

How to engage your students in meaningful, thoughtful, thorough, life changing, mind blowing, out of this world, Zen rehearsals, or better yet...

LET'S PLAY WELL!

by Mary Sorlie

Mary Sorlie presented this session as part of the pedagogy program for interns at the Upper Midwest String and Chamber Music Conference at the College of St. Benedict last summer.

We all know the joys that come in working with young musicians. How sweet it is to hear students recall a single rehearsal or performance that stands out as a magical, musical moment. I think our desire is that all of our students experience those moments that can truly change and shape their lives. We get to be involved in this process, and that is just as rewarding for us as it is for them.

Rehearsals are where we cover it all—technique, musicality, ensemble, rehearsal etiquette, and the list goes on. It seems that these rehearsal minutes are never enough. It is good for me to remember that every minute in every rehearsal counts. There are no “do over” minutes in any rehearsal. I need to be prepared to make the most of every moment I have in working with an ensemble. I have found the following ideas helpful in working with young orchestras. While none of these ideas are new, keeping these ideas in mind during a rehearsal is the best way that I can hopefully engage them throughout the rehearsal. These 7 elements are: **PREPARE!**

PLAN. Always have a plan. There cannot be rehearsals where we just show up. Time is a precious gift, and not preparing for a rehearsal is a waste of time for all parties involved. We have to know what we are going to rehearse and why it needs rehearsing. What elements need focus and attention? What skills need to be taught before they can play this piece? Whenever we work with humans, (all the time), things may not go according to plan. But if I have a plan for each rehearsal, I have a starting point and hopefully fresh ideas for that rehearsal. Planning each piece at every rehearsal means preparing each piece in greater detail. That can only help the students in playing each piece at the highest level.

RAISE the bar. If there is no bar set, this is what the students will accomplish. What you set is what they will attain. Know what your ensemble is capable of doing and then push them just a little farther. Instill

excellent intonation, a warm, beautiful sound, and good technique in them from the very beginning. Do not accept medium second fingers. Do not accept entrances that are not together. As the students begin to hear these differences, they too will set and expect high standards. One does not need to be a tyrant on the podium, but one can expect good pitch, rhythm and ensemble.

ESTABLISH expectations. If the students do not know what is expected of them, frustration will be present at every rehearsal. These expectations should include both behavioral and musical parameters. If students do not know that bringing all of their music to a rehearsal is a critical part of being a musician, they will never bring all of their music to every rehearsal. It is important that rehearsal etiquette is established at the very beginning of working with an ensemble. What do the students need to do before the rehearsal begins? How should they behave during a rehearsal? They will only know if you tell them.

PACE. Know thy students; know thy pace. Timing and flow is crucial in any rehearsal. Beginning students do not work at the same pace as middle and high school students. Keep the flow of play and instruction moving, according to age and ability. It is very easy for students to tune out if I have become “stuck” in how I rehearse specific passages. Can I add singing, counting or rhythmic elements to a passage instead of drilling it countless times? Have I paced the end of the rehearsal the same as the beginning? A good pace helps to keep everyone focused and energized throughout.

ASSESS and articulate. We must be able to quickly assess what needs to be fixed, and then prioritize. If I have stopped at a particular passage, can I say what I need to in just a few sentences? Can I demonstrate what it is that needs to be done? Whatever the reason for stopping, it needs to be demonstrated or addressed in a clear and concise

manner. What is the ratio of talking time to playing time in each rehearsal? Too much talking is a great way to kill a rehearsal, especially at the younger levels.

RESOURCEFUL. Take what you know works in a rehearsal and make it even better. Delete from your concepts and approaches what doesn't work and move on. Watch others, read, practice and try new ideas. Ask questions. Attend workshops. Take up a new hobby. Don't be afraid to try something new just because it is new to you. Find new ways to fix old problems.

ENGAGE your students. Often times, we work with one section of the orchestra while our backs are to another. How can one section participate while another section is the focus? Can they clap a part, sing a pitch, listen for accuracy? Can they watch if bow placement is matching in a section? How is each rehearsal affecting each student musically, emotionally and physically? Am I only aiming for correct rhythms and correct pitches? Are they thinking in terms of literature and art that might apply to this repertoire? Can they write a poem about a piece they are playing? What would their visual landscape be for this piece?

Paying attention to the details is why orchestras play well. Students who are engaged don't just play correct pitches and rhythm. They make music. That is what changes lives. How lucky we are to be a part of that!

Mary Sorlie conducts the Sinfonia Orchestra at the Upper Midwest String and Chamber Music Conference. She is active as a free-lance violinist in the Twin Cities and is currently a member of the WolfGang. She has played with the Lexington Symphony, Minnesota Opera, Minneapolis Chamber Symphony, Lyra Concert, Bach Society and Minnesota Sinfonia. Mary is a frequent guest conductor and clinician in the Midwest and is currently in her 12th season as a GTCYS conductor. †