

## Clinic: Teaching Orchestra Music in the Private Lesson

by Faith Farr

Claudette Laureano's presentation at the Fall Clinic resonated with me—"Of course, how sensible," I thought. I need to teach the students how to practice, and I need to help them master their ensemble music. In the discussion afterwards and in processing the responses from orchestra and studio teachers I have come to a deeper understanding of what I do in my lessons.

I do help students with their orchestra music—and their chamber ensemble, and their church music, and their garage band—because I want to be part of my students' entire musical lives. I work on orchestra music the most when students are first in orchestra, because I want to teach them what I consider to be a well-prepared part. For cello students in first-year orchestra, I think the most important thing to learn is that practicing and playing a harmony part is different than a solo. I will have them:

- say letter names. (Often orchestra parts provide more practice with lower strings than their solo pieces do.)
- clap and count. (Especially if they are counting in 8 or 2.)
- identify finger 2 vs. 3, and write in whatever they need to play accurately
- write in all extensions
- apply the "down-bow rule" writing in the bow of the first note after every rest
- play and count out loud during rests and long notes. (Often orchestra parts are challenging when they look easy. I think rests and long notes are traps.)
- for a repeated note passage, use the bowing to help count by writing in what bow the passage ends on, and don't stop if you're not on that bow. (Cello orchestra rhythm is often more repetitive than solo material. Students need to figure out how to count those 8 bars of eighth notes so that they end precisely, not approximately, at the right time.)
- explain the road map, e.g. 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> ending, da capo, dal segno, coda, pause, railroad tracks

With advanced beginner students, especially students who are in a once-a-week orchestra, I tell them that the professional expectation is that you can play every note accurately (in tune, in rhythm even if under tempo, with the correct finger and bowing)

at the next rehearsal after they receive the music. (I have had transfer students with the erroneous idea that the first 8 weeks of rehearsal are for fishing around, and that decisions on bowing and fingering should only be made between the dress rehearsal and the concert.) Advanced beginners are ready to:

- look and listen for phrases and patterns. I help them put in commas especially where there is a pickup, to help the page look like it sounds
- listen for and write in cue rhythms especially during rests and long notes. What looks like a quarter rest at the end of the cello bar may sound like a quarter pick-up in the violin part, or two eighths, or one eighth.
- learn specialized orchestra vocabulary such as col legno, con sordino, and special signs like repeat the pattern, divisi, cue notes

As students progress, my expectation for a prepared part is:

- every shift is indicated
- every bowing is understood
- "helper" fingerings or bowings are added as the particular student finds necessary. My rule is: if you messed up twice, write something in!
- X goes in the margin and at the top corner of the page when there was something tricky that didn't work well in rehearsal

Orchestra music is an important aspect of my teaching precisely because the fingerings are often not included. I do have strong opinions on what does and doesn't work in the solo literature I assign and I give those fingerings to the student. Orchestra music is the opportunity for students to explore and discover a fingering. I want to teach them strategies such as: find a fingering with the fewest shifts; find a fingering with the safest shifts; find a fingering with rhythmic shifts; find a fingering where the shifts go with the bowing; use the same fingering when the passage returns; use a similar fingering when the passage returns in a different key. I want to teach them writing strategies such as: fingering above and below the music for different options; a circle or dash means shift whereas a normal finger means stay in

position without shifting; x means extend; Roman numerals indicate the string you are on.

Especially with fingerings, I want to be able to look at the music and tell precisely how the student is going to play. Their job at home is to write down what they are doing. If they haven't written anything down, they aren't prepared. Many students protest, "But I can play it just fine!" In my experience, most of these students will choose three different fingerings when they play a passage three times. Even if they do the passage the same way, I tell them if they can't write it down, then they literally don't know what they are doing. If it is written down, students have the possibility of practicing for consistency, of remembering tomorrow what they did today instead of starting from scratch, and of discovering a new fingering and realizing it is different.

With my lazy students who don't write stuff in at home, I sometimes do take acres of lesson time. But I don't give them answers—I just keep asking questions about fingering or bowing. And we'll do scales and etudes and the orchestra music, and gosh just never have time for that solo they spent their practice time on. I learned from Mary West—I know they are going to practice their solo. When they realize they aren't going to get to the solo until they've done their technical work, including orchestra preparation, then they start to do what they need to do at home.

With advancing students, I sometimes I have to teach them how to do a planned simplifications (deliberate fake) often when they can't yet play fast enough. For instance:

- leave out that single high note, or play it down an octave
- play only the note on each beat in a run
- play the rhythm, but simplify the notes in a run, e.g. play the continuous sixteenth rhythm but play the beat note repeated four times
- play the notes, but simplify the rhythm, e.g. articulate the tied notes (lightly)
- "When in doubt—leave it out!" Simply omit that short blurry rhythm and come in correctly when things are manageable.

I think planned triage needs to be

taught. Busy students don't have time to practice everything, and they need to be reassured that not everything needs to be practiced every day. In my opinion, everything in every piece needs one careful, slow detailed practice. After that first careful practice and marking, some parts will be already fine, some parts will become fine during rehearsal without additional private time, and some parts will need repeated home practice. Hopefully the parts that need repeated work will become smaller and smaller as the performance approaches!

By teaching my students how to mark a part and how to triage, I find that by the time my students are working on standard literature, I can ask, "Is there anything we need to work on for orchestra?" and they have specific answers—usually one of "I've tried some fingerings, but I'm not satisfied." Or "I've already tried funny rhythms and gradual metronome, but I still can't play this fast enough." Or "I can clap and count slowly, but when I play my rhythm is goofy here." Then we proceed with some detailed help, which doesn't take a lot of lesson time.

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