



ORCHESTRA

Getting All-State Results at Home

by J. David Arnott

In the last few weeks I have hosted both the Upper Midwest String and Chamber Music Conference and the Minnesota Music Educators Association All-State Orchestra Festival at St. Ben's. One campus—two seemingly very different programs. (For more information on each of these programs please see the UMSCMC wrap up that began on page 7 in this issue and also Michael Watson's MMEA Orchestra VP column in the fall issue of *Interval*.)

The All-State orchestra is selected through a vigorous audition process that takes countless hours to put together and coordinate. The UMSCMC is open to anyone on a first-come first-served basis. The All-State students play about 7 hours each day; the UMSCMC students play about the same. What is most interesting about the two groups is not so much how much bigger and better sounding the All-State group is than the UMSCMC, but how similar the learning curves are between the two groups over the course of each week. Both programs are all about achieving great success in a very limited time span.

What factors lead to this outcome?

There are many factors which go into students achieving high-level learning curves rapidly—the most important of which are preparation and anticipation on the part of the leaders/organizers in conjunction with solid and directed coaching over the course of the week (full disclosure—I have been the All-State viola coach for the last several years).

Do we ever have the luxury to have our students on hand for a time span like either of these programs? If you could have this much time—what would you do with it? How about if you could have a single full day of orchestra? A google search of “Minnesota High School Orchestra Retreat” reveals a few programs that hold retreats. I know of several choirs that schedule a retreat at the start of each academic year. It can be done—but what would you do with it? How would you plan it? Would you require it of all orchestra students? Could

it be held two or three days before start of school? Are there any available sources of funding on which you could rely for the purchase of lunch/snacks/drinks?

What would this sort of thing achieve? A day spent on dynamics? Would you read everything you plan to play over the year? Would you engage 3 or 4 coaches for sectionals? There are no two ways about it: sectionals create team spirit in a way that full orchestra rehearsals cannot. When a section receives 100% of the attention for an entire rehearsal, amazing things happen. Would you spend time on pedagogical exercises?

What kind of camaraderie do you think this would develop? Would there be an increased sense of community within your group? Are you the orchestra “coach” as well as the conductor? Do you consider “team spirit” and teamwork, and all those other sports-oriented activities for making teams play better?

How would you prepare yourself and your students for such an event? How much lead-time would you need? Can you anticipate a starting point and an ending point? Would you likely send the music in advance with the expectation of preparation or would you be satisfied to have them sight read at the first meeting? If you send music in advance, it immediately becomes clear who is ready and who is not, who practiced and who did not, and Santa Claus does not have to lead a sectional to discover this!

As the conductor, your musical influence and rehearsal technique play a crucial role in the success of anything you do. One of the coolest things to watch at All-State this year was the timing and pacing employed by the conductor over the course of the week. The level of demand increased steadily as the week progressed without even a hint of degradation, demoralization, antagonism or alienation from the podium. It was magnificent to behold and I cannot wait to hear the CD recording.

From the very first downbeat, he forced the issue of tempo—with no free

pass during the reading. Who would have thought that reading *Mars* at 186 to the quarter on Monday would produce such a great result by the end of the week—but the students knew right from the start what the expectation was. Having a solid idea of the group's potential—not an underestimation—and not an overestimation—goes a long way in ensuring success. This can certainly be hard to do when your personnel changes every year and you have a wide range of talent levels within your group.

The better you are at picking music that is challenging but not too easy or too hard is a sure path to excellent results. This seems like a “no-brainer,” but I have frequently heard contest pieces that exceeded a group's ability by several factors. On the flip side—it is also not difficult to hear a sandbagging orchestra from half an auditorium away.

Be goal oriented at every step of the process—whether it be a two or three-day retreat or a three-month-long semester and you can reap All-State results at home. With excellent conducting, excellent sectional coaching and motivated students, a steep learning curve is possible anywhere.

N.B. I will be teaching in London for the entire fall 2010 semester and plan to report on what I discover about the state of school orchestra music in the United Kingdom while I am there.

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