Orchestra

Getting Past the Page: Teaching Movement

Moving from Survival to Excellence in the Public School Orchestra Rehearsal, part 3

by Gerard Jones

We have arrived at perhaps the most controversial subject of this series – the teaching of the use of movement in orchestral playing. As I have experimented with this concept during the past 20 years, I have found my colleagues to be either fully supportive or fully resistant. Even so, it is easy to see that *every* professional string soloist *moves*. As educators, we need to determine whether or not we should *teach* movement, and if so, how?

For clarity's sake, the type of movement I am suggesting is movement specific to string playing—that which is generated or enhanced by the act of string playing. I believe there are three different types of teachable string playing movements: balanced motion, movement inherent in the process of initiating, and movement for the sake of musical involvement and aesthetic development. The first and most important is balanced motion.

In his *The Teaching of Action in String Playing,* Paul Rolland came up with some positively brilliant ways of encouraging string students to move correctly and freely. What I term "balanced motion" comes directly from Rolland's "Flying Pizzicato" found in chapter nine of his book (entitled *Extending the Bow Stroke*). Simply put, it is teaching students to move their body's balance point to the left as they move their bow arm to the right during the execution of pulling a full bow. I have found that this simple exercise encourages students to pull much longer bows with more freedom of sound. While this is an exercise that should be taught to our beginners, it is one that high school students will benefit from as well. In fact, I have been amazed at how an orchestra's sound improves when the students are using balanced motion. For more information on this Rolland exercise—and all the great work done by Dr. Rolland—please see his book or consider purchasing the DVDs which are available from www.paulrolland.net. While Dr. Rolland's work was specifically with upper string players, I have found the techniques to be absolutely transferable to lower strings, especially cello. Just watch Yo-Yo Ma and Jacqueline du Pré.

The second most important motion for student's to learn is how to initiate an entrance. All concertmasters must learn this technique as well as all string quartet members. However, I would suggest that all *orchestral* students learn this technique *and use it together as a section*. I have found that when a section of the orchestra breathes and initiates together, the entrance is *always* together. Of course, the techniques of initiating the ensemble differ for upper string playing and lower string playing, but the concept is the same: moving and "breathing" before entering. For upper string playing the most common technique is to add the "up" motion of the instrument which is analogous to the last beat of a conductor's pattern. If an orchestra is playing without a conductor, the concertmaster might choose to add the "j" motion before the "up" motion to show the rest of the orchestra when to make their "up" motion. For lower string players, it is often the movement of the chest and head with the breath that communicates the initiation. Either way, it is the *initiating together* which is most important. I have found that when all students are engaged in the initiation process (no matter how large the orchestra is) students simply become more engaged in the quality of the performance.

One additional word about breathing: this is something we must encourage our students to do all the time but especially when initiating a phrase. The ability to take air into our lungs in a way that is specifically related to the pulse of the music has an incredible effect upon the quality of playing and a student's sense of pulse. My top group calls it "sniffing" and we have an award (with two large gold noses attached!) entitled The Big Sniff Award. It's given to the senior who exhibits the greatest sense of pulse via the most consistent—and loudest—sniff. It is my firm belief that the orchestra that sniffs together, plays together. We must make *appropriately* loud sniffing an acceptable thing. I understand that I am opening up a Pandora's box here especially with Junior High students, but in time even the most immature string player will begin to understand what's really being asked or will just get bored with his/her own silliness.

Finally, we must teach our students how to move for involvement and aesthetic reasons. Generally the movement involved is balanced motion (unless there is a piece or phrase that is being initiated). As students choose to move together, I believe they begin to learn a way of *feeling* the music and learn better how to respond to it. They also have an increased sense of *community*. It becomes something they are doing *together*. They not only hear it, they can also *see it* (assuming, of course, they are looking up!). Our students have an intense need for social community. This is one of the best ways to create that sense of community. We all know that there is nothing like the feeling of playing great music with friends. I have found that forcing my students to move together is one of the great tools for accomplishing this very goal.

I have briefly suggested some potentially controversial topics for us as orchestra teachers. But, are they *really*? Let's consider some of the role models we suggest for our students. Certainly string soloists move. Watching a video of Midori or Yo-Yo Ma with the sound turned down can be a very comical experience. But watching more carefully, we find that their physical antics are based primarily on Rolland's concepts of balanced motion. But what about *orchestras*? I would like to suggest two different role models. First, the Gustav Mahler Youth Orchestra's YouTube recording of Sibelius' Second Symphony http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tWLESuVkXVg; and second, any of the YouTube recordings of A Far Cry—one of Boston's up-and-coming non-conducted orchestras. Watching either (or both!) of these orchestral role models will provide orchestra teachers with plenty of encouragement regarding the need and value of involved, aesthetic movement. And don't

Originally published in MNSOTA's *String Notes* — Fall 2011 (Vol. 14, No. 1)

hesitate to show them to your students!

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that we must be active in teaching these techniques to our students. Generally, I have found my students to be reticent about these ideas at first. I believe this is partly because they often do not want to look obvious and they feel that movement will make them appear so. I also think it is partly because no one has ever *asked* them to do it, even though they see pros do it all the time. They don't know the hows or the whys; that's our job.

Of all the crazy ideas I have presented in these three articles, I believe these movement ideas to be the craziest but perhaps the most important for the development of our students' playing as well as their understanding and appreciation of the music.

Next time: The Rules of Engagement

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* — Fall 2011 (Vol. 14, No. 1)