

All-State: Chamber Music

presented by Tom Rosenberg — reported by Bruce McLellan

In Tom Rosenberg's session on the benefits of working with students in chamber groups he presented a number of good arguments for finding time in the day that will pay dividends down the road. Benefits include: improved skills in listening, rhythm, intonation, expressiveness and leadership.

In any ensemble, large or small, listening skills are essential for good intonation, balance and blend, matching styles and articulations, expressive interpretation as well as playing together rhythmically. The problem many students have is either feeling overpowered by the rest of the orchestra and then giving up on trying to hear their own sound, or enjoying the overall sound and not paying attention to what they are playing. In the chamber ensemble there is no getting around your own sound. You will hear it, and the rest of the group hears it as well. Intonation problems are better understood as the players hear how their sound fits with the harmonic structure. Players begin to understand their own tendencies, whether it is to go sharp or flat.

In a chamber group, rhythm issues are more easily identified as players have a more difficult time hiding in the texture. In addition, students who follow others in the section to get the rhythm now have to solve the problems themselves. No one wants to be the one who causes the "train wreck;" the only alternative is to solve the problem. Learning to breathe and move together also helps in rhythmic precision, and more precise attacks and releases.

In an ensemble, accompaniment figures can seem monotonous when not understood as being part of the whole. When each part is sitting closer together, accompanying parts can better hear the phrasing of a beautiful melodic line and adjust their playing to match, follow and support the phrasing. Players can discuss with one another what might be the most effective interpretation, and experiment with different options while listening carefully to determine what the group feels works best. When one player

shapes a phrase especially well, the others are often drawn more into the music, thus creating an even more effective performance.

Chamber groups can be an excellent vehicle for developing leadership that will benefit the orchestra and the students in their future endeavors. One skill that is emphasized is becoming a cooperative team player. Groups are often formed with students who have strong opinions about how music should be approached. Quite often these can be in conflict with each other, and players must learn that they cannot always have it their way. They need to work together to determine rehearsal times and how they will approach solving problems in their rehearsal. All of this is done in cooperation with each other and the teacher/coach.

Students may also develop a feeling that this group is something special, inspiring them to work for a higher standard of excellence. This attitude can carry over into the orchestra as well as other academic areas. When musicians feel the reward of excellence they are more likely to strive for that in large group, school and future organizations.

When students develop a stronger desire for excellence they are more likely to identify problems more effectively as they listen more closely for those problems. The first step in solving problems is to know that they exist. With the help of the instructor they can add more problem-solving tools to their toolbox. Learning to slow things down and listen carefully, breaking down technical problems into small chunks and looking to outside resources such as recordings and master classes are some useful techniques. Students can use these skills in their private practice, sectional rehearsals, other academic areas, higher education and life.

One of the most common causes of failure in leadership is a lack of self-discipline. Having a better understanding of cause and effect relationships is helpful in developing self-discipline: If I haven't prepared for rehearsal I will be embarrassed; if I am late it

affects the rest of the group; if I don't stay on task we don't accomplish as much. These are values that are needed in all organizations students may join throughout their lives.

If all of this is true, there is a compelling case for making room for chamber music in our school string programs. Why have I and other directors not tapped into this more? For me, it has been a perception that there is not enough time in the day to do all this. While it may not be possible to turn our schools into music conservatories, there are some solutions that don't have to take a lot more time. In the Oskaloosa String Program, most of our time is spent in large group rehearsals. We also have the opportunity to work with students once per week in small groups; however this has usually been a time to address incorrect notes and rhythms in our orchestra music.

One solution for schools with pull-out lessons is to group students into chamber groups instead of first violins, second violins etc. If the loss of time on orchestra music is critical, the director can select easier music for the large group while focusing on the chamber music unit. Another solution is to work on the large group music in lesson chamber groups and have the group perform a short, designated section of a piece in front of the class. These experiences may whet the appetite of some of the students to focus more on chamber music and find times they can get together outside of school.

Strong skills in listening, rhythm, intonation, expressiveness and leadership are qualities that we all desire to see in our groups. Finding time for chamber music can help us get to a higher level of excellence. Time is a challenge, but it is possible to fit at least some of the concepts of effective chamber music performance into our large group rehearsals. Pull-out lessons and providing opportunities outside of school, where possible, can raise the bar further in the worthwhile endeavor of chamber music.

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