

ORCHESTRA DIRECTOR / STUDIO TEACHER PARTNERSHIP

compiled by Faith Farr

At the MNSOTA Clinic in 2009, Claudette Laureano spoke about how orchestra conductors and studio teachers can work together to make well rounded musicians. The discussion period generated so many interesting ideas that the entire membership was asked to comment via email. The questions were:

Orchestra directors: Do you ask your students to take their orchestra music to their private lessons for help? Why or why not? If yes, what help do you hope studio teachers can offer?

Studio teachers: Do you work on orchestra music during students' lessons? Why or why not? If yes, what do you see that students gain from individual study of orchestra material?

For both: Is there information you would like from the orchestra or studio teacher about the students you share? If so, what information? What would be a good communication tool or method?

As Annette Caruthers' article points out in this issue, there is still a need for developing an understanding between studio teachers and school teachers that will best support our students. Please send comments and suggestions to String Notes editor Faith Farr faith@farrpublications.com.

Orchestra Directors answer: No

Orchestra directors who rarely ask for private-lesson help explained:

- If the students can't learn the piece in the time allotted, the piece is too hard.
- I don't expect private teachers to help students learn orchestra music. That's my job during class and the student's job practicing at home.
- If I choose the right literature, most of the students can problem-solve most of the technical issues in class. In theory, they go home and incorporate these solutions into their practice. Over the course of a year, there may be one or two pieces that will stretch a larger percentage of the students. These kinds of challenges are good and I think most studio teachers don't mind helping as long as it's not a frequent occurrence.
- I rarely ask my students to bring their music to lessons. If I do, it's usually to seek out answers to specific fingering or bowing questions that I or the students are unable to solve ourselves.
- It is not realistic for a private teacher to go over all orchestra parts, but a request for a small spot or technique is possible.
- I only ask students to do it if it is a solo or Honor's music.

These directors offered insights into the different roles of teaching and learning in private lesson and orchestra class:

- Lessons are for systematic skill building e.g. scales, etudes, tone production, fine intonation work, isolated bow hand work, isolated left hand development and literature study

for the performance of music.

- I know that many of my students ask their studio teachers for assistance, but I prefer that they use lesson time to work on the things we cannot work on as effectively at school—etudes, solo literature, individualized refinement of technique, etc.
- The purpose of individual lessons is to build individual skill. Better individual skills lead to better ensemble skills; in my experience, it doesn't go the other way. Playing alone and playing with others are very different skills and playing alone comes first.

Orchestra Directors answer: Yes

Orchestra directors who do ask for private lesson help explained:

- My middle school rehearsals are short and infrequent, so if students need extra help on their concert music material they ask me specifically during their small group lesson or with their private teacher.
- Especially in Chamber Orchestra—students agree to be in Chamber with the understanding that they will figure the parts out themselves or be able to get help with technically difficult sections.

The type of help these directors hope for from private lessons includes:

- Clearing up any confusion on notes, rhythms, fingering, bowing, dynamics.
- Shifting help.
- Developing specialized bow strokes such as spiccato.
- Tone production for soloists.

These directors mentioned the following benefits their students receive from private teacher help:

- Studio teachers can help their students digest and prepare orchestra music.
- Studio teachers can offer unparalleled attention and expertise in technical matters.
- Studio teachers who are experienced orchestral players can add their little tricks and large ensemble perspectives.
- Students build confidence in themselves and their playing skills when they get individual help.
- The work that the private teacher achieves will create a much better and stronger member and ensemble.

One orchestra director commented, "Every private teacher that I have ever contacted has been willing to help. I think orchestra teachers need to remember to thank private teachers at concerts."

Studio Teachers answer: No

Most studio teachers who do not help with orchestra music focused on students whose development is not yet up to that required of the orchestra. These teachers said:

- The orchestra music isn't pedagogically appropriate to the student's learning sequence.
- The orchestra music is too hard. If I work on this with this student, we'll never get to play anything else until this is learned properly, and I can't do that!!
- I have a remedial student who transferred to a new school where the other students are more experienced. If I take the time for her to learn her

school orchestra music really well, she still won't understand why we're doing certain things, and we won't be able to do anything else all year. So I just spend 10 minutes per day on it, and the rest of the time I work on what I think she really needs to work on to develop as a player and to increase her ability to figure things out for herself.

- In my own teaching history, I know I made a huge mistake decades ago trying to help a student who was over her head in orchestra. There was a big trip to Europe, and the student wanted to go, and the orchestra teacher wanted her to go. So I tried to teach shifts in complex keys to a student who was barely shifting; and we didn't do much else at all for the whole year. The result was an orchestra trip and then the student quit.

The summary of this view was that students will catch up faster if the lesson time is devoted to their actual developmental needs, and not the orchestra requirements. These teachers suggested that the orchestra director should consider providing a simplified part until the student catches up.

Many studio teachers commented on the different purposes of private lessons and rehearsals: "Private lessons are a time set aside to work toward becoming a master string player, not just learning bowing and fingering for a certain piece."

Some studio teachers are willing to provide limited help if the student has an audition or test for chair placement. Others help only when the student asks. Most require that the student has already put some work into it and comes with a specific question.

Some teachers cited their own full pedagogic sequence and said simply, "I don't have time to help with orchestra."

Studio Teachers answer: Yes

Studio teachers who do help with orchestra music offered these reasons:

- I help students master the skills of the music.
- If a student is in an orchestra I like to see the level of music they are expected to prepare.
- I want them to be leaders and develop good habits in all their playing.
- Sometimes orchestra music requires different techniques than solo music and working on orchestra helps me to remember to address those techniques.

- Orchestral music is an opportunity to apply the same concepts students are focusing on in lessons to another playing situation.
- Orchestra music should be performed by each individual in the group to their best ability, even though that ability will vary across the group. This means practice on individual parts is essential for all involved, so a lesson on a orchestra part can open student's eyes to number of things.
- I like the variety orchestra music adds to my teaching.
- I feel that whatever students are playing in public or for fun is part of my "lesson package" and needs to be played for me *before* it goes out in public (like for church or school talent show!). The biggest day-spoiler is when a piece of music I have never seen before falls out of their case and they tell me that they played it in church yesterday!!!
- Lots of times the music is more difficult than their lesson music and I don't want them to get bad habits. I will work on the music with them at the speed they can play it accurately. Even if they can't play it at the speed that is taken by the director, at least they have worked on it in the way that I want them to work on it.
- I want students to understand that it is important to work on any music that they are performing. If at all possible, I don't want them to "fake." Faking leads to bad intonation and sloppy technique.

The benefits of individual orchestra study include:

- learning something new; whether it involves a new or difficult rhythm, a new position or clef, more left hand agility, or new bowing techniques.
- building self-esteem by learning to play all the orchestra music well; enjoying their instrument and orchestra; and gaining confidence in playing their instrument.
- finding that playing in position can actually be easier and sound better. For example using vibrato instead of playing an open string.
- developing rhythmic precision of playing in a section. Just *exactly* how long do you hold that dotted half note so that everyone ends together?

- delving into style and music history. For instance who was that Tchaikovsky fellow and how is his music different from Mozart's?

Many teachers have strategies for helping with orchestra music:

- I encourage students to "triage" the music at home, that is, to just bring to me the spots that they have trouble with, are exposed or that the conductor has asked them to practice or bring to a lesson.
- We check fingerings, bowing skills, position fingerings and ease of playing in the suggested tempos.
- If students are playing a solo, I work on the music in lessons like any solo and hear it regularly until the concert.
- I try to ask about music at the beginning of the lesson, because, inevitably, as soon as the lesson is *over*, the student or parent mentions this orchestra music that is in a concert *tomorrow!* Aaaaarrggggg
- It usually takes only 1 lesson or 2 at the most to go over the piece or pieces. I tell them to use this piece(s) as a lesson piece and practice it for their next lesson in addition to the lesson piece/and or technique books they are working on.
- With section music, I will let advanced players tell me what needs help, while I will hear the whole part from intermediate students (who don't always know what is problematic). I don't do this at every lesson, but when they bring it in.

Communication suggestions

Studio teachers had some common suggestions for orchestra directors that would make studio help easier:

- Always have bowings in the part please. Bowings = articulations and are the responsibility of the conductor. Fingerings can be personally tailored to the player, but bowings cannot. A studio teacher can't help with rhythm unless the bowing is set.
- Performance metronome marks would be helpful. Students sometimes think the part is fine because they have only played it slowly so far. Other times the director is planning to play somewhat slower than the usual professional tempo.

- Performance date and expected pace would be helpful. Does this have to be ready next week or in three months?
- If the student has a photocopied part, *please* make the photocopy page turns match the published ones. It's hopeless when the big impossible run has been photocopied with a page flip in the middle of it, and the convenient 8-bar rest is in the middle of the spread, not needing a page turn.
- Especially in school programs with young beginners and intermediate level students, it would be helpful to have the school director send a list of the repertoire or music being used in the school program to the private teacher.
- It is always helpful if the conductor can get the student to write something specific in the part—X in the margin and instructions about what needs to be improved, e.g. rhythm, intonation, speed.

Orchestra teachers are interested in receiving tips in teaching technique from studio teachers—through MNSOTA workshops and *String Notes*.

The need for mutual communication was often mentioned.

- Sometimes orchestra and ensemble directors are excited to use students for school functions and concerts but they give them music to learn that is beyond the students' ability to master the skills needed for the music. Or, perhaps the private teacher is strengthening certain skills, and wants practice that is slow and careful. It is not helpful if the orchestra teacher gives music that demands a much different approach.
- It is important that we are positive to the student about their orchestra and private teacher. When I teach the student a certain technique, vibrato for example, I often start off by saying "There are many ways to teach this

technique and I am showing you only one way of doing it." I don't want it to turn into "my way is better than yours and is the only way to do it."

The method of communication between orchestra and studio teachers is a tougher nut to crack—each educator potentially needs to connect with 20 or more other educators. Email seems good for individual contact. Studio teachers can usually contact school teachers through the school district website. Many orchestra programs have their own webpage, and possibly can use this to post assignments.

Conclusion

Passions in all four quadrants are high. MNSOTA hopes that each teacher will reflect on their view, have great reasons for their stand and be honest with colleagues. We are all working for the best for our students.

Faith Farr has served as editor of this magazine since 1997. †