

All-State: The Habits of a Successful Orchestra Teacher: Long Range Planning & Units in Orchestra Class

presented by Christopher Selby — reported by Kathryn Buccola

At the 2019 MNSOTA All State Workshop, headline presenter Dr. Christopher Selby asked the workshop participants this question: We know what we want to rehearse, but what are we supposed to teach? This is a great question. Many orchestra teachers know what pieces they want to rehearse with students, but this often gets in the way of teaching fundamental skills. Or we believe that through the literature, students will learn all of the skills they need to be independent and successful string musicians. If we think logically about this, we know it isn't true. We need to have a plan to comprehensively teach skills and concepts.

Dr. Selby encouraged the workshop participants to make a realistic, long range plan that is broken into units. Examples of units could be tone and articulation, left hand patterns, scales and arpeggios, literacy and creativity, and concert music. Each unit will likely have different parts and should include both an end goal and a final assessment. Dr. Selby also encourages orchestra teachers to think of units differently than other subject areas and communicate this difference to administration. Unlike a subject like history, music units are not taught linearly. Instead, they are all taught at the same time. Subjects are introduced at different times, but then slowly all are worked on and developed over the course of the year. The units will overlap and connections between units can be made.

Tone and Articulation

One unit Dr. Selby highly recommends orchestra teachers use is Tone and Articulation. Tone is why we love our instruments. We enjoy the sound they produce. Often this is the forgotten unit because it is overshadowed by the left hand and the many notes the left hand must help generate. It might also be forgotten because it isn't seen on the page. When looking at music you don't see an indication of tone; only notes, rhythms, and dynamics.

Tone and articulation are produced through several methods. They include the right hand position (the bow hold), the use

of the bow (the angle, contact point, and part of the bow used) the tone projection, and the articulation. Dr. Selby recommends reviewing the bow hold every day and especially recommends teaching students to look at it upside down. He calls this "rest position." Dr. Selby also recommends encouraging students to think about tuning tone. He believes that before students can match pitch they need to match tone. Therefore the bow speed, weight and contact point need to match.

Tuning and Intonation

Another unit, although it is related to tone, is tuning or intonation. Dr. Selby highly recommends after students tune themselves individually the ensemble participates in cross tuning. This involves everyone checking their A to make sure it is perfect and then having the cellos and violas play D while violins and basses continue with A. Then the players switch so violins and basses tune their D. Next, violins and basses continue on D while cellos and violas move on to G. Again the groups switch. Then violins and basses continue on G while violas and cellos move to C. Finally the violas and cellos play A while the violins and basses tune E. Basses may want to end with double checking their strings using harmonics.

Rhythm and Pulse

Rhythm is another right hand technique unit, however it is also a literacy unit. Dr. Selby recommends teaching students the difference between pulse and rhythm. Strategies to teach rhythm include teaching students how to count the pulse first, then how to perform the rhythm over the pulse with their bow hand. Count out loud using the smallest denomination used in the music. Then while counting out loud encourage students to perform the rhythm with their bow. Air bowing, then open string bowing, then the pitched musical phrase. This is a good sequence. If needed, students can pizzicato the phrase before bowing. The biggest benefit of counting out loud while performing the rhythm is it teaches students

to count through long notes or long rests. These are the places students typically stop counting and therefore err. Dr. Selby also encourages teachers to avoid repetition when working on counting excerpts. This prevents students from learning the counting through copying instead of counting skills.

Concert Music

Concert Music is another unit for an orchestra class. Many orchestra teachers consider concert music their curriculum. They plan to teach orchestra concepts and skills through concert music. Dr. Selby doesn't recommend this practice because it often leads to music that is too difficult to learn and polish before the concert. A key point Dr. Selby makes is that teaching students how to play notes and rhythms is not making music. The concert unit should be about teaching students how to make music together in an ensemble. He recommends teaching the skills and concepts needed to play concert music during fundamentals time. Fundamentals time should be about 50% of instructional time and concert music should be about 50% of instructional time.

The 2019 MNSOTA All State Workshop headlining clinician, Dr. Christopher Selby, is a frequent presenter and active in the string orchestra education community. He is the author of Habits of a Successful String Musician, a book and method book series for middle level and upper level orchestras. Dr. Selby earned a music education degree from the Hartt School of Music in Connecticut and Master and Doctorate degrees from the University of North Carolina. Dr. Selby currently teaches high school orchestra in Charleston, North Carolina. He has previously taught all levels of orchestra in traditional public schools.

Kathryn Buccola teaches at Lake Middle School, S. Washington County School District, Woodbury. ♪