

All-State: Meet the 2017 Minnesota All-State Orchestra Conductor

presented by Miriam Burns — reported by Sarah Duffy, Cassandra Herold, Christopher Laue, Lisa St. Ores

Miriam Burns is Music Director and Conductor of the McLean Orchestra in Virginia as well as the Music Director of the Orchestra of the Redeemer in New York City. She explained having a good rehearsal plan is as essential as good conducting technique—and vice versa.

Ms. Burns feels that the prerequisite to being a conductor is proficiency on your instrument, because that demonstrates your ability to diagnose and fix a problem. Before she did a complete career change to conducting, she first received her degree in violin performance.

Before rehearsing any piece, conductors must know the score as much as possible before the first rehearsal and find out where the problems will be. Specifically she explained that most likely they will occur during the musical transitions. Interestingly, many times, different conductors typically have to stop at the very same places in the music while rehearsing. Knowing that can alleviate the pressure you may feel about having to stop and rehearse an area, especially a transition.

Workable bowings and marking parts are both very important. Even marking the way in which you will conduct and what pattern you use is very helpful. She also had a clear understanding that school teachers do not have access to the resources that she might enjoy—sectional coaches, someone to do the photocopying, write in the bowings, a music librarian, etc. These tasks are still very important—we must take the time to do them as part of the rehearsal preparation, so students get the most out of class times.

She explained that as a conductor it is

particularly helpful to be very specific with string students about how to use the bow. The more detailed, the better. An example: up bow does not mean to start at the tip—it is a direction. Be clear with where in the bow you want students to start.

She highly encouraged lessons if the conductor is not a string player—to get a sense of the many ways that a rhythm or musical indication can be interpreted. This will help the conductor to more effectively communicate with the orchestra. As an example, she talked about many different variations in bowing dotted rhythms, including separate bows, hooked bows, and at the tip starting on an up bow (the shoeshine method). Conductors must know what they want for articulation and communicate that to the string section.

Detailed planning of your rehearsal schedule is also important. Ms. Burns likes to be very respectful of people's times. Rehearse large to small. Break the piece apart for maximum effectiveness; even the pros will break things down in slow motion. We need to help the group demystify the challenging spots. Walk through the pieces visually with ensemble members. Rehearse in a way that allows the conductor to fix

what needs to be fixed while trusting the musicians to fix what they can fix on their own.

Ms. Burns recommended not going with the orchestra because they will drag you down. What she meant by this was that the musicians will always be reacting to the beat instead of being exactly with the conductor. If a conductor adjusts to be with them, then the problem compounds until the tempo is slower.

Conducting is both Function and Style—sometimes a group needs a strong and solid gesture, and sometimes groups need more style and expression. Sometimes, you will need to be able to fix something using only gesture, such as in a performance. Make sure you can do this!

She encouraged us to help our students listen across the orchestra and really pay attention to who has the melody, etc. Have students play a lot of chamber music.

She also recommended two conducting texts to read: *Inside Conducting* by Christopher Seaman and Elizabeth Green's *6th Edition of Introduction to Conducting*.

Sarah Duffy teaches in Mounds View School District. Cassandra Herold and Lisa St. Ores teach in the Stillwater School District. ‡

