



ORCHESTRA

Building a “Community” within your Orchestra Program

by Christopher Jannings

One of the most important things I’ve learned in my eleven years of teaching is that to build a quality music program, you also have to build a strong community within and around your ensembles. This “community” includes the students, parents and other family members, and the school and community at large. In this article, I will briefly explore different ideas that I have employed to help build my program at Roseville Area High School.

1) The importance of an orchestra “community” for your students

Dictionary definitions for community include terms like “living together,” “having characteristics in common,” “unified by common interest,” and “practicing common ownership.” Most of us have likely experienced that fact that music ensembles are unlike most other courses students take. A music ensemble can be a student’s identity. It can be a welcoming, safe environment that students do not necessarily get in other classes or in the halls at their school. Music ensembles can give students a sense of purpose and a great sense of pride. Some of this can be attributed to the powerful, emotional nature of musical performance while some of it can be attributed to students simply spending great amounts of time together. (Many of my students have been playing in ensembles together for eight years or more.)

While some of this community building happens organically, there are ways to help foster a greater orchestra community for your students. It is very important to come up with shared values that students buy into. In each student folder, I tape in a small treatise that gives them a daily reminder of what we are about (what I expect of them, what they expect of each other, etc.) Elect officers to help coordinate social events, orchestra “spirit days,” and the like. Tour or take field trips as much as you are able. It never ceases to amaze me how much closer my orchestras get following our annual tour.

2) Building a quality orchestra “community” requires parental and family involvement

If the individuals that support young musicians don’t buy into your program, it will be highly unlikely that your program will reach great heights. Students need financial support for supplies, instruments, and lessons (as much as families can provide), support and guidance for practice at home, and positive encouragement through concert attendance. Once you have established a certain amount of “buy in” from families, you have opened up a door for increased fundraising opportunities and volunteers for events.

Don’t be shy to ask for assistance. You will likely find that many parents and family members are willing to help in many different capacities to help make your program as successful as it can be. I have a few events during the year where I truly rely on family assistance. Our annual “Orchestra Gala” fundraising event is largely volunteer driven. While they are not an official booster organiza-

tion, they make the event successful. They find donations for our silent auction, work the tables, and provide the promotion for the event. When our school hosts our Region Solo/Ensemble Contest, volunteers are critical for helping the event run on schedule. Finally, as my Symphony Orchestra tours yearly, I rely on a few parents to volunteer their time to chaperone the trip. I can say that the families of my students have never let me down when I needed help. Many parents welcome the opportunity to be a part of an organization that their children hold very dear.

3) To build a strong orchestra “community,” you need to market your program

It sounds a little bit funny since we are in the world of education, but a certain amount of building a successful community is your ability to market your program. The reputation, prestige, and image of your orchestra program can significantly impact financial support, concert attendance, and retention of students. Here are some tips to market your ensembles:

Make your presence known in the community at large. Are your concerts recorded? Do whatever you can to get them played on local public access channels and/or web-streams. Have small ensembles or your full ensemble play in nursing homes and assisted living facilities within your school district. I have literally had a few complete strangers (with no connection to my students) approach me while out and about and tell me how much they enjoy watching our concerts on TV or live in concert.

Custom orchestra apparel will help promote your ensembles and also get many of your students excited. Many high school athletic organizations have their own apparel. Why not music as well? It helps foster pride amongst the ensemble and gives you great exposure. It can be as simple as T-shirts or as unique as cardigan sweaters. There is a tradition within my orchestra program to place orders for increasingly interesting items. Years back, we developed our own logo (with a crest...very classy!) that can be embroidered on many different items. We have ordered cardigans, sweater vests, mittens, scarves, and beanies along with the more traditional hooded sweatshirts, T-shirts, and the like. Not only does this provide great opportunities for “orchestra spirit days” and other ways to bond, it is also great for student retention and growth of your program in the younger grades in your district.

Develop a Social Media presence. As I’m sure you are aware, kids these days like their Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other social media outlets. Admittedly, I am personally not very drawn to such things, but I do recognize the impact they can have on improving the sense of community within your program. My officers or TA’s coordinate our Roseville Area High School Orchestra Facebook page. We post photos, links to videos, and an opportunity for orchestra members and their friends to connect. I recently started a RAHS Orchestra Twitter account and plan on using it to send out announcements, reminders for students, etc. Many of our

performances of the past five years have been posted on YouTube. In this age, where a “virtual community” seems to be as important as a real one, it is important that your orchestra program has a way to connect.

Hopefully this gives you some additional ideas to take your program to the next level. Best of luck to everyone as you start the new school year!

Christopher Jannings has been the Director of Orchestras and Guitar Studies at Roseville Area High School since the 2003-2004 school year. He teaches two curricular orchestras, two extra curricular orchestras, and courses in beginning and advanced guitar. He is also the principal bassist and assistant conductor of the Roseville String Ensemble and Past President and a member of the board of directors for the Minnesota High School Music Listening Contest. †