



ORCHESTRA

In Praise of Reviewing.

by Katie Gustafson

A few years ago I was teaching a small group lesson of sixth grade violin students. It was near the end of the school year and they asked me to teach them *America the Beautiful*. I decided it was a good choice, because it used several skills we had learned throughout the year, including dotted quarter note rhythms. When we started working on it, though, I was dismayed to find that most of the students in the lesson could not remember how to count dotted quarter note rhythm patterns, or even how long a dotted quarter note lasts. We had spent quite a bit of lesson time on these rhythm patterns, including counting out loud, clapping, performing a playing test, and even a creative comic in which I turned the notes of the rhythm into characters. So when I asked them to count the rhythm for me and their answers ranged from, “Three beats! No wait – Two and a half beats!” to “One beat?” to “umm...,” a little part of me died on the inside. We turned back in our lesson books to the page we had studied earlier, and with a great deal of coaxing and explaining, they eventually remembered what we had learned and were able to play *America the Beautiful*.

At the time the situation was quite frustrating, but I have learned to expect that students might forget some of the things that I teach them. Why? For the same reason that I cannot remember everything I crammed into my head before my geology final in college. I did fine on the test, but nearly all of the information I learned was only living in my short-term memory. As soon as I no longer needed it, it flew out of my head. So what can we as teachers do to help our students move their musical skills and

knowledge into long-term memory? There are many good strategies for this, but one of my favorites is frequent, strategic review.

It is common to reserve reviewing for times of test preparation, but I propose using it more often. Here are a few ways you could incorporate it into your orchestra rehearsals. First, consider adding review to your warm-up routine. If you typically do scales as a warm up, change it up a bit by using a different rhythm or bowing pattern each day. Invite students to try to figure out the correct way to count or play it without you first demonstrating it for them. This encourages them to try to remember what you may have previously taught them. It also will force them to engage with the material in a new context than they may have previously seen it. If you use more varied warm ups, consider taking short exercises from method books and prompting students to refresh a certain skill when they play it. You might choose an exercise that is technically simple, but useful for focusing on tone quality or vibrato.

Another way you can work it in is by including the material in multiple assessments throughout the school year, or even across multiple years. My favorite example of this is when I ask my beginner orchestra students to earn their “Bowing License.” When students first start their instruments in the fifth grade, we only pizzicato. Students usually fuss and complain about this, asking frequently why we don’t use the bow immediately. To this I reply (probably with more enjoyment than is strictly necessary), “Well, that would be against the law. You have not earned your bowing license yet.” I then get to watch them argue about whether

there really is any such law, and did I just make that up?

In order to earn the bowing license, students must be able to demonstrate a correct bow hold, do five wind shield wiper-like rotations without altering the bow hold, and then play a short open string exercise with good tone and no swerving. My students’ bow holds improved dramatically when they thought they were earning a license for accomplishing these things. (The license itself is business-card sized and prints easily on card stock. I would be happy to share the template if anyone is interested in trying it out.)

In spite of these efforts, the bow hold can still easily get sloppy over time. So, I have begun requiring them to renew their bowing license in their sixth grade year, and I make the requirements more difficult. In the sixth grade, they must also do a spider crawl up and down the bow and demonstrate slurs, ties and hooked bows. This is the first year that I have required the license renewal, and I am extremely glad that I did. Many bad habits have crept in over the last year, and I want to correct as many of them as possible before I send my students off to middle school.

Teaching strings in the public schools is tremendously challenging. Our time with students is short and our attention is often divided by countless demands. As tempting as it may be to say, “Who has time to review?” I hope that you will consider the benefits of working it in to your practice.

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