Orchestra

Getting Past the Page: Moving from Survival to Excellence in the Public School Orchestra Rehearsal

by Gerard Jones

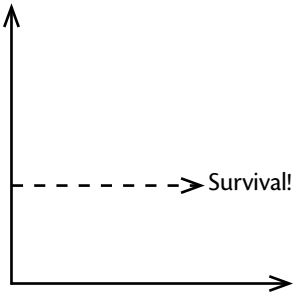
One of the greatest challenges I have had over my career is teaching students how to recognize that simply playing the notes is not enough. We all have attended (and given!) concerts where it is clear that the performers are lucky to be merely able to play the notes, much less give a musical re-creation of the piece! The cause of this problem is our fault and stems from two common errors. First, we are not careful enough in our music selection, and second, we are not good at communicating to our students what is our responsibility as teachers and what is their responsibility as musicians.

I believe the hardest part of my job is selecting the right music. Select the right music for a group and the rehearsals leading up to the performance go smoothly; select the wrong music and every day can be a terror. We must choose music that fits our students' age level and personality, while at the same time giving them quality music that challenges their musical and technical growth. Choose music that is too easy and the students are bored; choose music that is too difficult and they "hate it." Very few other academic disciplines have this problem; most have clearly defined curricula from which they can fudge only a little. As for us, we must choose a new curriculum every year for every concert. A daunting task!

The second hardest part of the job is helping students understand the difference between "playing the notes" and "playing the music." If we have done our music selection jobs correctly, each piece of music has built into it some technical "head room" where, once the students learn the notes, they have time to learn the music. To help them in this process, I use four terms: *survival, refinement, perfection* and *excellence*.

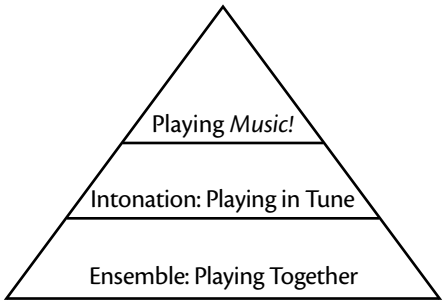
The first is the most important term for them to understand. Ask a student to define "survival" and they will use terms such as "being saved from dying" or "learning how to stay alive in dangerous situations." Asking orchestra students the same question evokes similar answers: "not screwing up at the concert" or "not embarrassing myself too much." Instead, I suggest to my students that survival is not our end goal, but the first step in the process. I define *survival* as "learning the notes so that we can learn the music," or "being able to play all the notes without stopping," or asking, "If we had to, could we play the concert tonight?"

I use an x/y diagram with a horizontal dotted line part way up the x-axis and call this the "survival line." I explain that we must reach this line before we can learn the music and that this is their personal responsibility.



The sooner we can play the notes, the sooner we can begin the refinement process—which is the rest of the x/y diagram. I explain that this is where the real rehearsal exists—where the "big dogs" do it. When I ask them what our true goal is, someone will generally spout out "perfection!", which is a perfect teachable moment to share with them the difference between perfectionism (an inappropriate goal since we will never reach it) and *excellence*. Every once in awhile, I will draw this x/y diagram on the board after we have played through a particular piece and ask my students where they think they landed—below or above survival. The process helps them to see that there is so much more to learn in a piece of music than just the notes.

Another diagram I like to use is a triangle split into three sections. I tell my students that the first thing we must master as an orchestra is ensemble—playing together. Next, we must master intonation—playing in tune together. When we have accomplished those, then we are ready to work on the most important part: making music, in tune, together. It does not take them long to make a long list of all the "things" that are included in this top of the triangle: dynamics, phrasing, articulations, etc. Once this discussion is over, many of them begin to see that learning the notes is merely the beginning of the process, not the end. When they see this, the musical results can be amazing.



However, this all comes back to music selection. As directors, we must make certain that the pieces we select for our students have enough "head-room" in them. I define head-room as the distance between the orchestra's combined technical skill and the technical and musical demand of the piece. If the students' technical skill is too close to the piece's requirements, then the chances for the students to make music is low; if the students' technical skill is appropriately higher than the piece's requirements, then the chances are much higher. If we are constantly challenging our students with pieces that are over their heads technically and/or musically, they will never have the opportunity to experience the tremendous joy of making music together, and will always sound rather pedantic. In this regard, there are two types of pieces of music: those pieces which, musically, play themselves (fast pieces are often like this), and those pieces for which we must work hard at playing musically (slow pieces are often like this). Of course we must give our students

Originally published in MNSOTA's *String Notes* — Winter 2010/2011 (Vol. 13, No. 2)

both types, but we must be careful to leave room for them to experience playing music and not just playing notes.

Once our students begin to taste the difference between playing notes and playing music, they will never want to go back to simply playing the notes. It then becomes our job as conductors/educators to learn how to best bring them from survival—the notes—to the music.

So, now that the notes are "learned," what's next? How do we engage students in the music? This is where the real fun begins…

In the spring issue: what students' eyes and ears should *really* be doing.

Gerard (Jerry) Jones is older than most of you and has been teaching for longer than some of you have been alive. He is currently in his 35th year of teaching, having started in Superior, WI, and then on to Denfeld and Duluth East High Schools in Duluth, MN. He is currently teaching at Stillwater Area High School. He was the recipient of the MNSOTA Orchestra Teacher of the Year in 1996, a three-time honoree in the Who's Who among America's Educators. He has served as a clinician/adjudicator/conductor for numerous ASTA regional contests and music camps in the Upper Midwest.

Originally published in MNSOTA's *String Notes* — Winter 2010/2011 (Vol. 13, No. 2)