

All-State: A Potpourri of Ideas for Planning and Pacing a Middle School Orchestra Program

presented by Connie Aiken — reported by Kathryn Buccola, Cassandra Herold and Brenda Radloff

In *A Potpourri of Ideas for Planning and Pacing a Middle School Orchestra Program*, Connie Aiken describes what each grade—sixth, seventh, and eighth—does in her orchestra program. The purpose of her pre-



sentation was to give an example of what a middle school orchestra program looks like and what and when curricular choices are made in each grade level.

Connie Aiken teaches middle school orchestra at Chippewa Middle School in the Mounds View School District. She has taught strings for 35 years and started with a private Suzuki studio before moving to public school teaching. She believes teaching is an art that it brings great joy to the teacher. She also believes that the process of learning is what matters just as much as the final performance product. Learning is all about continuity, routines, and repetition as well as contrast, creative diversions and variety.

Connie believes the principal skill the orchestra teacher teaches is the ability to concentrate and focus. We should remind students of this often—how far they have come from working on one-line, four measure tunes, to being able to keep their eyes on a page (and not get lost!) for the whole page, while trying to play all the right notes, in the right rhythm, with good posture! This takes a lot of energy and effort, and is really great for the brain. Music reading helps academic reading—we are asking students to keep their eyes on the page, and to keep them moving at a steady pace. As we gradually extend the length of the tunes, this is really wonderful for struggling learners. Many classroom teachers recognize the intrinsic value of music, but also recognize these cool skills that we help students

with—and that students have fun while working on those skills.

Sixth grade

In sixth grade orchestra, Connie's goal is to “keep students playing” throughout the year and into seventh grade—essentially, get them hooked into the program so that they feel successful, are making progress, and get invested.

Her sixth grade class meets every day. They focus on basic posture, which Connie describes as militant. Her students are asked to “corner sit” if they are violins and violas. This means they sit on the edge of the chair with a chair leg in between their legs. Cello students are asked to “square sit,” which means they sit squarely in the middle of the chair on the front edge. She explains that they must play with their feet, encouraging them to sit with their weight balanced on their feet.

Connie uses the Barbara Barber finger patterns. These include four different finger patterns that are each designated a color—Red, Blue, Green, and Yellow. For example, the Red Violin finger pattern is when there is a half step between second and third finger. The Blue Violin finger pattern is when there is a half step between the first and second finger.

Sixth grade students also work on letter name facility and fluency. Connie uses timed note name quizzes and other activities including identifying mystery songs from letter names and writing out words with notes.

Connie also has sixth grade students work on scales. Specifically they work on two-octave C, D, and G Major scales and also one octave e, d, and a minor scales.

Sixth grade students do a rhythm a week using SmartMusic. They also review left and right hand positions and basic bow strokes. Connie uses *Essential Elements Book 2* as a sight reading resource. In addition, sixth grade students play orchestral parts in four performances: an evening concert in the fall, a holiday concert in the daytime, an elementary tour and an evening concert in the spring.

Seventh grade

Connie's goal for seventh grade orchestra students is to “grow facility and expression.” Her seventh grade group meets every day; therefore she is able to have one sec-

tional and four rehearsals weekly. During sectionals, one section works with Connie while the other sections work on theory worksheets.

Seventh grade orchestra students continue to work on letter name and rhythm competency in the first half of the year. They also work on chromatics. When doing worksheets, the answers are on the back so when they are done they can independently check their answers, or “wave the flag” as Connie calls it.

For scales, Connie has seventh grade students do two octave scales and arpeggios – C, G, D, A, E, F, and B \flat Major; e, d, and a minor two octave scales and arpeggios; and also one octave B and E \flat Major scales and arpeggios. Scales are tested weekly along with spots in the orchestral repertoire.

Connie does different units with seventh grade students throughout the year. In September she does a unit on how to practice. She has students map out their schedules and shows a Winton Marsalis video on practicing. Also in September she does a unit on posture and uses many Alexander Technique exercises. In October she does a unit on whole/half steps and intervals. In September and October she introduces listening and stretching, which they then continue bi-weekly throughout the rest of the year. For example she has her students stretch while they listen to Vivaldi's Four Seasons. In September and October she does a sight-reading unit with the *Strictly Strings Book 2*, especially the duets.

In the second half of the year beginning in January, Connie does a fiddle tune unit and a harmonics unit using Scott Walker's *Irish Tunes for Young Fiddlers* and the song *Whistler's Waltz*, which uses only harmonics. Also in January, Connie does a conducting unit. At the end of January and into February, seventh grade does a composing unit where they write a valentine-themed composition for Valentine's Day. The valentine compositions are given to elementary students. Also in February the seventh grade orchestra travels to an elementary school to do a performance. In March, the seventh grade does a small ensemble/chamber music unit ending in an in-class recital. Again Connie uses the duets from the *Strictly Strings* books. In April the seventh grade does a bowings unit and then in May they do an instrument construction unit and a body rhythms unit.

Like the sixth grade orchestra, the seventh grade orchestra does four performances. They include a fall evening concert, a holiday daytime concert, an elementary visit/high school visit performance, and a spring evening performance.

Eighth grade

In eighth grade, Connie Aiken's students have daily rehearsals and sectionals. Their goal is to "do and understand." They reinforce seventh grade concepts and continue to work on letter names, especially ledger lines in the violin, treble clef for the viola, and tenor clef for the cello and bass.

Eighth grade orchestra students work on shifting using *Essential Technique*. They work on rhythms, especially subdivisions. They do all major scales and arpeggios in two octaves and two octave e, d, a, b, and g minor scales and arpeggios. In addition they work on vibrato and more challenging repertoire where they are held to a higher performance expectation.

In January and February Connie's eighth grade orchestra participates in the MNSOTA Middle Level Orchestra Festival where they are evaluated by two judges and given a half hour clinic.

Eighth grade orchestra students study

music theory using the Alfred, *Essentials of Music Theory*, books 1 and 2. They also study music history including the years, characteristics, and composers of the Renaissance, Baroque, Classical, Romantic, Modern and Contemporary eras.

Like the sixth and seventh grade orchestra, the eighth grade orchestra gives four performances: a fall evening concert with the top high school orchestra, a holiday concert during the day, the MNSOTA Festival Contest, and a spring evening performance.

All grades

In all of her grades, Connie incorporates a scale/warm-up. She suggests having something for the students to focus on (grape magic X on index finger, trace banana bows, vibrato with scroll on the wall, different bow strokes, vary sounding point, she had a long list!) You can use these less demanding moments in the warm-up to bring some focus to another area of playing and improve the quality of the students' playing. You can "wake up" listening and skill alertness by having students watch each other for very specific things (bowing, finger patterns, etc.).

Connie has the same basic routine

with all grades. Every student has a binder/pencil check. Next she does announcements. Tuning is next. Then she does scales and warm up. This is where it starts to get tailored to the grade level. What is really nice here is the consistency. Students will be able to transition easily to the next grade and know the routine and expectations.

Connie talked about some characteristics of the rehearsal itself. A few things to note: plan with the guys in mind—try to include sports, construction, adventure, dangerous missions, in the imagery that you use in order to appeal to them, too. Ask the students to be part of a musical experiment: "what happens if...???" Her rehearsal setting was easy to picture: she believes that students learn best in a quiet, focused environment with fun interludes. She gets attention with signals, rather than additional noise (such as shhh-ing them). She encourages teachers to examine themselves, so that they are not inhibiting the classroom environment.

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