

ALL STATE: MIDDLE SCHOOL ORCHESTRA TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR LEARNING AND ENGAGEMENT

presented by Julie Vanderstappen — reported by Kathryn Buccola and Sarah Duffy

Middle school orchestra teachers are always looking for new strategies that will give students a concrete way to track their own learning as well as new ways to engage their students in the learning process. Julie Vanderstappen's session at the 2016 MNSOTA All-State Orchestra Workshop gave teachers these new strategies. Julie teaches orchestra grades 6–9 in the Stillwater Area Schools. Her orchestras have received numerous awards and recognition including invitations to the MNSOTA Middle Level Festival Tier II performances at Orchestra Hall and the World Strides Heritage Festival in Chicago.

Classroom setup

Julie starts the year in rows with all grades, 6–9. She uses a scavenger hunt for the older students to find their seat, using personal tidbits on cards on the back of the chairs. Every student has their own stand. They have to “earn” the professional set up. This is a great way for the teacher to walk around and connect with each student. It is important to be specific about where you want all of their stuff to go so it is easy to walk around. One suggestion was case on the left, skinny part towards the back so the student is able to open the case easily. If you have a student who always sits back in their chair, put the case on the chair behind them.

Tuning procedure

The student leader tunes with a red Snark tuner (different than the other colors, cheapest price is about \$13) and then plays four open As, the class echoes. Then, D, G, C (violin leader plays C on the G string), E bass (leader plays 1st finger on the D string because it's easier to match. If the bass section is having a hard time hearing, have them play a 4-count down bow to tune because it can be easier than the four quarter notes.), E violin.

Jim Hainlen said it's important to tune in two different ways. Tuning Round 2 is: C string whole note down and up, G string same thing, D string same thing, A string, E string. The group plays two cycles of this, up and down.

Warm Ups

Scales Rounds, Drone, Rhythms, Upside Down

To teach scales Julie varies the how the scales are performed. She does one-octave scales in rounds, upside down (from the top of the scale to the bottom), with a tonic drone, in rounds and rhythms. Two bows per pitch. It's another way to get repetition on scales and introduce interesting harmonies to the students. To help teach scales she also uses finger maps to help teach pattern awareness as well as rote teaching and other worksheets to give students a visual representation of the concept they are learning. It is these visuals that help students clearly identify what they are learning.

For threeoctave scales, basses have two options. If there is a strong player, they can play three octaves. Otherwise, they go two up, one down, one up, two down. Split the class and have cellos/violas play C while violins/bass play G. This keeps everyone in the right key for them and still playing this is better than having students sit and wait.

Finger Pattern Drills

Have the students play up and down each string three times in 8th notes in the pattern for the scale. The last note on each string is held for two counts with the third count of the measure being a bow lift during a quarter rest. Start on the lowest string represented in the ensemble. The basses work from high string to low string and must shift on each string into III position. Cello must shift to IV position on the last note on each string.

- introduction: one string or two strings in the same interval pattern using finger map.
- next: two strings with pattern change
- next: entire drill within the key signature The finger map of these scales are often projected or posted for students to follow along.
- advanced work: combine violins in III position while others stay in I position. Bass would either play E string drill alone or end drill early.

Etudes

Julie likes to use etudes to check student accuracy. A few of her favorite books are:

- *Solos & Etudes Book 1 & 2* Anderson & Frost
- *String Techniques for SMP* Frost
- *A Rhythm a Week* Anne C. Witt

Notereading

To teach notereading, Julie has several techniques. She uses Note Spellers, which is a worksheet where students are asked to identify 4-6 notes. On the worksheet students should draw their clef each time; copy the notes exactly as pictured with regard to rhythm, stem, accidentals, etc.; identify where the notes live on their instrument, and play them in class. Students can practice note identification and music notation at the same time.

Also to teach note reading, Julie uses group flash cards created with presentation software like Power Point that are projected on the wall using a projector. On each slide is all four instruments' note so all instruments can participate at the same time. Other activities that can be used to teach note reading include computer games Kahoots and Staff Wars.

Labeling Rhythm

When teaching counting, Julie uses a rhythm tree and teaches students to write in counting with numbers and subdivisions. In Stillwater, they “label” the counting as opposed to “writing” the counting. It is a language choice. Her rules of counting are as follows:

- Label every beat in the measure (1, 2, 3, 4 should all be present)
- Eighth notes are subdivided using 1& 2& 3& 4&
- 16ths are 1e&a
- Triplets are 1lali or 1triplet (not 1&a)
- Rhythms that begin or end partway through a beat are labeled using the subdivision on which the note begins

Shifting Goals

Why do we play in positions? To extend the range, vary tone color, avoid open strings, add vibrato

How are positions named? Location of first finger determines position. Positions are labeled with Roman Numerals; (this gets the whole class using the same language.)

Practice the shift. Identify positions and fingerings. What do we already know?

Thumb moves with the hand (compare to escalator)

Observation Sheets and Study Guides

Julie also uses Observation sheets and Study Guides to guide students through the skills and concepts they are learning through the pieces they are playing. For example, in her *Goin' to Boston* Observations worksheet she asks students to draw the time signature and label how many counts are per measure as well as what kind of rhythm gets the count. Students are also asked to draw their clef and key signature. In addition students are asked to draw a finger map of the key signature and label a few measures

of counting.

A Study Guide is similar. For a specific piece it would include the time signature, key signature, scale (which would include the finger pattern drill and finger pattern identification), techniques that are featured in the piece, rhythms, dynamics, musical terms, and excerpts. For example an excerpt is printed out for all instruments in unison that occurs in the first violins. This gives all students a chance to practice and learn the challenging part.

Julie likes using certain pieces from year to year because they are wonderful teaching tools. She does not use a method book. Everything is supplemental and she pulls from multiple sources. She buys classroom sets of multiple method books instead of lots of new music from year to year.

Keeping it New, but Continuing the Work

Create a new exercise for students to reinforce key concepts. Help students learn

something they already know.

Assessment

The students all have a 3-ring binder with five dividers. Warm Ups (scales, technique, etc.), Orchestra Music, Assessment, Theory, Other (handbook). Students are responsible for providing their own binder and dividers. They are provided if they can't afford it, or the student pays \$1.

Julie was amazed at how much assessment improved student learning. It let her know what the students know, and it motivated the students to focus more and strive for achievement. (Ric Geiger: "If you aren't assessing it, you aren't really teaching it.")

Julie Vanderstappen teaches orchestra grades 6–9 in the Stillwater Area Schools. Kathryn Buccola teaches in the South Washington County Schools. Sarah Duffy teaches in Mounds View School District. ‡