



ORCHESTRA

Developing a Quality Orchestral Sound: It Begins With a Quality Warm-Up

by Christopher Jannings

One of the most important parts of a rehearsal with your student ensemble is the warm-up. Unfortunately, due to the constraints of time or a lack of quality materials, this important piece of the rehearsal process is often overlooked or neglected. While our allotted time for rehearsal can vary greatly depending on our building schedule and grade levels (I've heard of anything from an hour or two a week to 90 minutes every day), devoting an appropriate amount of time to a comprehensive, well-balanced warm-up is a must. This article will address different components of the orchestral warm-up and their benefits to your ensemble. Before we delve into said components, however, let me briefly explain a bit more as to why I feel the warm-up is such an integral part of developing a quality sound in young musicians.

The warm-up is a great opportunity to loosen up your student's muscles, focus their brains and ears, and develop the technical skills that will aid them in their orchestral playing.

Our students don't generally have the same need for stretching or experience the same type of pain that we "old" folks do, but it is important that students prepare their bodies for the stress on their muscles and joints to come. Listening across the ensemble for balance, blend, and articulation is something that we strive for with our students. I feel that one of the best places to address this is during the group warm-up. There is no doubt that students need to study technical materials like scales and arpeggios to make great strides in their playing. Most of us would probably agree that when students do practice, not very many put much of an emphasis on those technical studies.

I'd love to be able to say that all of our students would be physically and mentally prepared for rehearsal the second they sit in their chairs, but we all know that, being the social animals that they are, much of the time allotted between classes is a chance for the students to catch up with friends (not

worry about stretching or playing through their scales). We as educators need to facilitate this at the start of rehearsal.

Scales and Arpeggios

The benefits of studying scales and arpeggios are probably too great to mention. I firmly believe that the most effective way to get your orchestra to play in tune is to spend ample time developing these important technical skills. The beauty of this warm-up option is that it can be easily tempered to fit the ability and experience level of your ensemble. Whether it's beginners playing a pizzicato D Major scale or your advanced high school students playing three octave melodic minors, the journey of scale playing is never really over. (I would wager that most professionals still spend a good amount of time practicing scales!)

Finger Patterns

String players are able to develop numerous finger patterns that work well across different strings. This pattern recognition can come in handy when sight-reading and figuring out efficient fingerings for orchestral parts. These small patterns are typically three or four notes ascending and then descending and played four times. Here's an example:

(Open) D – E – F# – E – D

(Open) D – E – F – E – D

(Open) D – E \flat – F – E \flat – D

Come up with your own patterns on all four strings or check out various method books for similar exercises. An added bonus? These exercises are great for finger dexterity and building muscles in the hands and forearms (especially helpful for younger low string players).

Chorales

Perhaps the best warm-up activity for improving listening and musicality, chorales are also another great tool for improving ensemble intonation. My older students will typically play chorales in keys with four and five sharps and flats, while my younger

students will typically play in varying keys up to three sharps and flats.

Chorales generally have a great amount of flexibility and allow you to work on very specific skills. For example, you can do the chorales completely without a conductor so the students are completely engaged in listening and communicating with breathing, movement, and facial cues. Conversely, you can conduct the chorales and have the students respond to fine details in tempo flux, articulation, and dynamics through your conducting gestures (this can be a great warm-up for you, the conductor, as well).

I've collected a number of different chorales from various sources and arranged each in multiple keys (all done on Finale notation software). Most of the chorales are hymn tunes by Bach, Luther, Palestrina, etc...

If I were to pick an "essential" part of my warm-ups with my orchestras, chorales would probably be it. In addition to giving the students practice exploring multiple key signatures, they also have more of a positive impact on musicality and musical communication than anything else I've ever used.

Bowing Studies

One of the biggest challenges I've found as a string educator is getting students to articulate in a uniform and correct manner. There's a lot at play here; students need to know the type of articulation that is expected from the style period or conductor's preference and also be able to execute it physically. Throw in students needing to know the correct terminology (sometimes in multiple languages) for bowings and you've got a challenging situation on your hands.

I attack the bowing issue in two main ways during the warm-up. First, I often include various bow strokes as part of a scale warm-up. I'll have the students play through the scale in slow quarter notes and then have them play it again while executing a specific bow stroke (it could be as simple as off string eighth notes or as difficult as a ricochet bowing). Secondly, I am a big fan of James Kjelland's method *Orches-*

tral Bowing: Style and Function (Alfred Publications). This book goes through pretty much every bowing style students will encounter through well-known orchestral excerpts. Not only do the students get a workout with the bow, they are also exposed to excerpts of some great literature!

Other Ideas

Pitch matching

This is another great option to improve ensemble listening skills and ear training. I'll have the students start by playing any note they choose with the goal of coming to a consensus (matching pitch) in as short of an amount of time as possible. Younger students in particular will often enjoy setting a new best time or having a competition with another one of your ensembles. In addition to matching one pitch, I'll also have the

students form major or minor triads as fast as possible.

Singing

While this may elicit a few blank stares from students (Singing? In orchestra?), I believe that there is great value in instrumentalists spending some time vocalizing music. During the warm-up, I'll have my students occasionally sing our chorales. I'll also have the students try to sing their starting notes of chorales or other music given the tonic note in the key signature. Aside from a change of pace and a chance to get some of your students out of their comfort zones, this work can yield great results in ear training and pitch recognition.

Rhythm reading

A few years back, our music department

at Roseville Area High School developed a rhythm curriculum with the ultimate aim of producing better sight-readers and more competent performers. The curriculum, which is made up of a number of sequentially difficult worksheets, includes practice identifying examples as well as doing rhythmic dictation. Consider including something like this in your warm-up as it will sharpen your students' musical skills and engage their brains for the upcoming rehearsal.

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