Clinic: Moving from Survival to Excellence in the School Orchestra Rehearsal

presented by Gerard Jones
reported by Faith Farr

Currently in his 37th year of teaching, Gerard (Jerry) Jones started in Superior, WI, and then on to Denfeld and Duluth East High Schools in Duluth, MN. He is currently teaching at Stillwater Area High School. He shared his insights on getting school students to play with excellence.

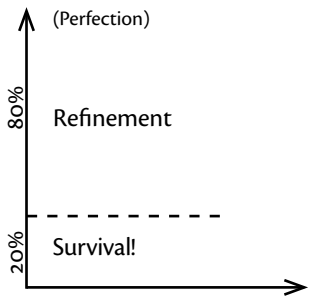
There is more to playing than just the notes. How do we create an environment so that we get more than the notes? There are two common mistakes: poor music selection, and not communicating what isn't our job.

Music Selection

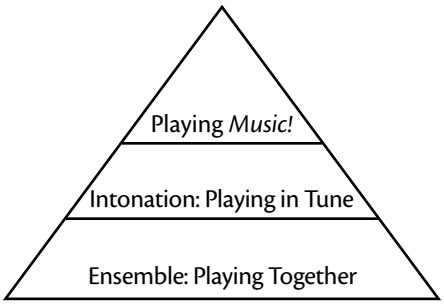
The right music will be not too hard, and not too easy. In choosing music you need to assess:

- the pedagogical intent (e.g. spiccato, fugue, tone)
- the musical intent (e.g. a slow piece might have easy notes, but the "music" is hard)
- the purpose of the ensemble. Is it your training orchestra or your performing group?
- the difficulty level of the music
- the technical level of the ensemble
- "headroom"

"Headroom" is the difference between the level of the music and the ability of the player. The purview of the private teacher includes choosing music that is *more* difficult than the current level of the player, with the purpose of teaching those skills. For school teachers, it is important to choose at least some music that is *less* difficult that the current level of the players so they have "headroom" beyond their technique to excel in the musical and ensemble demands of the piece. Headroom allows students to become excellent; it is where they move from survival to excellence.



The 80/20 rule says that 80% of the job takes 20% of the effort, and the last 20% of the job takes 80% of the effort. *Survival* means being able to play the concert tonight if you have to. It might be 80% of the job, but it is only 20% of the work. *Perfection* is not achievable; the main work goes into *Refinement*.



The layers of refinement exist in a pyramid. At the bottom level, you need to solve the ensemble problems— first get the rhythm. Add intonation work when the rhythm is set. Then you can work on *music*—dynamics, phrase and line. Students are drawn to the music; it elicits in them an aesthetic response.

Remember that for your top performing group, the standard is MPR—what the Boston Symphony sounded like playing *Russlan and Ludmilla* on the radio as parents drove to hear your group perform the same piece.

Students' Job / Teacher's Job

The students' job is to learn the notes before the rehearsal. They should arrive "music ready" or at least "notes ready." The teacher's job is to communicate to the students what the music is—beyond the visual representation of the dots on the page. If the teacher spends rehearsal talking about music (instead of beating notes) students will understand that learning the notes is their job. When enough students do that, you will reach critical mass, and more students will figure it out.

In order to get to the music, students need to take ownership and do their job. The director can only take an orchestra as far as it wants to go. Sometimes you just need to say, "We don't have a critical mass today."

The teacher's job is to create an environment where students take responsibility to be engaged. The director wins when the students believe the rehearsal is all about them. The students should walk out thinking, "I had a good time. I made *music*," not thinking, "The director is amazing."

Getting Off the Page

Once students accept the responsibility of arriving at rehearsal note-ready, you can train them in ensemble skills.

Watching and Listening

Professional players have big Dumbo ears that take in every part of the ensemble while looking at the page. Not so with students. Youthful ears follow youthful eyes. You must train your students what to watch and where to watch. Get them to memorize at least part of their music, and then remove the stands.

Train your students where to listen and when. If the violins watch the cellos at the crucial entrance, they will also hear the cellos better.

Don't emphasize, "Watch the conductor!" The pulse resides in the ensemble; the conductor is just a traffic cop. Teach students to look at the conductor at a particular places for a particular reason. Teach them to grab a measure at a time with their eyes, then look up and play.

Once student eyes are not stuck on the page or on the conductor, they can choose where to look and when—and it depends on the place in the piece. Take time in

rehearsal to develop listen/watch skills. If rehearsal turns out unfortunately to be all about "beating notes" then it is because the students did not do their job of learning the notes at home.

Movement

Paul Rolland taught balanced movement as the core to successful playing. With your feet in a comfortable "V," perform a flying pizzicato and your body will sway slightly to the left to stay balanced in response to the vigorous arm motion to the right. (If your feet are together with knees locked, your body will stay still because of tension.) Show your students wonderful examples of balanced motion from YouTube. At http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JUmxHXsxsug you will see A Far Cry (chamber orchestra from Boston that performs without conductor) performing Tchaikovsky's *Souvenir de Florence mvt IV*. All the upper strings are standing so they can move; the sound and the sight are spectacular. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tWLESuVkXVg shows Sir Colin Davis conducting the Gustav Mahler Youth Orchestra playing *Sibelius Symphony #2* at the BBC Proms. Young players, seated traditionally, but moving clearly with each entrance. Their engagement in music making is obvious.

Teach students to move to improve their sound. Playing with movement releases tension; the sound improves. Experiment by recording your ensemble playing a scale staying stock still, and then record again forcing the students to move. Hear the difference.

To get the ensemble to start together, get everyone to breathe together. The conductor should give beat 3; everyone should initiate a breath on beat 4, then play. Breathing together develops a sense of community. Teach students where to sniff—on the rest if the entrance is on an "and." Breathing together builds engagement.

Rules of Engagement

When students take their job seriously, they will be engaged. The reason they should practice is not so they play well, but so that their stand partner will play well. They play for their ensemble, not for themselves. Students engage each other in the music.

Take No Prisoners

This is a hill you chose to die on. The enemy is mediocrity. When you give a signal, repeat until everyone breathes; repeat until someone grabs the pencil and writes in "breathe."

The Rules of Engagement every student should accept are:

- have accurate bowings and fingerings
- learn your part for others as well as yourself
- memorize where necessary: beginnings, endings, transitions, tempo changes, wherever possible
- learn where to watch and what to watch for
- care enough to do it
- write down *everything*

The best way to get students to write things down is to give an instruction and then just stand there with a dumb look until someone writes it in.

Orchestra Culture

We create a culture for our orchestra whether we intend to or not. A successful orchestra culture has students pledging to succeed because of their commitment, not the director's authority: "We choose to commit ourselves to:

- watching the director and others all the time
- using a pencil
- respecting each other
- being willing to make mistakes for good reasons
- choosing "our" agenda over "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"

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