

# ALL-STATE WORKSHOP PRESENTATIONS

*MNSOTA was delighted to host author and pedagogue Cornelia Watkins as our keynote presenter. Unless otherwise noted, the session summaries that follow were compiled by Kathryn Buccola (South Washington County Schools), Cassandra Herold (Edina Schools) and Allison Johnson (South Washington County Schools). [ed.]*



Cornelia Watkins

## The Power of Positive Teaching

presented by Cornelia Watkins

As teachers, we need to create a “you-can-do-this” environment for our students. Students need to live into what they do well: to learn what it means to play well—what it sounds like, how it looks, how it feels—so that it can become a part of them. We need to reinforce students’ best playing—by having them describe it to us so that they can call on it again for themselves when we are not there. To do this, we need to show students a new possibility that they can immediately do well. Give clear, specific

instructions about how to accomplish that goal. Offer enthusiastic praise when they achieve it. Allow plenty of time to reinforce the skill and an opportunity to have students explain why it’s working, what it sounds like, feels like, and looks like, so they can recreate it on their own.

If a student isn’t able to accomplish what’s been asked of him, then it is the teacher’s responsibility to refine the request or alter the approach until the student can have immediate success.

Positive teaching actually allows the teacher to be very demanding without being negative. Once a student has been able to create a sound or play a passage at a high level, the teacher can always point to that moment of excellence and remind the student how well he can play because he has done it before and can do it again. Always be willing to review and repeat the “you-can-do-it” approach. †

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## Why Can’t They Play In Tune?

presented by Cornelia Watkins

Cornelia Watkins posed the question, “Why can’t they play in tune?” MNSOTA teachers put forth their answers. They said students don’t listen, they don’t know what they are listening for, they use their fingers to find the notes, the instrument is out of tune, they play too fast, their poor posture and tension get in the way, and the teacher doesn’t insist they play in tune. Watkins agreed with all of these reasons and gave techniques to solve the problem.

Watkins’ first solution was to make sure students could imitate in tune with their voices by singing. She believes that if a person can hear in tune in their head they will be able to produce it on an instrument and the only way to know if a person can hear in tune in their mind is to sing. To teach students to sing, start them by mimicking pitches. If they have trouble

with that, have them siren and work up to sirening under and up into pitches. Use the terminology high and low and use hand gestures to create visualization.

Watkins gave many more ideas on how to improve intonation including the use of

ringing tones and harmonics. She suggested having students play the harmonic and then the stopped note to listen if the pitches match including the ring that will be created if the note is played perfectly in tune. †

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## Why do I have to Tell them Everything?

Ideas for Fostering Student Independence

presented by Cornelia Watkins

Cornelia Watkins observed that we often tell students everything—what to fix, how to fix it, and when it is better. In doing this, we are not engaging our students in their learning, not expecting them to think on their own—and we are creating their progress each time

we see them at a lesson. She encourages specific suggestions or feedback—if a student says that it was “not good,” we should ask for a more specific answer.

She also stressed that students should learn to critique the positive aspects of their

playing—practice is not just about finding errors or poor preparation in practice, but about finding the aspects that are going well and reinforcing those things. Encourage students to really look for things in their playing that they really like, and ask them to apply those skills, techniques or ideas to other pieces they are playing.

She addressed a few basics of good critiquing. Always focus on something positive before pointing out a weakness—this will help to encourage students, motivate them, and allow them to relax (so they are not always expecting to hear something bad the minute they are finished playing). Be as specific as possible (and encourage students to do this as well) about what the problem was, and where it occurred. As we teach these skills to students, if they are unsure, simply ask them to play again and listen more carefully to their playing in order to hear what went well and what could be improved. Young students may need more guidance—suggest specific areas or specific skills to listen for. †

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## Preparing Students for Performance: Success from the Inside Out

presented by Cornelia Watkins

Watkins started by stating that musical strength is created from more than one strand—performing is not just about knowing notes and skills. She focused on three ideas, skills, knowledge and expression, in order to create integrated musicianship.

We need to establish good practice habits from the beginning with our students. Speed should never be a factor; accuracy comes first. While doing this Watkins explained that students need to play with a strong, high quality sound right from the start. We need to encourage our students to achieve 200% practice meaning that it puts the students in charge. They need to practice beyond what's needed for a passage, so that the actual passage feels like nothing to it!

Play without stopping. This is one of the biggest challenges for students, especially when they are in the habit of constantly making little fixes. Metronomes offer helpful assistance. Setting a performance goal is important. Goals need to hold real meaning for students, so they know what

they are doing and why they are doing it. An effective performance goal creates a focal point, which channels the performer's attention and energy in a direction that enhances the music, while minimizing potential distractions. †

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## Low-Tension Technique

presented by Cornelia Watkins

This session offered some hands-on experience for as many cellos as we could access and addressed basic posture issues on the cello. Watkins addressed cello hold, bow hold, bow strokes, shifting, extensions and vibrato, all with an eye to having cello posture that will allow the player to do these techniques with the least amount of tension.

Many of her verbal explanations were accompanied by a demonstration, checking in with participants and their particular hold of the cello or bow, or by using imagery to help the player understand how a particular skill felt. We used the image of a “dead arm” to help better understand the muscles that we need in the left hand. Using a partner, the player hangs their arm limp at their side. The partner picks up the arm by holding one finger, shaking it to ensure that it has remained limp. The player's finger can form a hook onto the partner's finger, but the partner should still be able to shake the arm and find that it is limp. The “live” finger that has formed the hook can be hung onto the cello (like a coat hanger) to give the player an idea of how to use arm weight, rather than using thumb tension, in the left hand. †

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## Custom Fitted Chinrests

presented by Gary Frisch

Gary Frisch presented a session at the August MNSOTA All-State Teachers Workshop on custom fitted chinrests. Frisch is a violinmaker and dealer as well as the Past-President of the Virginia String Teachers Association. Frisch has teamed with Lynne Denig to create a systematic way to diagnose the height, contour and placement of chinrests.

Frisch stated that most violin and viola players do not have chinrests that fit them correctly. He suggested the best way to

identify if a player's chinrest fits properly is to look at the angles of the body with the instrument in place. If the angle of the shoulder tilts up, then the chinrest does not fit properly. The chinrest also doesn't fit properly if the head tilts back, towards the right shoulder, towards the left shoulder, or tilts forward. It is sometimes easiest to see



Gary Frisch fitting a chin rest for Kara Mathers

these body positions if viewed from behind the player looking at the back of their head and back. An ill-fitting chinrest can also be observed if the instrument rolls as much as 45 degrees or if the scroll droops down. Frisch said that if the head tilts to the right the problem most likely is that the chinrest is too high. If the head tilts toward the left then the chinrest is too low.

The most common successfully fitting chinrest is the flat chinrest, especially for people who have fleshy jaws. Frisch recommends small children most often use a chinrest that is really low. Frisch advises when fitting a person to a chinrest, experiment with the chinrest location on the instrument in comparison to the tailpiece. It can be in basically three positions—left, center or right. Then experiment with the height of the chinrest. A snack size bag of chips can audibly alert the player if they are clenching the instrument in between the jaw and the shoulder. †

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## Meet the All-State Orchestra Conductor

presented by Louis Bergonzi

Louis Bergonzi, this year's MMEA All-State Orchestra conductor, is the professor of music education and conductor of the University of Illinois Philharmonia Orchestra. In his session with MNSOTA teachers, Bergonzi described the pieces he chose for the Minnesota All-State Orchestra and the uncommon connection students were able

to make with the music. Two of the pieces he chose were written by living composers and he was able to arrange a Skype meeting with one of the composers and a phone conference with the other. This gave the students a chance to ask questions about the music and make deeper connections with what they were playing. Bergonzi pointed out that this opportunity gave a quiet Chinese American student a chance to speak in Chinese with the Chinese composer.

Bergonzi also spoke about his method of seating. He rotates stands of string players at each rehearsal. The seating rank is determined through auditions and the strongest players are paired together on the first stand and the next strongest players are placed on all outside stands then paired with weaker players. Then at every rehearsal the stands rotate positions. This gives players the opportunity to sit everywhere in the section and learn to listen from everywhere in the section. It is of course hardest to sit in the back and easiest to sit in the front. This also relieves most of the stress from sitting in the front. Often students are intimidated by sitting in that position but if it is just a rotation they are more at ease. †

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## Double Bass Technique in a Classroom Setting

presented by Mark Kausch

Mark Kausch is an educator and bass performer from the Twin Cities. He spoke about the challenges and possible solutions for double bass students in the classroom. Rosin makes a huge difference in the sound of the bass. You need to apply it differently in the summer than in the winter. For the summer months, you must apply it using the edge, while in the winter, using the flat part. He also spoke about how the bow arm should be “gorilla arm” meaning relaxed, no tension, let gravity do the work (hoping for a straighter arm). This is one way to keep the bow straight. For bass players, there is an optical illusion of a straight bow. Kausch recommends having your bass players play in front of a mirror to visualize what they have to do to keep their bow straight while playing.

Kausch then focused on left hand technique. Students have a tendency to keep their left elbow down which destroys their hand position. He recommends having

them play an F# harmonic (in 1<sup>st</sup> position on the D string) instead of pressing down for an F#. This way, it helps build up the finger calluses to gain strength in the hand. Overall, you don't want your students to grip the neck “lobster claw”.

Kausch showed the group his favorite



Mark Kausch

method books to use with bass students. *Double Bass: The Ultimate Challenge* by Jeff Bradetich, the *Double Bass Solo* series by Keith Hartley, the *Progressive Repertoire* series by George Vance and *Nouvelle Technique de la Contrebasse Vol 1* by Francois Rabbath were some of his favorites.

Kausch covered several logistical aspects of bass playing. Adjustable bridges should come up in the spring and go down in the fall months. Adjust the bridge so that you can insert your pinky (sideways) on the G-string, underneath at the end of the fingerboard. Use a steel wool (finest grade) to clean off the bridge or strings from rosin buildup. Replace strings when they are torn up at the bridge, when they are frayed at the tailpiece, or when the windings are flawed. Kausch recommends the Thomastik (Spirocore) strings for big sound on plywood basses and D'Addario (Helicore – medium) strings for hybrid basses. †

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## Developing Effective Practice Routines

presented by Benjamin Whitcomb

This session was full of clear and well-articulated practice ideas, definitely geared towards a more advanced student/player. Benjamin Whitcomb addressed types of practicing techniques first, many of them

being fairly standard—simplification, exercise creation, slow practice, add-a-note and conceptual practice. He also listed standard comparison—taking a passage and playing it in an easier/more favorable way to make it sound better, then replaying it as written. The idea here is to allow the ear to hear a high quality version, and then use that aural picture as a sort of training goal for the original printed section.

Whitcomb also breaks down the organization of practice time, both in daily practice, and also in a longer-range concert-preparation guide. This kind of written-down organization can be quite helpful to a student who does not know where to start breaking down their practice—it can be easy to get bogged down with perfecting notes as the concert approaches, without realizing how close the actual performance may be! It can be helpful to request that students record their practice—what did they practice, how did they practice it—so that the teacher can check it occasionally and offer suggestion for improving the practice sessions. †

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## Masterclass with the All-State Viola Section

presented by Corey Konkol  
reported Mary Gagnon

Corey Konkol, the viola professor at the University of Minnesota, was the guest clinician for the MMEA All-State Orchestra viola sectional masterclass this August. Konkol's charismatic personality entertained the viola students and MNSOTA teachers as he guided students through trouble spots in Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*. He spoke about expressive sectional playing and technical decisions a player would make in the music. Some points to remember:

- 2<sup>nd</sup> position is your friend.
- Memorize repeated passages. Count how many times you play them, then memorize and look up.
- “Hug the string”—obtain a warm sound. Eleganza passage should be played elegantly.
- Have instrument up a bit more—don't let scroll drag.
- Play with rounded strokes.
- Experiment with vibrating before the

note and having vibrato come from the articulation of the first note.

- Left hand back a bit more—pull back when vibrating.
- Violas have to have it all—the virtuosity of violins and the depth of celli.
- Gooier with the bow—strong first note, then let go: wah-wah
- Regarding posture: stand, then come to a sitting position. If you sit first, you can droop.
- The viola is built on C; it rings on these overtones. This means C, G, D, A and E (some) will ring. Dead notes such as F#, F, B need an extra push.
- Pronate the bow a little more to prep the sound.
- Left hand: to get to 3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> finger, pull your hand back and release your 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> finger. 1<sup>st</sup> finger ends up pointing towards the scroll with no curve to it at all, 2<sup>nd</sup> finger is back. This opens your hand up for slower stuff. Looser, warmer, easier vibrato. Release tension. Exercise: 3<sup>rd</sup> position on A string, 2<sup>nd</sup> finger on E, 3<sup>rd</sup> finger on F—pull hand back and vibrate.
- It's OK to use open strings if you get a good sound.
- A section in the orchestra does not have to use the same fingerings as each other all the time—variations make the section sound richer. You can experiment with having ½ the section shift at one time and ½ at another. This can also help with intonation.
- Accent and sail—the whole concept of following through with the bow.
- Remember that instruments were created to imitate the voice, not the other way around. Sing through your instrument.
- Think of double up bows as a traveling stroke.
- When left hand 4<sup>th</sup> finger plays, have 3<sup>rd</sup> finger down to help. Can have 2<sup>nd</sup> finger down or not, depending on the comfort level of the hand.
- Scoot fingers up a half step using the inside corner of the finger. Suggested chromatic fingering: 011223 (D D# E F F# G).
- Knock down fingers from the base of the knuckles.
- Look at the architecture of the music. There is shape within the passage. What is the composer's technique?
- Arpeggio across strings—keep your left hand fingers down. Keep your

hand in position. Don't let other fingers curl. Keep everything open. "Rabbit ears"—2 and 3 down, 4 and 1 up and relaxed—perfect 4<sup>th</sup> on 2 strings.

- Fast passages—don't lift 1<sup>st</sup> finger, and push hand back.
- 3<sup>rd</sup> position—can relax wrist a bit and feel like you're touching the side of the instrument.
- Feel the rests—can practice grunting when coming in off a rest.
- Can let right hand pinkies go off the bow when playing fast passages in the upper ½ of the bow.
- Know your half and whole steps.
- Generally speaking, play lower in the bow. Don't be afraid to play out. Look up more and play out.

*Mary Gagnon teaches in the Osseo School District and serves as MMEA Orchestra Vice President. †*

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## **Clocks and Clouds: Bridging the Gap Between Bach and the Beatles**

presented by Clocks and Clouds  
reported by Juli Vig

This session began with an introduction of the members of the Clocks and Clouds band: Stephanie Shogren on violin, Lucas Shogren on cello, and Derek Powers on drums. Lucas talked about his musical background. He began cello at age 10 with Brian Cole. He only listened to and played classical music through high school. He met the drummer Derek in college, when he began being asked to play in rock bands and started listening to rock music. After getting married to his wife, Stephanie and having their first child, Lucas decided to move into music education and become an orchestra director. Their group, Clocks and Clouds, is available to play for schools and kids. The name of their group comes from a piece written by Ligeti, who composed several minimalist pieces.

The mission of their group is to bridge the gap of the negative stereotype kids have of classical music and the popular music that they listen to today. They performed several pieces to give the audience an idea of their music. The violin and cello had microphones attached. The first piece they

performed, entitled *Requiem for a Dream*, made use of a loop pedal. This piece used fluid melodic ideas that were layered with rhythmic rock elements. Lucas has arranged this piece for middle school and high school. Lucas performed a solo cello piece, and their final piece, *Finest Hour*, was performed without amplification with Derek performing on the guitar instead of the drum. This was a piece used to demonstrate emotion.

Lucas encouraged teachers to help stop the definition many kids have of classical music as "slow and relaxing." It is our duty to help awaken students to see that classical music is exciting! One idea to help bridge the gap is to search for pieces for your students with "rock and roll" elements, like a strong beat in the cello and bass parts. Lucas also talked about the importance of making music history interesting for students. Often a story can help kids to connect to the music. Lucas feels it is important to get kids excited about music and playing with passion.

Lucas Shogren is getting commissioned to write pieces particularly for school orchestras and he is available for writing or arranging pieces for school orchestras. Also, their band is available to do performances for schools. For more information about Clocks and Clouds, check out their website at [www.clocksandcloudsmusic.com](http://www.clocksandcloudsmusic.com).

*Juli Vig teaches in the Mounds View School District and serves MNSOTA as Secretary. †*

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## **Exploring Eclectic Styles**

presented by Randy Sabien  
reported by Kathryn Buccola

Randy Sabien is a nationally known jazz violinist and teacher. He has performed on *Austin City Limits*, been a guest on *Prairie Home Companion*, and appeared as a soloist with many community orchestras. He currently has an eight-piece band with three violins. He has presented numerous workshops and concerts with string orchestras and he writes eclectic style music, most notably the *Jazz Philharmonic* string method for Alfred Music. In 1978, he founded the string department at the Berklee College of Music and is currently the founding chair of the string department at the McNally Smith College of Music in St. Paul.

Sabien led MNSOTA teachers in a

low-key evening jam session that taught the fundamentals of playing the blues. He started with creating a pulse. For string players this meant lightly stopping the strings with your left hand and hitting the strings with the bow. The next step was creating a drone or basic harmony. The group played fifths (two strings at a time) with the same underlying pulse. The basic harmony also included the blues scale. Then Sabien taught us a melody by ear. He used a call and response method; we repeated what he played and sang. At this point we had collectively created a string orchestra song with many verses in a blues style. The next layer was to add improvisation. Sabien said improvising is a drawing upon a vocabulary. Throughout the evening, Sabien taught us a vocabulary through example and call and response. Towards the end of the session he

taught us special effects used like modified vibrato.

Sabien also presented *Jazz Philharmonic*,



Randy Sabien teaching improvisation

the jazz method book he co-authored with Bob Phillips and published through Alfred Music. The book is set up much like Sabien

taught us how to play the blues. The book includes original jazz compositions written out in standard musical notation. A melody is given as well as two background parts. In preparation for each new tune a preparatory page is given. It primes the player with a scale and rhythms. The player is therefore taught additional vocabulary they can use to perform improvisation if desired. The book also includes bass lines, parts for piano and percussion and a professional accompaniment CD for solos or improvisation.

MNSOTA teachers had a great time playing the blues and learning how to teach their students how to play jazz from Randy Sabien.

*Kathryn Buccola teaches in the South Washington County school district as serves MNSOTA as Membership Coordinator. ‡*