



# ORCHESTRA

## Getting Past the Page: The Rules of Engagement Moving from Survival to Excellence in the Public School Orchestra Rehearsal, Part 4

by Gerard Jones

When one thinks of the term “Rules of Engagement,” one either thinks of the CBS television show or a military situation where the determination of force against an enemy is required. Now, I am not suggesting that we consider the music (or our students!) as the enemy, nor am I suggesting that we begin to behave like Russell Dunbar. However, I am suggesting that we have a common enemy against which we need to have Rules of Engagement. That enemy is mediocrity. We’re all in favor of excellence, but what does it look like? How does it feel? We all know what it *sounds* like, but how do we know that we’re really *getting* it?

I believe the concept of excellence is about engagement—about getting our students engaged in the process of doing excellence and being excellent. Excellence is about developing in our students a sense of culture, a sense of importance, and a sense of purpose that transcends their normal daily school existence. Excellence is about the environment that we as teachers create for our students. We must communicate that it is all about *them*, but we must remember it is our job to create the stage upon which they perform and *experience music for and with each other*. How we do this is as varied and unique as we are as human beings, but I think there might be some similarities that are useful to consider.

A few years ago, I was involved in a music festival where I was amazed at both the excellence and the mediocrity I saw there. I had the chance to watch some rehearsals of both types of groups. What I saw was a difference in whether or not the students were *engaged* in the process of music making. The groups that were indifferent to the process sounded poor, whereas those who were actively engaged—where the director had figured out how to harness each student’s interest and involvement—were quite wonderful, no matter what the age level. After pondering what I observed, I came up with the idea of needing to attack mediocrity the way a military force attacks an enemy—with vigor and a “take no pris-

oners” mentality, in order to establish an “attitude of excellence” during rehearsals. Here’s what I came up with for our daily rehearsal attitude:

### Rules of Engagement:

1. Have accurate bowings and fingerings.
2. Learn your parts—for others’ sake as well as your own.
3. Memorize where necessary
  - a. at beginnings
  - b. at endings
  - c. at transitions
  - d. at tempo changes
  - e. whenever possible
4. Learn where to watch and what to watch for. Look up all the time.
5. Care enough to do it!
6. Write down *everything*.

This list helped to continue a mentality that I stole from a magnificent teacher a few years ago. He called it developing an *Orchestra Culture*. Every culture has rules and expectations that are simply required. Unless you follow these rules and expectations, you are not considered part of the culture. As educators, we also have rules and expectations, but developing them into a concept of *culture* is the key. In a culture, these expectations are simply part of the environment and are engaged in without thought or disagreement. Here are some examples of what might be part of our *Orchestra Culture*:

We succeed because of our (the students’) commitment, not the director’s authority.

We choose to commit ourselves to:

- watching the conductor (and others!) all the time.
- using a pencil.
- respecting each other.
- being willing to make mistakes for good reasons.
- choosing “our” agenda rather than “my” agenda.
- verbally responding to the conductor

and each other.

- being engaged; choosing to be involved all the time!
- thundering for each other whenever appropriate.
- taking risks; choosing to push ourselves beyond what is comfortable.

The above culture points are suggestions that work for my orchestras because they work for me. The point here is that we, as orchestra teachers, must figure out what makes us tick as teachers and *get our students to buy into these culture points*. It must begin with us, but it must end with our students being totally engaged in the rehearsal process every minute of every rehearsal—100% invested in the process of music making, not for themselves but for each other. I think this, perhaps, is the most important mentality we can give them. Instead of seeing practicing as merely having them get the notes, help them see that *they are really practicing for their stand partner*. Instead of just playing a passage well, help them see that *they are really playing the passage well to honor and benefit the rest of the orchestra*. Instead of just playing beautifully, help them see that *their real responsibility is to play beautifully for the person in that other section who will be truly inspired by their playing*. The day we can convince our students that making great music with and for their friends is the finest experience in their lives, we will have introduced them to an orchestral experience they will never, ever forget. We all know this is how the *great* orchestras in the world do it. They do it because they *love making music and love making it with each other*. Our students can experience the same, exact thing. But, it must begin with us. We must create this environment. We must learn how to engage our students 100% of the time. It is creating a sense of family, with us as the parent figure.

Finally, I’d like to share four principles I learned from David Barg, a dear friend and co-founder of the Institute of Continuing

Conductor Education:

**Principle One:  
Model the Right Behavior.**

If we do it, there is a much better chance our students will do it.

**Principle Two:  
Send Consistent Messages.**

Make certain that what we say in rehearsals matches how we conduct.

**Principle Three:  
Focus on Learning, not Teaching.**

Constantly ask our students questions. Constantly require our students' 100% engagement.

**Principle Four: Expect only the Best,  
from Yourself and your Students.**

We get what we expect. Period.

As I wrap up these four articles, I find myself, finally, at a loss for words as to how to encourage us to complete this awesome task of engagement. It is so great a task that there may well be no place else in your school—other than your rehearsal room—in which your students can truly experience it. Granted, we provide them the opportunity to work with one of the greatest gifts ever given to humankind—music—but the environment in which we share this great gift is equally important. What is best is that we will all determine this path in ways that are unique to us. But, find it we must. The stakes—our students' lives—are too

great for us to ignore.

Engaging students is our greatest challenge.

*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 thirty-fifth year of teaching, having started in Superior, WI, and then moved 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, and 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. ‡*