



VIOLIN

Sight-Reading—Can It Be Taught?

by Ann Anderson

To the Student

How fast can you prepare your music to play in the local orchestra (amateur or semi-professional) and make some money? You probably will have only two weeks, three at best, to get those tough passages under your fingers before the first rehearsal. It took you probably an entire year to prepare your concerto or concert piece, (very useful to play for your audition just to qualify for the orchestra) but now you're on a timeline with limited preparation time. Are you ready?

This summer in Duluth, the UMD School of Fine Arts, sponsored performances of two operas—Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and Donizetti's *L'Elisir d'Amore* and a Gilbert and Sullivan musical *Pirates of Penzance*. Music faculty at the University of Minnesota Duluth and members of the Duluth Superior Symphony Orchestra comprised the orchestras, but a few positions were offered to advanced students from UMD in all instrumental areas. We had approximately three weeks to prepare our parts: over 50 pages in the first violin part for *Don Giovanni*.

I don't recall ever being "taught" how to prepare orchestral music. The Flesch *Scale Book* and the Kreutzer *Etudes* (amongst many etude books) plus sonatas, concertos, and concert pieces were my basic training, plus playing in the Duluth Symphony as a college undergraduate at UMD. But orchestra music was never taught in my lessons.

My first professional job was in the New Orleans Symphony and to my horror, I was expected to prepare two concerts at the same time in two weeks. One set of material for the first concert and the next set the second concert. After the first concert I was given a third set of concert material so I was always preparing two concerts at once. That was when I realized I simply didn't know the standard orchestral literature. I was used to having a month or two to learn the music for one concert. My stand partner was a seasoned violinist and helped me get through the material.

I was amazed at everyone else in the orchestra who didn't seem to flinch at the

expectations, but I soon learned that the older professionals knew most of the literature. They just polished up the tough spots, and learned the contemporary music. I was trying to learn everything.

With the economy stretched as it is with limited funds for orchestras, our rehearsals are now being cut to the bare minimum. Musicians must know their parts for the first rehearsal. High school musicians expect to learn their parts during rehearsals; not so with semi-professional orchestras. Much preparation on individual parts is imperative before the first rehearsal.

We're urged to listen to recordings in the DSSO and learn how our parts fit together in the orchestra before attending the first rehearsal. (A logical suggestion from management to save money, but a difficult exercise at best to complete successfully for students.) Students should, however, listen to the great orchestral repertoire, but the listening process will be more beneficial if it is a work that the student is preparing to play.

For students, I would suggest that two to five string students practice together and perhaps form a quintet (violin, viola, cello, and bass) to learn how the strings fit together. Again, for sight-reading, force yourselves to play through the new material without stopping. Invite some of your wind soloists to join you for a sight-reading session.

One of my advanced students was interested in auditioning for a professional symphony job, and he asked me, "How do you survive the sight-reading part of the audition?" My first thought was, "You need to know the orchestral literature and hope that what music they put up in front of you is familiar and you aren't sight-reading." My next thought was, "How do you prepare for the situation of sight-reading, if you are not familiar with the music?"

In judging string players for the DSSO as Associate Concertmaster, I have listened to sterling playing by candidates of concertos and prepared orchestral excerpts, but when asked to sight-read fairly simple excerpts, the candidates failed miserably. Applicants for semi-professional orchestras

must be able to demonstrate their ability to prepare music quickly. Accurate reading of unprepared material is a good indication of that candidate's value to the organization.

Which leads me to a number of suggested solutions to this problem of fast preparation for performances in an orchestral situation.

For the Teacher and the Student

Here are some suggestions for our advanced students to prepare for membership in orchestras.

1. First of all, teachers, do include orchestral literature as part of the students' lessons. I recommend Josef Gingold's three-volume orchestral excerpts *Orchestral Excerpts from the Symphonic Repertoire For Violin*, Volumes 1-3, International Music Company, New York City
2. Before studying the music and practicing the excerpt, make an attempt to play the example at a moderate speed at first sight. *Use your metronome.*
 - Observe the Italian tempo marking—if it says Allegro, keep the tempo brisk.
 - Observe the meter; count it quietly and "scat" sing the rhythms in the first measures.
 - Check out the key signature and quickly look for the sharped or flatted notes in the first measures. Once you get started, your ear will remind you of the correct sharps or flats.
 - Even though you stumble, *keep going* and try to keep the downbeat. Skip a note or two. You don't have to be perfect on this first attempt. Just get through the excerpt without stopping.
3. Mr. Gingold's three volumes include mixtures of Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Brahms, etc. in each volume. There is a healthy variety of standard orchestral literature in each volume.
4. I'm including suggestions from the first volume in this article. My

suggestions are not necessarily progressive in difficulty, however the last Tchaikovsky excerpt from *Symphony No. 4* is a real challenge.

- Beethoven, *Overture to "Prometheus"*: straight 8th notes; C Major,
- Beethoven, *Symphony No. 1, Op. 21*: dotted 8th and 16th notes; triplets off the string; $\frac{3}{4}$ meter but conducted in one; sequences; shifting on one string
- Beethoven, *Symphony No. 3*: disjointed sequences; octaves; dotted notes; 3-note patterns off the string; 32nd notes
- Brahms, *Symphony No. 1*: signature in flats; slow $\frac{6}{8}$; high chromatic pitches; extended arpeggios; 32nd notes; sequences; disjunct intervals; 7th position necessary
- Glinka, *Overture to "Russlan & Ludmila"*: fast 8th notes

- Mendelssohn, *Overture to "Fingal's Cave"*: fast 16th notes
- Mozart, *Overture to "The Marriage of Figaro"*: cut time; scale patterns
- Mozart, *Symphony No. 40*: cut time; broken thirds; $\frac{8}{8}$ meter; 32nd notes; large leaps; up-bow staccato; slurred/separate bowings
- Rossini, *Overture to "William Tell"*: 16th note rapid passages
- Schubert, *Unfinished Symphony*: 16th notes in duples/grace notes
- J. Strauss, *The Blue Danube*: octaves
- Tchaikovsky, *Symphony No. 4*: 5 1/2 pages!; very advanced technique; disjunct intervals; chromatic runs

These are only a few recommended excerpts to learn from Gingold's first volume. There are many other examples there as well, but the previous list would be an excellent starter for your advanced students.

I'm off to practice Handel's opera *Acis and Galatea*. The Duluth Festival Opera is performing this opera in Lief Erickson Park August 22 (music ready for rehearsal August 20). I just got the music yesterday (August 10). Hope the bugs are few and the wind is just a gentle breeze in the trees. I'll bring clothespins just in case; no perfume, just Off repellent. Good luck on your sight-reading ventures. Don't forget to write: aanderso@d.umn.edu.

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