

All-State: Meet the All-State Conductor

presented by Gary Lewis — reported by Paul Boese

Gary Lewis' presentation was a summary of what I had seen in most of the workshops. I share many of his views and try to incorporate them into my teaching.

Lewis' handout and presentation emphasized the importance of posture. Posture affects tone production. Good posture tells the listener that I am comfortable with my instrument and that I have control over it. It sends a message to the observer that I am ready, energized, and you can look forward to hearing good things. It is the only way to play healthy and avoid injury. Conductors who insist on proper posture really do have their students' overall best interests in mind.

The conductor's posture sets the stage for what will follow. A conductor who slouches in preparing to start his orchestra can expect a "slouchy" sound. He demonstrated this during his presentation. His body presence sends a message to the orchestra and audience what he's really feeling. He is making an impression before a single note is being played.

Gary Lewis said, "Music is a visual, as well as an aural art." There is nothing more beautiful to see than a poised orchestra moving with ease and in tandem with each other and their conductor. It's the reason why live concerts and the atmosphere created by them are so powerful. It is no waste of rehearsal time to consider choreography. I often tell my students how we need to work on our bow choreography. It really does matter!

Creating this unified experience requires that conductors and performers incorporate chamber music philosophy. One of the goals of chamber music is to increase awareness of what is going on around you. Teachers need to be willing to get their eyes out of the score and on their students. Be willing to lay down the baton and walk among the ensemble. You will gain a new perspective on your ensemble by seeing and hearing things that you never noticed before. Performers will have to increase their awareness as they listen and watch each other. Failure to do so usually results in a crash and burn teachable moment. It is the opportunity to bring the score to the orchestra. Analyze

what's going on in the piece. What are the cues that we need to listen to, watch for, and feel?

Allow students the opportunity to analyze and take ownership. Why did the ensemble break down? How can we fix it? This is the teacher's opportunity to improve questioning and listening skills. Resist the temptation to fix it on your own in order to save time. Make an investment in their analytical skills. Good coaches and teachers should have the goal of creating independent learners. We don't need more people who rely only on experts.

The topic of general rehearsal ideas was not explicitly covered in the lecture but was included in the hand out. These general ideas are crucial in training musicians how to be self-analytical and become independent learners. Here are several of those suggestions that help to break down a complex passage into simpler more manageable steps.

- Play separate bows instead of slurs.
- Isolate LH by playing pizzicato.
- Isolate RH by playing open strings.
- Air bow. Sing. Combine them.
- Speak and count articulations.
- Hear it before you play it.

These are skills that any student can use to solve most problems of pitch, clumsy fingerings, bow direction, shifts, slurs and tricky string crossings. They have to be able to play the music competently if they are going to feel like they have ownership in the ensemble and become more aware of what is going on in the rest of the ensemble.

Why is singing a part of instrumental playing? It is a way to introduce expressiveness without the technical difficulties of playing. Singing allows our ear to begin learning the passage. We now have an aural image or target to aim for. We cannot play what we cannot sing or hear. Our ear has to anticipate what is coming so the rest of the body can prepare for what needs to be done.

One area of music making that requires awareness of the entire ensemble is starting and stopping. The conductor and ensemble must establish eye contact and breathe together. The conductor's initial gesture

must be breath orientated. That initial gesture must continue. The idea of attacking a note should be replaced by releasing the note. It makes much more sense to release a note in a soft delicate passage. It might help eliminate one of the most common mistakes made by string players—not having the bow on the string. A note can't be released unless the bow is on the string and engaged.

Breathing helps to set the body in motion. When the conductor breathes he is inviting everyone to breathe with him. This is the beginning of a collaborative effort. The players are now free to move with the music. The rhythm of the preparatory beat has established a tempo and the players are doing much more than following a beat pattern. They are now engaged together in a creative effort. This is much more rewarding than merely following the leader.

The process of teaching chamber music principles, training independent musicians, and going beyond just following the stick has many lasting benefits. It engages the students. They have something to say in the process. They have a stake in the outcome. This makes it meaningful. It builds a trusting relationship. This is why students will shuffle schedules in order to keep playing in an orchestra. It explains why they are willing to rehearse before school starts or after it has ended. These are the kind of things that administrators are looking for when they evaluate our effectiveness as teachers.

The hardest part of this process is for the conductor to get out of the way. We need to be more of a musician and less of a traffic cop. Gary Lewis encouraged us to move less so we hear more. Don't try to control everything with gestures. It is so easy to try to do too much which can become counterproductive. Take fewer beats. This says to the ensemble that I am trusting you to maintain tempo so I can deal with the bigger musical picture. I have to remember that the audience is there to listen to and watch the orchestra. They are not there to look at my back or watch gestures that I might think are really cool.

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