

Clinic: How to get Middle School Students Excited about Being in Orchestra

presented by Jennifer Arco Bellefeuille — reported by Faith Farr

Jen Arco Bellefeuille gave an energetic and fun 2-part presentation. Part 2: *How to Pick the “Right” Music* will be in the spring issue.

Her tips on getting middle schools excited about orchestra included lots of advice on giving 7th graders what they need as people. It is important to say what you want as a Director—set your expectations. For example, to avoid having girls check their hair when class is starting, tell them, “You can look in the mirror as long as you are ready for class by ___ time.” Seventh graders are usually having their first experience with different teachers for each subject, and they need to be treated as young adults. They need to be challenged intellectually, but may not be skill-ready for difficult music.

Jen feels her success comes because she connects with who the students are first, and then does the music. Jen has realized that she is primarily a teacher; and second-

arily a teacher of music.

Jen shared some of her rehearsal techniques by asking clinic attendees to choose an instrument we weren’t particularly good at, and settling in for a rehearsal of *Fancy Fiddles*. She kept us engaged with listening challenges and questions on what we had noticed.

In her school calendar, Jen programs a 3-week project between the fall concert and Christmas and asks each section of the orchestra to choose a holiday song as a section, and play it for the class. This project helps bonding, and the teacher will discover the personality of each section.

As a general bonding experience, Jen asks the students to say something nice to the teacher at the end of each day as they leave the classroom. That puts a good spin on what just happened in the rehearsal.

In discussing music selection, Jen cautioned against “over programming”—choosing music that is too hard for the

students. The teacher may get bored, but 7th grade is 7th grade, and students need to do all the steps. The *St. Paul’s Suite Jig* requires that students already have a big sound and developed technique. *Fancy Fiddles* may be a better choice if those requirements are not already in place.

Jen recommended the occasional silent rehearsal—to challenge students in a different way. Jen advocated giving students information that they need from you as a teacher, and then getting out of their way as a conductor.

If a student thinks that the orchestra music is “too easy,” Jen explains to them that, “It’s about the group; not about you.” Every player needs to get 100% of the notes, not 75% of a harder piece.

Jen Arco Bellefeuille teaches middle school in Owatonna. Faith Farr has been editor of this magazine since 1996. †