



ORCHESTRA

Incorporating Rhythm Exercises, Written Theory, and Ear Training in Performance Classes

by Chris Jannings

As accomplished music educators, we have a thorough background in the true building blocks of music. We understand how music works by looking at it and can identify numerous things through simply listening. Most of our students, however, are generally not blessed with the same training or natural ability we possess when it comes to these building blocks of music. Taking a small amount of time during our rehearsals to teach it to them can pay great dividends in their musical understanding and, therefore, their performance ability. In my twelve years of teaching high school orchestra, I've adopted lessons and exercises for students to work on in the areas of rhythm, written theory, and ear training. This article will briefly outline the areas I've targeted and my approach to incorporating it in my performance classes.

Incorporating Rhythm Exercises

Like me, I'm sure many of you find that the biggest stumbling block when it comes to sight reading or learning a new piece of music with students is rhythm. This creates a number of problems. In a previous article I wrote for *String Notes*, I laid out a "hierarchy of sight-reading." The top of the hierarchy is rhythm, for it matters not if students are playing correct notes or with dynamic contrast if they aren't playing "together." For most students, rhythm is inherently difficult and the aspect of a piece they are most likely to learn by rote. Students need the practice of reading rhythms and understanding how to break them down and count them. My colleagues at Roseville Area High School and I have spent a number of years developing and revising a rhythm curriculum to give students a better understanding of (and more confidence in) reading rhythm.

The rhythm curriculum is a sequentially difficult tour through different rhythm values, combinations, and time signatures. Each rhythm worksheet provides a number of examples (typically one bar in length) that are identified by letter. I always start by simply sight-reading the entire worksheet on an open string (one bar of rest between each example). After reading down the sheet, I'll highlight some of the particular rhythms that crashed and burned and we'll break them down and play them numerous times in an isolated fashion. This same process will happen two or three times on separate days before moving on to identifying rhythms by their corresponding letter on the worksheet. For identification, I'll pick varying examples (often focusing on the examples that gave us trouble through the sight-reading process). After an adequate level of proficiency is reached on identifying rhythms, we then move on to dictation exercises that feature the types of rhythm patterns/level of difficulty of the current worksheet. While the ultimate goal is proficiency with two bar dictation examples, I'll also occasionally include one bar dictation "nuggets" for easier practice and four bar examples to really challenge them.

Incorporating Written Theory

While the thought of music theory might conjure up bad memories from your college days of staying up all night trying to wrap your head around really difficult concepts, we're not talking about that kind of theory. No secondary dominants, augmented sixth chords, or chain modulations here. Our students should simply grasp some basic written theory elements that will give them a well-rounded understanding of music and aid in their performance.

The first step in incorporating written theory? Assure that everyone is comfortable with reading musical notation. It seems like a given, but I'm sure most of us could name a couple students in our ensembles who we suspect have trouble reading notation or flat out know they can't do it. This is also a good opportunity to have students learn to read more than their own clef. Next, I tend to focus on identifying whole steps and half steps and identifying and building major and minor scales. Finally, we address the matter of key signatures. I start by going through the process of identifying both major and minor keys (there are a number of "shortcuts" or "formulas" you can teach them) and then work on the process of drawing key signatures (including their correct notation on the staff).

For all of these concepts, repetition is a must. Create worksheets, use online resources like musictheory.net, write examples on the board, or have students create their own examples for class use. With older or more advanced students, don't be afraid to delve into chord construction and basic Roman numeral analysis. Put part of the score of a piece you are working on in front of them and see if they can make some sense of it. Conductors are not the only people who can really benefit from basic score study and analysis!

Incorporating Ear Training

I can't tell you how many times I've been frustrated during a playing test when I ask to hear a minor scale and the student plays a major scale (or some sort of strange hybrid between the two). A few years ago, I finally came to the conclusion that it needs to be formally addressed with many students. If they don't ever receive training on identifying the sound of a minor or major scale, how can we expect them to really know the difference?

Like with written theory, we're just talking about incorporating some basics. I have never approached melodic or harmonic dictation with students, though that is certainly something to think about with advanced students. There are three areas that I want my students to be comfortable in when it comes to ear training. First, they should be able to distinguish by ear the intervals of minor and major seconds (half and whole steps). Second, students should be able to distinguish by ear major and minor scales. With my more advanced orchestra, we also work on distinguishing by ear natural,

harmonic, and melodic minor variations. Third, students should be able to distinguish by ear basic triad sonorities (including diminished and augmented triads).

As with written theory, there are numerous ways to practice this with your ensemble. My favored approach is using the ear training exercises on musictheory.net.

They are quick, easy, and very customizable. In addition, using this in class shows how easy it is to use on their own at home for additional practice.

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