



GUITAR

Even in the Large Group Setting: Fundamentals First

by Grant Wilcox

In the large group the quickest way to individual improvement is in the concentration on the fundamentals. Many years ago I heard a comment made by an orchestra director that has annoyed me for many years. At the time he and I were listening to a different orchestra perform. The visiting orchestra was playing so poorly that I said to the other director, "That group is so out of tune it is painful," and the other director simply said, "I have always believed that you cannot teach intonation in orchestra." The irony for me was when it was his turn to perform, his orchestra did not play much better in tune than the group we were both commenting on. What can you teach in the orchestra setting that is worthwhile if you cannot teach intonation?

There is nothing you can do... that can't be done

All you need is...a proper presentation, hard work, individual practice and repetition. After learning to hold the instrument, the most fundamental aspect of playing an instrument is tuning and playing in tune. Each day in the group rehearsal the first thing to be scrutinized by the individual and the teacher is the question of intonation. The fact that proper pitch can be focused on carefully in the private lesson or in personal practice does not in any way mean that it can only be learned or refined in that setting. After all, playing in tune is just a well-practiced behavior. The more carefully practiced, the quicker the progress. On the very uptick for the student, once the pitch is right in tune, no one can play it better in tune. Someone will always be able to play the instrument faster or with a more beautiful tone but once the pitch is in tune no one can play it better in tune. However if you concentrate on playing faster first, you only play your notes out of tune quicker.

When English teachers watch music teachers

I had an English teacher comment to me after watching my orchestra class, "English teachers should teach more like you do in orchestra." I sat back and listened with interest. The English teacher went on to conclude that if they used more repetition and polish in teaching reading and literature students would be more fluent and test with better comprehension. Current brain research predicts that a student needs to practice and repeat a concept 24 times to achieve eighty percent mastery. In English, Social Studies and Math an 80% success rate is a C+ or B-. In music an 80% success rate is a disaster. With a success rate of 80% why would you want to play music or who in their right mind would want to listen to that quality of music?

From the American String Teacher Convention

At the Detroit ASTA National Conferences my top group was playing in one of Kirk Moss' demonstration/discussions on conducting technique for teachers. Kirk made the point in his presentation as he referenced the schools that still have private lessons. He said

these programs are increasingly rare and that these lessons were a luxury in the school day that should not be expected to last. Kirk's most interesting statement was, "If you cannot teach an aspect of string playing in the large orchestra setting, that teaching has no place in public schools." The simple truth is students can be taught in a private or group setting; however the student learning is always accomplished on the individual basis and the individual must be given time to develop and repeat the target learning.

Fundamentals in the large class setting

It is my contention that playing in tune, developing good tone and playing in time together and repeating those steps are fundamental skills to teach in the class setting as long as everyone is not expected to learn or progress at the same rate. In fact for most students they will only have the chance to learn...in class. The private lesson during the school day has never been in our string program. Math, science and social studies teachers hate them because they take students away from their classes and administration would like to see them leave the school day to be more cost effective and in fairness between programs. I think teaching vibrato to a private student is much easier than teaching vibrato to a violin and viola section of 40 while the cellos and basses are waiting. However not every student will be able to learn vibrato in a private lesson and it sure would be nice if each student had the chance to learn this technique.

Students want to play in tune with competence

I received an e-mail in the past week from a mother who re-located to the Twin Cities because of employment. Her oldest son played in our orchestra at two ASTA National Conventions and is a cello performance major out east; his younger sister is currently a student at one of the larger suburban schools. The mother's disturbing message follows: "Grant, every time I go to our school concerts and grimace through the—sorry to gossip, but it's only the truth!—horrendous orchestra playing, I marvel at what you are able to do at a much smaller school on probably a much smaller budget!"

In fact, students want us to make them be competent and every time we let them "go on" without repeating correct fundamentals we cheat them out of the opportunity to become competent string players and encourage incompetent orchestra playing. Repetition is one of the fundamentals of competent string playing. That is repetition of the correct fundamentals. If it takes 24 correct repetitions to insure an 80% competency how many correct repetitions will it take to reach a target of 99%? Suzuki said repeat it 10,000 times for mastery. Remember an incorrect repetition does not count. The students must repeat the correct fundamental over and over. The teacher simply must require the students to demonstrate correct fundamentals in class and more important the teacher must require the students to demonstrate these fundamentals correctly over and over again.

The need for private string lessons

Strong string programs need private lessons outside of the school day. These motivated, advanced students drive our programs. The earlier we start them the more profound the effect they will have on our programs. They create interest within the community from parents and young students as families think ahead about their high school years. The first twenty years of building our Brainerd String Program it was only me and my advanced students who were available to teach lessons before and after school. This was very difficult but I found a way to, in part, accomplish the task. The hard reality is that in both my private and class teaching, if I do not require and review the proper fundamentals it is only my fault if my students do not play well. That said, no matter how important private lessons are to our programs not even half of our students will be able to

afford them or are interested in them. So it is the teaching of the fundamentals in the large class setting that will offer each of our students the opportunity play together, with good tone and in tune.

Grant Wilcox teaches orchestral music at Brainerd High School. This past year he offered: Chamber Orchestra, four sections of Classical Guitar I, two sections of Classical Guitar II, two sections of Classical Guitar Ensemble, First Orchestra, Sinfonia Orchestra and independent study before and after school. His guitar ensemble performs between orchestras at each of his orchestra concerts. Grant's ensembles have performed twice at the ASTA National Orchestra Festival, five times at MMEA State Conference, four times at the Tier II Festival in Orchestra Hall and at the MENC National Convention. †