



# ORCHESTRA

## Where's the Inner Drummer these days?

by J. David Arnott

This installment of *Orchestra News* will not be about something new. In fact, it is about something that is becoming alarmingly old. We seem to be producing a generation of rhythmically challenged musicians. These are kids who are troubled by the idea of pulse, meter, ictus, sub-division, ensemble, tempo, syncopation, and dare I say, hemiola. It appears to be an issue across all levels of players in the state. What happened to the inner drummer? Is this just a trending topic or are we looking at a bleak future? Are others having similar experiences?

In the past few months I had close contact with a regional festival orchestra (Central Lakes Conference Honors Orchestra), a state-wide non-auditioned orchestra (Upper Midwest String and Chamber Conference), and a state-wide competitive orchestra (Minnesota Music Educators Association All-State Orchestra). At each of these programs, rhythmic weakness was the biggest issue on the table. I also did *Skylife* with my chamber orchestra at my school but that will have to be another discussion on rhythmic challenges at the college level.

For the Central Lakes Conference Orchestra, two rhythmic problems presented themselves quite clearly. The first was in the Puccini *Chrysanthemums* and the other was in the fourth movement of the Ireland *A Downland Suite*. The Puccini has a section in which the first violins and the celli play together in octaves and which requires counting an alternating 16<sup>th</sup>-note subdivision with a triplet subdivision. The 16<sup>th</sup>-note subdivision required for the duple portion of the tune is straightforward but it presents a 2-against-3 issue for the triplets. It is a lovely opportunity to introduce 2 against 3 (one-cup-o'-tea) and it is also a good opportunity to work on conducting a really slow quarter-note beat (did anyone else have to practice conducting under water in school?). Regardless of chosen tempo or subdivision, the rhythm must be accurate. (Intonation in this particular section is another issue for another day.)

The Ireland movement was a problem in several respects. It begins contrapuntally

(as a quasi-fugue) with a tune that involves dotted notes and tied notes as well as rests. An eighth-note subdivision is necessary across the entire orchestra to pull this off successfully. We approached this movement in several ways—we sang (a lot); we split up outside and inside players—one side keeping the eighth note pulse, the other singing/tapping/playing the printed rhythm (and then swapping). We played the whole thing pizzicato; we eliminated the ties over the bar lines and then put them back in; we counted out loud all the sub-divisions of the rests. As we got closer to the performance I knew we would need to do something special to pull off the Ireland. As we had achieved great success singing our parts in rehearsal, I thought it would be cool to start the Ireland performance with everyone singing the first 30 bars or so. I explained to the audience (proud parents all of them) the pedagogical value of what we were doing and the issues we were attempting to solve by doing so. Of course, the first time singing it we crashed and burned. The second time singing was solid and the following performance was superb. The kids seemed to buy in to what was at stake and took it quite seriously. Had they not crashed the first time singing—they probably would not have played so well in the actual performance of the piece.

For the Upper Midwest String Camp Chamber Orchestra, I specifically chose a piece to work on rhythm that I knew they would like—I bought *Maharaja* by Doug Spata. It required finger snapping (which has a tendency to rush like pizzicato), 16<sup>th</sup>-note subdivision within a Latin Dance rhythm environment, scotch snaps (sixteenth note followed by dotted eighth note—which also has a tendency to rush—especially when played pizzicato), and a good bit of pizzicato. Playing on the first and fourth notes of a set of 4 sixteenths was an issue—that meant subdividing down to the sixteenth every once in a while. There are triplets—but mostly they are of the 3 sixteenths against the eighth note pulse type. The rhythmic difficulties were spread

equally across all sections and we practiced it in a variety of different ways. All this was in a g harmonic minor environment.

Allstate took place at Concordia up in Moorhead. By the second day we had re-named it “Camp Sub-Division.” Our official band was “Rush,” and our mascot for the week was the “Hemiola.” The conductor (Amir Kats) was magnificent and did everything in his power to get the students to internalize a solid sense of rhythmic integrity, which basically meant playing together, and without rushing.

The two areas which stood out as most problematic were the opening of the second movement of the Shostakovich *Fifth Symphony* with which they had great difficulty in avoiding rushing, and the entirety of the Chabrier *España*. Dr. Beat was called to action (at about 100 decibels) and he worked tirelessly for several days. Strategies employed included counting out loud, having half of them playing continuous sub-division notes while the others played the tune (and then swapping), snare drum as metronome, even a bit of Tai Chi came into play. In the end, everything was pretty good—but it took such an effort to get there.

Why are our students having so much trouble with rhythm? Is it our fault as orchestra directors? Are we expecting too much at the start of their instrumental education? Are students beginning their instrumental training without the same background in general music skills as they once had? Do general music teachers still use rhythm sticks? I can't help but feel I have written this article before; it all seems so familiar now.

We have to find ways to do better. We all spend ages working on intonation. Can we try starting every rehearsal with three minutes of rhythm exercises? Pick something from your repertoire for the day to sing, clap or tap. Do your students have a (collective) favorite piece? Have them sing the rhythm of their parts. Have half of them sing the tune and have the other clap sub divisions. Have them count the beats/

subdivisions out loud during rests (8 bars of *Eine Kleine* if nothing else comes to mind). If you want to challenge them, have them try to work through Ernst Toch's *Geographical Fugue*—it is for spoken chorus so there will not be the challenge getting students to actually sing notes but it will make them acutely aware of rhythm. Bring in someone if you have the resources—did anyone catch Jerry Henry at the Mid-Winter Clinic

(<http://www.orchestratriage.com/>). Try a book (*Teaching Rhythm: New Strategies and Techniques for Success*). We have to do something fast (but don't rush).

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