



ORCHESTRA

Getting Off the Page: Moving from Survival to Excellence in the Public School Orchestra Rehearsal, part 2

by Gerard Jones

All too often as orchestra teachers, we forget to teach our students that the printed page is not *music*, but merely paper and ink. While this discussion may seem a bit esoteric, it communicates a truth that our students must grasp if they are to move from survival to excellence: that true orchestral music is *shared*. In order for them to learn to share, we must teach our students to perceive *where the music actually exists*. That is, *within and between them as musicians*.

A number of years ago, I became convinced of a simple truth: youthful ears follow youthful eyes. If we want our youthful musicians to listen to each other, then we must encourage them to watch each other. In my last article, I suggested a number of ways to encourage students to learn the notes *ahead of time*, so as to provide opportunities for students to engage in a level of music-making that is deeper and more excellent than that which is usually heard by school orchestras. I believe the next step in this process is convincing them that *they must get their eyes off the page* in order for true excellence to occur.

Because this is not something our students are generally asked to do in the course of their training, we must teach them how to do this. Once they learn how, we must then challenge them to utilize this skill by teaching them what to do with their eyes once they are no longer glued to the page. Any creative teacher will come up with dozens of things along this line. Here are a few I've tried:

1. Write a simple unison etude that starts with measures of whole notes then proceeds through half notes to quarters to eighths and finally to sixteenths. Teach the students to "scoop up" a measure or two with their eyes and ask them to look up as they are playing the measures, remembering what they read. The technique is similar to speed-reading, and does require some training.
2. Once they are familiar with the technique of "scooping up," ask them to do it with a familiar orchestral piece—one for which they have learned most of the notes. Challenge them to look up at someone across the orchestra. Count "eyes up" and don't be afraid to name names of those not doing it!
3. Take away their music by having them rotate their stands to face the other direction. Consider removing the stands completely from the rehearsal area. While it feels weird, they will immediately understand how they have perceived their music as a crutch and a filter to real music-making. Choirs don't use music. They learn how to memorize thousands of notes for a concert. Why can't we? Tradition? Because the "big dogs" use them? I firmly believe that the presence of the printed page in front of our students is a major detractor from their shared music making. Trained ears can hear past their music stand; youthful ones can't (yet).
4. Ask them to look at some specific person in another section. Make sure they know to whom they are playing. Have them smile at each other; have them play *to* that person.
5. Make them move from their location (without their music) and stand around another section, allowing them to listen more carefully to that section they are surrounding.

Without a doubt, the above techniques take *time*. If we have chosen our music well, we will have *time* to incorporate these sorts of experiences.

Perhaps the most important element of encouraging students to "get off the page" is to give them the *freedom to make mistakes*. Our society (and we as teachers) has so ingrained in our students the need to not make any mistakes that, sometimes, they

are riveted to the page out of fear of playing the wrong notes. We need to release them to make mistakes (one of the great gifts of being human), and even honor those who do make mistakes *for the right reasons*. Looking up is a wonderful reason to make mistakes. Poor preparation is not.

Before moving off this concept we must ask ourselves this question: how much do *we as instructors* look up? How buried is our head in the score? What type of role model are we presenting? If we ask our students to look up and we are not doing so, they will see what we *do* far more than they hear what we say. If you're not sure, video yourself during a rehearsal and find out. Be prepared to be surprised and ready to make changes.

Now that our students are less chained to the page, we are able to teach them *where to look*, and thus *where to listen*. All sorts of melodic and harmonic concepts can now be introduced, including unison themes, hearing the color pitches in a chord, being the controlling pulse of the moment, etc. Practically every moment in any great piece will contain a reason for a student to look up and listen instead of looking down and reading. We simply need to encourage/require our dear ones to do it. I have found that once they begin the process, it becomes self-replicating. Good students *want* to play with each other and *want* to hear what is going on around them. Of course we must continually remind them what is really important, but we must remind ourselves as well. All too often, we get caught in the tyranny of the printed note and forget that *we are to be about making music*.

Now that we have our students looking up and (one hopes) listening a bit better, how else can we use this new freedom? Next time: how movement improves everything, especially the music!

Gerard (Jerry) Jones is currently teaching at Stillwater Area High School in Stillwater, MN. He was the recipient of the MNSOTA Orchestra Teacher of the Year in 1996. †