



ORCHESTRA

Developing Chamber Musicians in the Large Ensemble

by Christopher Jannings

Most music educators would agree that one of the best and most effective ways to make our students better musicians in ensembles is to give them experience as chamber musicians. How does experience with chamber music translate to better musicianship?

- 1) *Chamber music develops effective communication with others through breathing, listening and movement.* One of the most challenging roadblocks I've found as a high school orchestra educator is getting kids to "open up" and get their eyes out of their music stands. Quite simply, it is often tough to get them to emote and feel the music together. This is not all that surprising; you have to be willing to put yourself out there and have complete trust in the other musicians. Effective music making is a very emotional experience.
- 2) *Chamber music develops greater confidence for individual musicians.* There is generally very little to no "hiding" in chamber music. Each individual is responsible for his or her part and it will be painfully clear if they are not prepared. Chamber music teaches you to play out strong and requires you to trust in yourself.
- 3) *Chamber music develops a greater level of musicality.* Rather than having a conductor tell you what to do and how to play, the chamber musician is charged with developing their own interpretation of phrasing, articulation, bow direction and pulse.

While we can essentially all agree that chamber music teaches some fantastic skills for our students, effectively incorporating it within the large ensemble format can be a challenge. Here are some ideas I currently use with my ensembles to address this:

- 1) *Make the large ensemble function like a chamber ensemble.* Perhaps the biggest thing I've learned the past eleven years as a conductor and educator is that I need to give students more ownership in the music making. I have come to feel that it is not my job as the conductor to "keep the beat" for the ensemble, spoon-feed all of the bowings to students, or tell them exactly how to shape a phrase. I look at it more like collaboration; we attempt to solve the musical puzzle together. This is not to say that I won't tell them some specifics of what I want for a bowing, length of note, or dynamic scheme. After all, one of the things I love about conducting is bringing my own unique artistic vision to life. I find, however, that there is a lot of room for students to make decisions and lead under the umbrella of my vision.

What does this look like in my rehearsals?

- I don't wave my arms around the whole time. I find that the less I'm giving a beat pattern, the more the students are

listening to one another and watching each other. I have the students work on starting a piece and stopping a piece themselves through movement and breathing. We will, at times, do works without a conductor in concert (a true 60 member chamber group).

- Students will actively discuss bowings with their section mates as well as other sections.
 - Rather than telling students exactly how to phrase specific passages, we will often play them until they come to a consensus through listening and watching.
- 2) *Get ALL of your students involved in small chamber ensembles.* Challenging? Yes. Beneficial? Most definitely! Many high schools are involved in state Solo/Ensemble contests and many middle level ensembles host Solo/Ensemble concert nights. Rather than making playing in an ensemble optional, why not make it a requirement of your class? My younger orchestra (mostly 9th and 10th graders) all participate in a small ensemble from February thru April. The students have the choice of participating in the official contest or simply performing for their peers in class. There are certainly some logistical challenges, but most orchestras will be able to accommodate this type of program. (Full disclosure: I have the pleasure of having another member of the district orchestra staff run lessons, sectionals and ensembles every day with this orchestra, so the students have guidance and supervision. However, I wouldn't hesitate to run a similar program and have students work in a practice room on their own).
 - 3) *Expose your students to more chamber music.* Many educators include some sort of listening in their curriculum from time to time. Rather than always reaching for the "masterworks" of symphonic literature, throw in some chamber music. Within chamber music, there are a lot of different varieties to explore. While Haydn and Mozart quartets are great, play the Schubert *Trout Quintet*, the Dvorak *Serenade for Winds*, or the Mendelssohn *Octet* to give students a greater understanding of the possibilities.

I encourage you to try some of these techniques or develop your own ideas for incorporating chamber music in your teaching. Admittedly, I was a bit slow to adopt some of these ideas when I started teaching, but have really enjoyed the improved musicality and heightened responsibility of my students. Have a wonderful end of the school year!

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