



ORCHESTRA

The View from the Other Side of the Podium

by J. David Arnott

As I write this I am sitting in the auditorium of my school watching another man conduct my orchestra in rehearsal for a concert this evening. It is an unsettling feeling, yet at the same time I am excited that my students have an opportunity to work with and learn from an excellent musician. By concert time this man will have spent eight hours in rehearsal with my group and I will have closely watched every minute. I have had guest conductors visit in the past to run sectionals or to work with the group for a single rehearsal, but not to come and conduct an entire concert. Over the last several weeks as I prepped the orchestra for their experience with this new conductor, there was an unshakeable feeling of trepidation.

The genesis of this situation was brought about in an odd way. Our Director of Fine Arts Programming hired a wonderful internationally recognized pianist to play at St. Ben's and he asked if the orchestra would like to play with her. After taking about two seconds to decide that this was a good thing, we started making plans. We decided that we would ask her to play the Beethoven *Fourth Piano Concerto*. This would be a great choice for collaboration because it is such a wonderful work, it is accessible to my orchestra, and it could be put together with a soloist rather quickly. At just about the last minute before the final details were set and agreed, on a whim I asked our people to ask her people if she would like to play the Beethoven *Triple Concerto* with us as well (which calls for exactly the same instrumentation as the *Fourth*) and she agreed. As I was now planning to play the solo violin part in the *Triple*, I knew I would need to bring in another stick waver for that part of the concert. Shortly after engaging a wonderful replacement, I had an epiphany—why not ask him to conduct both works on the concert? This would give the orchestra a chance to have more time with a new conductor, and it would also make it more worth the drive for the conductor. It would make me look less territorial and would give me more time to focus on playing; (that was

the thought anyway).

The intent of the rest of this column was originally to present a list of both the positive and negative aspects of this situation to share for this article. In working through this process of compiling ideas, I admit to only being able to find positive aspects to having a guest conductor. Here is a short list of some of them:

As players, getting used to playing for different conductors is a musical life lesson. As orchestral musicians, we must be flexible enough to play for more than one conductor (often on short notice and with little preparation). We must be ready to react to different rehearsal techniques, different stick techniques, and certainly to different personalities. Learning to do this at a young age makes it easier in the long haul.

As conductors, we must be able to set aside our egos for the benefit of our students. Admitting that there are actually other people out there who can lead our groups might be hard to grasp at first—but it is true. When school orchestras play at contest and the clinician has an opportunity to work with your group for a few minutes... are you nervous? How does it feel to see someone else in front of your kids? I am happy to report that this time for me it was hard for about 3 seconds.

It is amazing how different everything sounds from the outside than on the podium. I try to go out in the hall to listen to my group when possible—but usually it is only for a quick listen for balance. Having heard my group rehearse for 8 hours gives me a much greater sense of what we need to do in future rehearsals.

If it happens, it is always nice to hear your own words spoken to your orchestra through someone else's mouth! Hearing my guest conductor ask for things I have asked for repeatedly in the past is somehow vindicating. What I learned this week is that I should not give up asking (dare I say, demanding) so easily.

In this instance, my guest conductor was a baton-less stick waver. My group

adjusted to this rather quickly (those who actually noticed) and responded very well. It is not my intention to start a debate about baton/no baton, but we owe it to our students to be ready for both options. It is amazing how well phrases may be shaped and cajoled with both hands gesturing.

One of the most interesting aspects for me was watching someone else's rehearsal technique. I tend to sing in rehearsal and make my students sing (notes and rhythms). It was nice to hear someone else with basically the same philosophy. It made me wish that he had been able to be there for the first rehearsals and not just the last few.

To see what holds another conductor's focus shines a bright light on one's own weaknesses. What I learned this week is that I obviously do not spend enough time demanding their attention in rehearsal. I let them get away with inconsistent articulation and I am not demanding enough about intonation. Other than that, everything is great.

In addition to handing over my podium, I also had the opportunity to sit in the back of my second violin section to play with the orchestra for the other concerto. This experience from the trenches was enlightening. If nothing else, this experience alone will make what I plan for sectionals more germane—not just working on notes and rhythms and intonation, but also the very basics of how to play in an orchestra. How do you mark your part? How important is it to watch your principal to see where he/she is in the bow? When the principal makes a mark—how long should you wait to make the same mark in your own part? Do you have a pencil on your stand at all times?

Though it was eventually possible to get over the feeling of infidelity of having someone else drive my orchestra, it was a positive learning experience for all of us (though I am relatively sure that I will never be able to watch someone drive my car).

For those of you still reading and wondering who we brought in to conduct and play—I am thrilled to report that the

conductor was Amir Kats and that he did an absolutely amazing job with my students as well as with our soloist! The pianist was Sofya Gulyak, recent winner of both the William Kappell and Leeds International

Piano Competitions.

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phony orchestra and teaches viola and violin. He is the past-president of the Minnesota chapter of the American Viola Society. He may be reached at darnott@csbsju.edu. †