

TEACHING ORCHESTRA ONLINE

by Cristina Seaborn

For the last two months I have been teaching orchestra at seven schools in Saint Cloud, covering for a maternity leave. These include elementary, junior high, and high school orchestra classes. The teacher asked me to prepare her orchestras to be performance ready when she returns. We went to distance learning two weeks ago and have been rehearsing orchestra on Zoom.

I created student-directed class lesson plans that are working well on Zoom and that I would like to share these with you. There are three major elements in our junior high and high school orchestra classes: Performer Reports, music theory, and repertoire.

At the junior high and high school level, I assigned Performer Reports. I find the performer that would personally interest each student. The student had the option to choose another performer on their instrument from the one I had assigned them.

A student starts each orchestra class with an introduction to a performer on their instrument. Then they describe what the musician did to become an excellent musician. They show a 3-5 minute YouTube video of the performer, followed by what they like about the performance. Afterwards, there is a question and answer period with their classmates.

To prepare the class, I shared this document with the students:

Performer Report

Give a report in class about somebody famous who plays your instrument.

- 1) Name of the Performer.
- 2) Birthday and lifespan if they are no longer living. e.g. Jascha Heifetz (1901 - 1987)
- 3) Talk about what the person did to become a professional musician and performer.
- 4) Present YouTube video of a live performance.
- 5) Say what you like about the video.
- 6) Q & A with class.

Each student was assigned a date in advance so we would be done by the midterm. Here is an example:

- Grade 7 & 8 String Ensemble member: Lucas
- Performer: Niccolò Paganini
- Date of your presentation for class: November 17
- YouTube video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CjDz-r65xUU>

In orchestra class, once we are done with the Performer Reports, we work on our music theory worksheet for the week. With these excellent resources available created, why wait until college to start understanding music theory? *Basic Music Theory and History for Strings* by Wendy Barden & Terry Shade, KJOS. *Workbook 1* is for junior high school level while *Workbook 2* is for the high school level.

For theory practice, I transposed *Joy to the World* into six different keys, following the circle of fifths up to four sharps, then two flat keys (C, G, D, A, E, F, B \flat). I choose one student to start playing the first key of C. I ask these two questions: What key has no sharps or flats? What is the relative minor key to C major? I explain that the relative minor is two notes down from the major key. Each

high school student answers questions about the key they are about to model for the class, and the relative minor. For the junior high orchestra, we only did the major key.

One student plays the melody while everybody else mutes, then picks the next student for the next key. I explained that relative keys are like your family relatives. You share the same genes with your brothers, sisters, mom and dad. Relative keys share the same notes.

Since the string instruments are tuned in fifths, we can use the strings to help us learn the circle of fifths. The low C string on the viola and cello is the key with no sharps or flats. The key with one sharp is the key of G, the low string on the violin. The key with two sharps is the key of D, three sharps is the key of A, and four sharps is the key of E. Since the bass is tuned in fourths, the pattern works in reverse! 4ths and 5ths are inverse intervals.

I tell the students this to figure out the flat key signature: the key with one flat is the first letter of the word flat. After that, the second to last flat from the right is the key.

After we finish with theory, we do our repertoire of ten pieces for the high school and four pieces for the junior high school orchestras. I upload the recordings into the chat. I have one student choose the first piece, then play the YouTube video of the recording from their computer. They have to give a count off before pressing the play button. Then they pick the next student who will choose the next piece to rehearse.

We hear the student playing with the recording, while everybody else who plays along is muted. At least for that three minutes of class each student has quality audio!

I am really enjoying this ping pong approach, where the students choose what piece we rehearse next. We have enough variety of repertoire to keep things interesting, as the order we rehearse keeps changing.

On the YouTube recordings, occasionally the tempo is too fast for the orchestra to rehearse with. You can slow down the speed of the YouTube recording by clicking on the gear icon, then bringing down the speed. Usually, 75% slower is the right speed for the students to be able to play along.

For seasonal repertoire, I would like to recommend *Christmas Kaleidoscope* by Robert S. Frost, KJOS. There is a melody with two harmony parts. Christmas carols are familiar melodies to most students and are great for sight reading. The student who chooses the piece plays the melody. The rest of the students have the option to play melody, or either of the harmony parts. Only one student is unmuted, so the experience for the student is a duet.

Of course, there are times when I rehearse a certain section without using a recording, but student-directed learning has created a great camaraderie in the class. While the students are playing through a piece, I focus on the exact part of the student who is playing. I call out measure numbers to help when anybody is lost.

Elementary Orchestra

At the elementary level, each student has a private lesson on Zoom. Many students are learning how to hold their bow. I ask them to show me their bow hold up close to the camera. I model my bow hold too. It was a challenge to have the bow facing the right direction, and the hand approaching the bow the right way! Zoom has an option for a mirror image on the video which was helpful.

To get mirror image, choose the up arrow to the right of the stop video icon (looks like a camera on the bottom left). Click on video options, then click on mirror image.

With the elementary students, music bucks are given every time they practice for ten minutes. The music bucks are used to buy things in the music store, including treats, games and prizes. This was motivating for students. They often want to save their music bucks in their case rather than spend them all at once. Since we are in distance learning, the students are really going to be getting a lot of music bucks the next time they see their teacher in person! They might buy the whole music store!

The biggest challenge at the elementary level string players has been tuning the instrument with distance learning on Zoom. When we were in person learning, I worked on teaching them how to look at the tuner, know if the string is sharp, flat, or in tune, then how to turn the fine tuners clockwise or counterclockwise. Sometimes I have helped elementary students on Zoom use the tuning pegs when the string is very loose. Some have actually succeeded in applying enough pressure as they turn to keep the peg in place. Other times, I ask the student to find an adult for help.

Tuning on Zoom

- 1) Follow the string to find the correct tuning peg.
- 2) Don't go past the note or you may overtighten and break the string.
- 3) The peg is tapered with a friction fit. For each peg, one hole in the peg box is bigger and one is smaller.
- 4) It is really important to be continuously plucking the string to hear the notes as you tighten the string.
- 5) Know what the string sounds like when it is in tune. I play the note on Zoom for the student using my instrument.
- 6) Apply pressure gradually as you turn the peg, especially when you are getting close to being in tune.
- 7) Sometimes I need to apply pressure with both hands on both sides of the neck to get the peg to stay in place.
- 8) Once you are close to being in tune, use your bow, the fine tuners, and a tuner, for the finishing touches.

Zoom Tips

Your sound input and output can be brought to the highest level by clicking the up arrow to the right of the mute button which looks like a microphone. Go to audio settings. Slide the fader all the way

to the right for both output volume and input volume.

To prepare for students screen sharing on Zoom, choose the up arrow to the right of "Share Screen." Select the "advanced sharing options" and click on "all participants." This allows students to share their screen. The quality can be better overall if the student chooses "play computer audio." Click on "share screen" and you will see "play computer audio" on the bottom right corner.

Expert at fiddling and jazz improvisation, Cristina Seaborn holds a Bachelor of Music Degree in jazz violin performance from Berklee College of Music in Boston, and a Masters in Conducting for Orchestra from St. Cloud State University. She has produced an instructional video for fiddling through Mel Bay entitled Anyone Can Play Country Fiddle, CDs entitled Inside the Heart of a Musician, Seaborn Breeze, and Spirit Wind, and many arrangements for string orchestra of fiddle music, jazz, Celtic, Scandinavian, Cajun, and original. Cristina is a violinist and fiddler with over thirty years of experience. In symphonies, quartets, jazz ensembles, and folkrock bands, her musical background includes influences in classical, jazz, Celtic, bluegrass and Texas swing fiddle. ♪