Violin

Bridging the Great Divide: Collaboration between Studio & Orchestra Teachers

A Tale of Two Teachers

by Katie Gustafson

One of my favorite things about being in the teaching profession is my colleagues' willingness to share ideas. There is very little of the competitiveness that sometimes exists in commercial and industrial fields where secrets of the trade can be guarded closely. I have found that most teachers are happy to share their strategies and discuss ideas about pedagogy, curriculum, repertoire and other issues. In the end, our students can only benefit from this openness, which is what brings us back to conventions and workshops year after year. In fact, public schools are beginning to push collaboration between members of their staff during work hours because research suggests that this can lead to improved student achievement. This makes sense to me—two heads are better than one, right? Unfortunately, there is far less collaboration between public school teachers and studio teachers, which I believe to be a big missed opportunity.

Reaching over the line between public schools and private studios can be challenging for a lot of reasons. 1) School teachers do not often cross paths with studio teachers, which can make regular communication difficult. 2) The differences in strategy between large group instruction and individual instruction (as well as differing pedagogical schools of thought) can lead to misunderstandings and disagreements, and 3) teachers sometimes feel insecure about whether others will judge their teaching ability if students have flaws in their playing.

As a teacher who has done both private instruction and school orchestra teaching, I can sympathize with the challenges that both groups face. However, I have also experienced firsthand how much we can benefit from each other's input. Here are a few examples.

1. Program building

As a private instructor, the best thing I have ever done for building up my studio is to work with public school teachers. I have frequently offered to do in-class demonstrations, master classes or sectionals in exchange for an orchestra director's recommendation to parents. Students are more likely to consider taking lessons if they have met a teacher that they liked, and orchestra directors are more likely to recommend another teacher for the same reason. On the flip side, orchestra programs can benefit from this. Most directors are happy to place interested students with private teachers because their improved technique and musicianship will strengthen the orchestra.

2. Common Performance Goals

The potential in this area is twofold: events and curriculum. Events like auditions and solo/ensemble contests can help studio teachers plan the progression of repertoire and technique while capitalizing on the student's increased motivation to prepare for the event. For example, if students are expected to play a wide range of scales in their audition to get into a more advanced orchestra, they are often more motivated to learn the scales that their private teacher has been pushing. Solo and Ensemble contests are another common fixture of orchestra programs—but their timing varies from January to May. Communicating in advance about the timing will help you make decisions early on about whether to participate and how to fit preparation into your overall plans for the student.

Secondly, curriculum alignment can be very useful. In my studio lessons, I often keep in mind that violin students who start playing in 5th grade will need to know certain rhythm patterns and keys by 6th grade, and should begin 3rd position around 7th grade. Common orchestra repertoire will likely require these things, and I can do my students a favor by including them in our lesson material. You do not have to change your whole method to accommodate the orchestra music, nor should this monopolize your lesson time. However, it is possible to find elements of the orchestra curriculum that align with your own goals. This helps provide continuity for the students, and prevents them from needing as much help on orchestra music in the future.

3. Addressing Specific Students

Orchestra directors and private instructors often see different sides of a student, and could benefit from the other's perspective. Some common issues might be:

- *Orchestra Teacher: I'm considering making Jane a section leader, but I'm not sure how she would handle the responsibility. What do you think?*
- *Orchestra Teacher: Tommy's standing posture is great, but he seems less comfortable with his sitting posture—is this something you might have time for in your lessons with him?*
- *Private Instructor: I'm curious to know whether Suzie is putting our techniques into practice when she plays in orchestra. Could you tell me how she's been doing on her playing tests?* Note: there might be confidentiality issues with this one, but students can bring you their scores, or you can get parent permission to request the info.

I have had conversations with several orchestra teachers who provided me with important (and sometimes surprising) information about how my students are doing. This allowed me to quickly correct problems or encourage strengths in a student.

To be fair, this kind of working relationship may not be possible with everyone. We don't all have pedagogical soul mates working in a studio nearby. But even a small amount of communication can have positive outcomes, so consider some possible first steps:

Orchestra Directors:

1. If you don't already, keep a current list of private instructors on file, and update it as you hear of new teachers in the area. When people ask to be

added to your list, inquire about their credentials so that you can help parents make informed choices.
2. Each year, invite one or two private instructors to come to your school and meet prospective students. Maximize the time by using them as a sectional coach so you can see how they interact with students.
3. If your school has appropriate space, see if any private teachers are willing to teach after school lessons on site, to encourage student participation and facilitate easier communication with the teacher.
4. Over time, identify which teachers seem the most open to communication and follow up occasionally by phone or e-mail if you have any ideas or concerns regarding the progress of a particular student.

Private Instructors:

1. Construct a calendar of the school year that contains major events and concerts of your students (as well as days off of school that might affect your lessons.) Refer to school websites, or consult with orchestra directors to get the info you need.
2. Build up your studio by paying visits to local orchestra teachers or attending a few concerts. Whenever you attend an event, introduce yourself to the directors hosting the concert and follow up by e-mail with complimentary observations about the concert.
3. Consider doing demonstrations for student groups, or be present for parent orientation nights at schools to make your presence known to families. (Some orchestra teachers might be willing to mention the idea of private lessons to parents, and they could meet you on the spot.)
4. Follow up with teachers occasionally to request input on a student's progress.

Once you have established some basic familiarity with other teachers, communication will flow more easily. From there, the primary task is to maintain a positive tone whenever you consult each other. Personality conflicts and turf battles can poison the water very quickly, so set yourself up for success by following a few principles of good collaboration.

First, **communicate tactfully**. Teachers are busy and get about a million e-mails per day. Be patient if it takes time for them to respond, and be willing to try a second time if they don't. When conversing, choose your words carefully, giving the person space and deference. (e.g. "Would it be possible to ____?" or "Is ____ something you might have time for?" or "What do you think about ____?") Offer to hear their opinion before giving yours.

Secondly, **avoid making assumptions or judgments**. Admit it. You have caught yourself wondering what on earth a teacher is doing when their student "plays like that." *Johnny has a serious rushing problem. Hasn't that teacher ever heard of a metronome?* Well, it turns out that she has, but Johnny's parents keep forgetting to buy one. Plus, she has had bigger fish to fry, like Johnny's abysmal ear for intonation. Sometimes teachers develop a good or bad reputation because of their students, which is unavoidable and often accurate. But every teacher also has had students that they hope no one will ever hear, because we do not want to be judged on a student who doesn't practice or is deaf to our instructions. Practice withholding judgment.

Third, **don't get defensive**. If a colleague notices a weakness in the technique of one of your students, keep your emotions in check and hear them out. All students have flaws, and it doesn't imply that you are teaching poorly. Keeping your ears open about what other teachers notice can help you identify holes in your strategy, and bring balance to your teaching.

Fourth, **be open-minded about different schools of thought**. The fact that you have different teaching styles or disagreements doesn't mean that you cannot benefit from each other's ideas. I am not a Suzuki teacher, for example, but I have found that many Suzuki strategies that are useful, and I can use them without employing the entire Suzuki paradigm.

Finally, **always give your colleague the final say**. No one wants to be told how to run their studio or orchestra. You might have a spirited conversation debating a subject, but always respect the final choice of your colleague.

These ideas have served me well in collaborating with other teachers. While not all of them may work for you, I hope that some of them will help you build relationships that aid your teaching and your students.

Katie Gustafson teaches elementary orchestra in the Eden Prairie School district, and keeps a private studio on the side. She lives in Minneapolis with her husband. Katie welcomes your feedback on teaching at kgustafson411@gmail.com.