Claudette considers her training to be an example of what *not* to do in private teaching, because it wasn't until six teachers later, in her third year of college, that she finally found a teacher who taught her how to practice. Her early teachers helped her hear things that needed fixing, but did not teach her how to practice. In addition, her teachers told her never to bring orchestra excerpts to lessons. In comparing the training she had in violin and her husband Manny had on trumpet, Claudette said that Manny's teachers taught excerpts almost exclusively. Claudette believes teachers should include excerpts as a general balance in students' musical education.

In learning to practice effectively, students need to set goals, then prioritize, analyze, pinpoint and perfect. Laureano's Law of practice is: the first successful attempt is an Accident; the second successful attempt is a Coincidence; the third one is a Clue to Understanding. Claudette recommends five good repetitions, or three in a row, to solidify any practice spot.

All students, but especially perfectionists, need to realize that progress will be big at first in learning a new piece, but then progress will slow down. It is this subtle

progress that comes before true polish is achieved. Students need to be patient with themselves when they are in the subtle progress stage. In addition to practicing deeply in detail, students also need to learn when



Claudette Laureano

to move on. If they are working on a spot, and it's not getting better, they should try a different practice technique, or put a mark in the margin to remember to ask for help at their next lesson.

Doing critical listening to recordings is an important part of practice. Students should listen to several performances, both student and professional, for example on YouTube, and learn to compare phrasing, dynamics and nuance. Students need to be able to identify and discuss the differences and learn to listen to themselves critically.

Conductors and teachers should be in perfect harmony about student devel-

opment. Hopefully students are hearing the same advice about technique from the podium as from their private lessons. Auditions are important to hear the technical training the student has received, but teachers need to help students through possible disappointment in audition placement. The placement should be appropriate—where students will be challenged but not overwhelmed. It should be possible for a teacher to find out why a student didn't move up—it might be simply because the competition from other students got stiffer.

Communication between the private teacher and the conductor is important. Music is our ultimate priority.

Claudette led a lively discussion and answered questions. Some topics:

- Rehearsal is rehearsal and practice is practice. Time spent practicing scales and etudes counts both towards solo development and towards orchestra development.
- One director wondered whether expectations should be lowered if students are too busy to practice.
- School directors often make a choice between breadth and depth—similar to choices the school sports coaches make with the regular vs. the elite teams. In a school setting, an auditioned group might be for serious students, a larger group that works on easier light pieces might be for everyone, and small groups might be for friends to play quartet, electric, hip-hop or whatever their interest was.
- Both orchestra and studio teachers need to teach students how to get the

most out of the limited practice time they have. One teacher uses a practice chart that isn't for minutes but for the student's goal of the day—e.g. using big bows, keeping the wrist open, playing in tune. By looking at the

practice chart at the end of the week the teacher can tell where the student's focus has been.

- One school teacher gives students a 3-page list of technique points; instead of an excerpt test, each student is

asked to show their best work.

- *Practiceopedia* by Philip Johnston has many excellent practice ideas.

Faith Farr is editor of String Notes. †

Clinic: Orchestra Director / Studio Teacher Partnership

compiled by Faith Farr

At the MNSOTA Clinic, Claudette Laureano spoke about how orchestra conductors and studio teachers can work together to make well rounded musicians. The discussion period generated so many interesting ideas that the entire membership was asked to comment via email. The questions were:

Orchestra directors: Do you ask your students to take their orchestra music to their private lessons for help? Why or why not? If yes, what help do you hope studio teachers can offer?

Studio teachers: Do you work on orchestra music during students' lessons? Why or why not? If yes, what do you see that students gain from individual study of orchestra material?

For both: Is there information you would like from the orchestra or studio teacher about the students you share? If so, what information? What would be a good communication tool or method?

Orchestra Directors answer: No

Orchestra directors who rarely ask for private-lesson help explained:

- If the students can't learn the piece in the time allotted, the piece is too hard.
- I don't expect private teachers to help students learn orchestra music. That's my job during class and the student's job practicing at home.
- If I choose the right literature, most of the students can problem-solve most of the technical issues in class. In theory, they go home and incorporate these solutions into their practice. Over the course of a year, there may be one or two pieces that will stretch a larger percentage of the students. These kinds of challenges are good and I think most studio teachers don't mind helping as long as it's not a frequent occurrence.
- I rarely ask my students to bring their music to lessons. If I do, it's usually to seek out answers to specific fingering or bowing questions that I or the students are unable to solve ourselves.
- It is not realistic for a private teacher to go over all orchestra parts, but a request for a small spot or technique is possible.
- I only ask students to do it if it is a solo or Honor's music.

These directors offered insights into the different roles of teaching and learning in

private lesson and orchestra class:

- Lessons are for systematic skill building e.g. scales, etudes, tone production, fine intonation work, isolated bow hand work, isolated left hand development and literature study for the performance of music.
- I know that many of my students ask their studio teachers for assistance, but I prefer that they use lesson time to work on the things we cannot work on as effectively at school—etudes, solo literature, individualized refinement of technique, etc.
- The purpose of individual lessons is to build individual skill. Better individual skills lead to better ensemble skills; in my experience, it doesn't go the other way. Playing alone and playing with others are very different skills and playing alone comes first.

Orchestra Directors answer: Yes

Orchestra directors who do ask for private lesson help explained:

- My middle school rehearsals are short and infrequent, so if students need extra help on their concert music material they ask me specifically during their small group lesson or with their private teacher.
- Especially in Chamber Orchestra—students agree to be in Chamber with

the understanding that they will figure the parts out themselves or be able to get help with technically difficult sections.

The type of help these directors hope for from private lessons includes:

- Clearing up any confusion on notes, rhythms, fingering, bowing, dynamics.
- Shifting help.
- Developing specialized bow strokes such as spiccato.
- Tone production for soloists.

These directors mentioned the following benefits their students receive from private teacher help:

- Studio teachers can help their students digest and prepare orchestra music.
- Studio teachers can offer unparalleled attention and expertise in technical matters.
- Studio teachers who are experienced orchestral players can add their little tricks and large ensemble perspectives.
- Students build confidence in themselves and their playing skills when they get individual help.
- The work that the private teacher achieves will create a much better and stronger member and ensemble.

One orchestra director commented, "Every private teacher that I have ever

contacted has been willing to help. I think orchestra teachers need to remember to thank private teachers at concerts.”

Studio Teachers answer: No

Most studio teachers who do not help with orchestra music focused on students whose development is not yet up to that required of the orchestra. These teachers said:

- The orchestra music isn't pedagogically appropriate to the student's learning sequence
- The orchestra music is too hard. If I work on this with this student, we'll never get to play anything else until this is learned properly, and I can't do that!!
- I have a remedial student who transferred to a new school where the other students are more experienced. If I take the time for her to learn her school orchestra music really well, she still won't understand why we're doing certain things, and we won't be able to do anything else all year. So I just spend 10 minutes per day on it, and the rest of the time I work on what I think she really needs to work on to develop as a player and to increase her ability to figure things out for herself.
- In my own teaching history, I know I made a huge mistake decades ago trying to help a student who was over her head in orchestra. There was a big trip to Europe, and the student wanted to go, and the orchestra teacher wanted her to go. So I tried to teach shifts in complex keys to a student who was barely shifting; and we didn't do much else at all for the whole year. The result was an orchestra trip and then the student quit.

The summary of this view was that students will catch up faster if the lesson time is devoted to their actual developmental needs, and not the orchestra requirements. These teachers suggested that the orchestra director should consider providing a simplified part until the student catches up.

Many studio teachers commented on the different purposes of private lessons and rehearsals: “Private lessons are a time set aside to work toward becoming a master string player, not just learning bowing and fingering for a certain piece.”

Some studio teachers are willing to provide limited help if the student has an audition or test for chair placement. Others help

only when the student asks. Most require that the student has already put some work into it and comes with a specific question.

Some teachers cited their own full pedagogic sequence and said simply, “I don't have time to help with orchestra.”

Studio Teachers answer: Yes

Studio teachers who do help with orchestra music offered these reasons:

- I help students master the skills of the music.
- If a student is in an orchestra I like to see the level of music they are expected to prepare.
- I want them to be leaders and develop good habits in all their playing.
- Sometimes orchestra music requires different techniques than solo music and working on orchestra helps me to remember to address those techniques.
- Orchestral music is an opportunity to apply the same concepts students are focusing on in lessons to another playing situation.
- Orchestra music should be performed by each individual in the group to their best ability, even though that ability will vary across the group. This means practice on individual parts is essential for all involved, so a lesson on a orchestra part can open student's eyes to number of things.
- I like the variety orchestra music adds to my teaching.
- I feel that whatever students are playing in public or for fun is part of my “lesson package” and needs to be played for me *before* it goes out in public (like for church or school talent show!). The biggest day-spoiler is when a piece of music I have never seen before falls out of their case and they tell me that they played it in church yesterday!!!
- Lots of times the music is more difficult than their lesson music and I don't want them to get bad habits. I will work on the music with them at the speed they can play it accurately. Even if they can't play it at the speed that is taken by the director, at least they have worked on it in the way that I want them to work on it.
- I want students to understand that it is important to work on any music that they are performing. If at all possible, I don't want them to “fake.” Faking leads to bad intonation and

sloppy technique.

The benefits of individual orchestra study include:

- learning something new; whether it involves a new or difficult rhythm, a new position or clef, more left hand agility, or new bowing techniques.
- building self-esteem by learning to play all the orchestra music well; enjoying their instrument and orchestra; and gaining confidence in playing their instrument.
- finding that playing in position can actually be easier and sound better. For example using vibrato instead of playing an open string.
- developing rhythmic precision of playing in a section. Just *exactly* how long do you hold that dotted half note so that everyone ends together?
- delving into style and music history. For instance who was that Tchaikovsky fellow and how is his music different from Mozart's?

Many teachers have strategies for helping with orchestra music:

- I encourage students to “triate” the music at home, that is, to just bring to me the spots that they have trouble with, are exposed or that the conductor has asked them to practice or bring to a lesson.
- We check fingerings, bowing skills, position fingerings and ease of playing in the suggested tempos.
- If students are playing a solo, I work on the music in lessons like any solo and hear it regularly until the concert.
- I try to ask about music at the beginning of the lesson, because, inevitably, as soon as the lesson is *over*, the student or parent mentions this orchestra music that is in a concert *tomorrow!* Aaaaarrggggg
- It usually takes only 1 lesson or 2 at the most to go over the piece or pieces. I tell them to use this piece(s) as a lesson piece and practice it for their next lesson in addition to the lesson piece/and or technique books they are working on.
- With section music, I will let advanced players tell me what needs help, while I will hear the whole part from intermediate students (who don't always know what is problematic). I

don't do this at every lesson, but when they bring it in.

Communication suggestions

Studio teachers had some common suggestions for orchestra directors that would make studio help easier:

- Always have bowings in the part please. Bowings = articulations and are the responsibility of the conductor. Fingerings can be personally tailored to the player, but bowings cannot. A studio teacher can't help with rhythm unless the bowing is set.
- Performance metronome marks would be helpful. Students sometimes think the part is fine because they have only played it slowly so far. Other times the director is planning to play somewhat slower than the usual professional tempo.
- Performance date and expected pace would be helpful. Does this have to be ready next week or in three months?
- If the student has a photocopied part, *please* make the photocopy page turns match the published ones. It's hopeless when the big impossible run has been photocopied with a page flip in the middle of it, and the convenient 8-bar rest is in the middle of the spread, not needing a page turn.

- Especially in school programs with young beginners and intermediate level students, it would be helpful to have the school director send a list of the repertoire or music being used in the school program to the private teacher.
- It is always helpful if the conductor can get the student to write something specific in the part—X in the margin and instructions about what needs to be improved, e.g. rhythm, intonation, speed

Orchestra teachers are interested in receiving tips in teaching technique from studio teachers—through MNSOTA workshops and *String Notes*.

The need for mutual communication was often mentioned.

- Sometimes orchestra and ensemble directors are excited to use students for school functions and concerts but they give them music to learn that is beyond the students' ability to master the skills needed for the music. Or, perhaps the private teacher is strengthening certain skills, and wants practice that is slow and careful. It is not helpful if the orchestra teacher gives music that demands a much different approach.

- It is important that we are positive to the student about their orchestra and private teacher. When I teach the student a certain technique, vibrato for example, I often start off by saying "There are many ways to teach this technique and I am showing you only one way of doing it." I don't want it to turn into "my way is better than yours and is the only way to do it."

The method of communication between orchestra and studio teachers is a tougher nut to crack—each educator potentially needs to connect with 20 or more other educators. Email seems good for individual contact. Studio teachers can usually contact school teachers through the school district website. Many orchestra programs have their own webpage, and possibly can use this to post assignments.

Conclusion

Passions in all four quadrants are high. MNSOTA hopes that each teacher will reflect on their view, have great reasons for their stand and be honest with colleagues. We are all working for the best for our students.

Faith Farr has served as editor of this magazine since 1997. †