



ORCHESTRA

The Delicate Balance 'Twixt Practice Room and Orchestra Stage

by J. David Arnott

Or: Don't Pass the Buck if It's Your Fault the Kid Can't Play the Part...

Faith Farr and Annette Caruthers have recently raised some fascinating points about the relationship between the school podium and the private studio that I would like to address in this issue. In my position at The College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, I serve as both studio instructor and Orchestra Director so I see both sides of this coin from the inside view. My target audience is music education students discovering some potential pitfalls they will encounter in their profession as school orchestra director and any studio teachers who have ever been asked to work on school orchestra music in a lesson.

In reading our MNSOTA member's responses to Faith's recent survey questions, I can't help but try to add to the discussion regarding just a couple specific questions. The answers given from both constituencies were quite startlingly varied, indicating that many of us are not, shall we say, on the same page of the score. These were great questions. How does the role of the studio instructor enhance/complement that of the orchestra director? At what point do the requests of orchestra directors become impingements on the pedagogical obligations of studio instructors? Must there be a relationship between the two? Obviously this might only be a problem for those lucky enough to have students in their ensembles who take private lessons so this article might not appeal to everyone. Sorry. I do hope my take on all this is helpful in some way.

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?

When I get frustrated with my orchestra violin section and snarkily suggest that they take the offending part to their lesson to have their teacher explain it to them, I know that I will be the recipient of this charge. As I suggest to them that they explain to their orchestra director that he has clearly chosen inappropriate music beyond the capabilities of the ensemble, I realize the possible folly of my ways/desires/inflated ego for choosing such a piece. After the ensuing battle between personalities (id and ego?), we make the best of it and go on. I usually win the battle—but I have been known to punt when victory is elusive. I win not because I send them off without specific instructions for what needs to be fixed or improved. I win because I ask for very specific items to be covered by their teachers, hopefully with clear and useful pedagogical value.

Make sure you are fulfilling your obligations as conductors. Are you choosing appropriate repertoire? Is it challenging to the front stands and impossible for the back stands? Are you distributing parts with fingerings and bowings already marked to better utilize rehearsal time? Are you choosing repertoire that will be successfully mastered in the allotted rehearsal time? Are you including ideal metronome markings so everyone knows what your goal is?

How should school teachers incorporate a wide range of skills in one ensemble?

One of the best philosophies is to make sure you take advantage of all the technology that is available to you. Does your school use

any online software such as SharePoint, Blackboard, or Moodle? Posting recordings of the works you are playing, listing suggestions for specific passages which need attention, pointing out anything that might be useful to students to explore outside of class is better than sending them home with the instruction to just "work on that." For the truly adventuresome—how about making video examples of a few difficult passages played really slowly and then posting it on YouTube? It might not go viral... but if it gets students to think about music outside of class then it is worth any embarrassment it might generate.

Another place to look for resources is the International Music Score Library Project (http://imslp.org/wiki/Main_Page). This wiki is a repository for public domain music uploaded by individuals from all over the world. More public domain works are being added constantly. From a very quick perusal of this web site I found the Kreutzer *Etude* book, three of the Sevcik books I use most often (Op. 1, 3, and 8), the Campagnoli *Caprices*, and a host of concertos.

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?

As a studio teacher, my students understand that it is my pedagogical expertise for which they are forking over the big bucks and my lessons are structured around the musical and technical needs of each student as I perceive them. That said, I do find myself coaching All-State auditions and college entrance auditions. These are things in which not all students in any particular program will participate and which I believe I am able to do a decent job in assisting students achieve their goals. It is not reasonable to assume that all students in a particular district will audition for All-State or audition for a college scholarship on their instrument so that is something that is easily added to the list of responsibilities for the studio instructor. Orchestral literature and solo literature at that level of ability certainly contain more than enough pedagogical value to make time for in lessons. Many studio instructors track the number of students they have had participate in All-State and which colleges have offered scholarships to their students. I know I do.

Part of my studio pedagogy involves orchestral music, as it is a major portion of what most string players will be doing with their playing over the span of their lives (hopefully). In their lessons my students are much more likely to be given the Scherzo from

A Midsummer Night's Dream or an excerpt from Mozart 35 than anything having to do with *Les Miserables/Phantom of the Opera/Cats*. Not that there is anything wrong with this repertoire—if a student brought one of these pieces to me we would be extracting the scales and talking about the value of commercial music as it relates to audience enjoyment, and I might even share some performance-practice tips. There is a reason most professional orchestras in America play at least a few pops concerts every year. If a high school student brings in an orchestral work, I am much more inclined to choose two or three technical aspects from the piece, offer multiple recordings, apply the appropriate scale, and isolate the bowing requirements. There are not many issues in orchestral music that are unsolvable with a background in Flesch or Sevcik and it is a good life lesson when students are able to take their difficulties and solve them with the techniques they spend so much time developing.

Just over half my violin section takes lessons with me so when we get to the third movement of Sibelius 2, I see that half the section is bowing their eighth notes with lovely Sevcik Op. 3 right hand fingers (with a little wrist) and the rest of them are playing eighth notes with their elbows (tiring quickly and slowing down). How do you solve an issue like this? The first is by teaching students how to practice—not just what to practice. I believe we do this through example and through modeling:

- Do you have a passage of fast 16th notes that are not living up to expectations? Teach the students how to practice them inégales (changing the even 16th note rhythm to dotted

eighth-sixteenth and then reversing it to sixteen-dotted eighth). Orchestra directors—this can easily be done in a group setting.

- Are all your players using different amounts of bow? Seat them strong-weak, outside-inside, so that the more advanced students are more able to influence the weaker students directly by modeling the desired bowing right next to them.
- Have you got two or three superstars in your ensemble? Have them work individually with less advanced players during orchestra rehearsal time. The stronger players will enjoy the responsibility, the weaker players will improve at a greater/faster rate giving them a chance to reach the middle of the pack. The middle players will be able to work efficiently.

Conductors and studio instructors should be able to complement each other's teaching. Orchestra conductors should not try to "pass the buck" to studio instructors. Studio instructors should be able to glean at least some pedagogical value in assisting students with their orchestra music when occasionally requested and with specific instructions on what needs work. Ultimately, we have to live by the immortal words of Rodney King, "Can't we all just get along?"

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