

All-State: Developing Chamber Music Interest and Participation with Accountability and Responsibility

presented by Ray Shows — reported by Spencer Frie

Ray Shows, notable violinist and founding member of the Artaria String Quartet, led an incredibly engaging and passionate session on the methods by which string teachers can develop chamber music interest in their students. Ray described the aspects of chamber music that he believes to be most valuable to young string players and discussed the best ways to bring those aspects to fruition. The presentation emphasized accountability and methods by which instructors can make students accountable for their own success, thereby enjoying all the incredible “side effects” of chamber music.

Ray Shows is a coordinator for the Artaria Chamber Music School, an organization that routinely produces string players on track for careers in the performance realm. The presentation used the Artaria Chamber Music School as a model by which string teachers can structure their own coaching sessions of string students. Ray Shows stressed that in his program, players develop most notably in the following ways: improved performance skills, enhanced team and collaborative skills, boosted self-esteem, and increased sense of individual accountability. I thought it was important to note, though not surprising, that the intensive musical training received at Artaria Chamber Music School does not only result in increased musical skills, but skills transferrable and essential to success in any field. This is a primary reason, I think, that regular study of chamber music belongs in school orchestra programs; chamber music develops students into better musicians and into more responsible, sensible, and sensitive human beings.

In his session, Ray described the process by which the Artaria String Quartet coaches its most advanced ensembles. Appropriate selection of literature was discussed, but also raised questions of my own. How can teachers best approach situations in which students in a chamber music ensemble have selected music they would like to play, but

the repertoire is too easy or too difficult? Situations arise in which a fine line must be walked to avoid discouraging a student from participating in chamber music. Obviously, logistics in the ways of rehearsal space and time also made Ray’s list of crucial first steps.

I was particularly intrigued by Ray’s idea to “identify your strong leadership and tap these players as chamber music assistants.” I think that this is especially important for his program, in which Artaria String Quartet members cannot meet with all student groups. In addition to this, Ray has access to unusually talented string players who do not exist with the same frequency in school programs. I believe that in my chamber music curriculum, leadership is necessary and important, but may take a different form. Group leaders can be selected and be asked to create rehearsal plans for their group, involving them in the structure of their time with me. Perhaps leadership in this role can be traded amongst the musicians, so that all members are held accountable. Strong leaders who have different lesson times can assist in coaching peer ensembles. It has been my impression that students learn quite a lot about their own playing and tendencies by acting in a teacher role.

Ray listed his primary targets in chamber music coaching: tone quality, intonation, articulation, ensemble and balance, and phrasing ideas. Student accountability in my own program would be simple to encourage and incorporate using these broad concepts. Perhaps each quartet member would be responsible for a rehearsal plan that focuses on a single aspect. Quartet members might be asked to listen for a single aspect during their rehearsal, and then four broad areas could be discussed and synthesized in a single meeting. I believe in the power of efficiency; developing clear goals and tasks for students to accomplish (always maintaining a future goal or eventual outcome to which students

can look forward) makes students accountable and efficient.

Ray Shows described his Group Recording Bag, an all-important collection of recording tools that are used at every single rehearsal. Musicians are able to easily record and then listen individually to their work. I am especially impressed with the idea that while listening to their work, students suddenly find themselves in their own personal world of focus and are often their most honest and vocal source of criticism. This tool to develop accountability also demonstrates to students their progress in a clear, tangible manner.

In my own orchestra program, final performances may most commonly take place at orchestra concerts themselves. I think it is important to make chamber music as public as possible; the feat of performing solo lines together without a conductor is enormous, especially for student musicians. Ray made a special point to suggest students never play chamber music as a background event. I think that there is certainly value in students recognizing the importance and magnitude of their work, however I do feel a responsibility to offer as many opportunities to perform as possible. I struggle with the notion of turning down opportunities for my students as an act of pride. Perhaps background chamber music performances can be viewed as a rehearsal of sorts; approaching the situation with a goal of self-evaluation and reflection can be a compromise.

I was so glad to have the opportunity to attend Ray’s presentation. With his ideas and approach to teaching chamber music, I feel energized to include this incredible genre into my own orchestra program immediately.

Spencer Frie is a graduate of St. John’s University where he studied cello with Lucia Magney. He is now teaching at Brainerd High School. †