



ORCHESTRA

Engaging Student Listening: The Conductor as Facilitator

by Christopher Jannings

Regardless of student level, type of ensemble or level of your conducting experience, we've probably all been there. No matter how hard you beat the pattern or clap your hands, the kids just can't keep the beat. No matter how many times you discuss ensemble balance or matching articulation, the kids just can't get it quite right. While conductors are occasionally indispensable and metronomes can certainly have an appropriate place in ensemble preparation, perhaps the most effective strategy to improve the nuts and bolts of your ensemble's performance is for you to take a step back. This article explores the philosophy of the conductor as a facilitator in student musicianship and growth.

In my first few years of teaching and conducting, I can vividly remember moments of breaking baton tips from tapping them on music stands or leaving rehearsal with sore shoulders after trying to physically will the orchestra to play in time. It stood to reason that really emphasizing the beat would get the students to watch more carefully and realize that something was amiss. I came to learn, however, that the opposite is often true. If pulse is an issue, lighten up and don't "force" the beat upon the musicians. If a fast, off-string passage continually drags, conduct a more horizontal and smooth pattern. Perhaps most effective? Stop conducting all together. If you haven't really tried it, it may sound a little crazy or counter-intuitive, but there really is no better way to get your ensemble to listen more effectively. An added bonus to the improved ensemble pulse, of course, is that this increased ensemble awareness and listening will pay dividends in other

ways. More uniform articulation, better balance and blend, and increased phrasing should all result from this increased level of musicianship.

It all comes down to putting more of the responsibility of pulse and musicianship on the members of your ensemble. Too often, I see conductors frantically beat the pattern thinking that is their job. I frequently remind my ensembles these days that the conductor is not there to "keep the beat," but rather direct traffic or facilitate the performance. I'll be the first to admit that I don't always achieve my goal of less-is-more conducting, but I attempt to stay out of the way as best I can. With this in mind, here are a few suggestions on implementing this philosophy with your students:

Work on strengthening internal pulse and ensemble communication.

An exercise that I like to call "keep the beat" works well. I will play a metronome over the speakers or audibly keep the beat myself and ask the students to "lock in." After a while, I will simply say "1" and remove the audible beat. The students are responsible for silently counting 2, 3, 4 and playing on the next "1." I start with 4 beat preparations, move to 8 beat preparations, and occasionally try 12 beat preparations. Obviously, the more beats of preparation, the more difficult it is for an ensemble to keep a common internalized beat. What the students quickly learn, of course, is that they need to do something to help them stay together. This is where watching, breathing and moving come into play. To effectively start together, the students will need to give a visual and audible preparatory beat before the down

beat. I have found that it really helps students develop both a sense of internal pulse and understand what an ensemble needs to do to really play together.

Engage the musicians in your ensemble in creative and artistic decision making.

Discuss musical elements with your ensemble and take suggestions for phrasing, balance and blend, and (purposeful) tempo fluctuation. With experience, students will begin to do this organically when playing without a conductor.

Give your students an opportunity to play chamber music.

The benefits of chamber music experience speak for themselves and are directly aligned with the listening and musicianship skills that students need to become mature musicians. I often remind my orchestras that a large orchestra should simply be thought of as a large chamber ensemble.

Jump off the deep end!

Take a chance and go for it. Your students may need a bit of time to adjust, but they can do it. Obviously, student age and experience level will play a role in the amount this philosophy can be implemented, but even younger elementary students can begin to do this. Why not start getting them to think about this at a young age? It will pay dividends for your district's program as they mature.

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