



# ORCHESTRA

## Keeping Advanced Students Motivated in School Orchestra

by Dan Mollick

I have always had to be creative about how to motivate the most advanced students in middle school orchestra. At the school where I teach, all of the students, regardless of their playing level, are in the same class. This has presented challenges over the years, and though I haven't found a perfect solution, I have found some ideas that have worked well for the advanced students in my classroom. My question is: How can I provide rigor for advanced students and keep them motivated so that they remain in the school orchestra program from elementary through middle and into high school.

It goes without saying that every student is different. Some students with advanced skills are happy to teach other students, demonstrate for the class, or lead a sectional. Other advanced students are perfectly happy blending in with the rest of the group. Many advanced students do not want more work from their school orchestra teacher, because of their workload with private lessons and youth orchestra music.

Respecting what works for each student is important and that starts with building positive relationships with these students. This means knowing who their private lesson teachers are, what pieces they are working on, what youth orchestra they play in, and why they participate in school orchestra. I remind myself these students have elected to take school orchestra knowing they are in class with less experienced musicians.

Below, I offer 10 practical, actionable ideas for connecting with, providing rigor for, and retaining the most experienced students in orchestra. I teach middle school but most of these ideas can be tailored for elementary or high school settings.

### Build a Positive Relationship.

I list this as number one because it is always number one! As teachers, we need to have daily conversations with students by checking in with them before, during, and after class. Connecting with students is our number one priority because they will feel

welcome and included in orchestra class. Conversation starters for advanced students:

- What new solo are you working on and what's the biggest challenge for you?
- What youth orchestra are you in? What pieces are you playing?
- Do you have a video of your last recital performance? I'd love to see it!

It's also important to provide opportunities for students to connect with one another. Playing in an ensemble is a team effort and we need to continue to help foster that team building.

### Resident Expert.

Involve the student with helping others in class by asking them to tutor another student, demonstrate specific skills in class, or lead sectionals. When teaching a new skill you might ask them to share with the class what they have learned from their private teacher so the class can learn from this expertise (I have learned so many great tricks this way!) Not all students want to teach others, lead, or be singled out in any way. Plan to talk with the student (See Idea #1!) before asking them to do any of these things.

### Special Ensembles and Events.

MNSOTA offers a lot of amazing opportunities for students. I also offer enrichment opportunities for students at school. Here are a few ideas:

- Middle Level Honors Orchestra and All-State Orchestra: For both of these, it's important to plan ahead. I like to use a "Project Plan Organizer" with students, especially those who might play advanced violin music but lack executive skills to plan long term! I offer these students coaching sessions before the due date and give them specific details as to when we will record at school and how many takes they will get.

- Start a school chamber orchestra, pit orchestra, quartet, etc.
- Create a studio class where students play for one another and give each other feedback. This is also an opportunity for these students to bond.

### Melody Sheets.

For each concert cycle, I select one or two pieces that can be turned into a page of unison melodies for all of the instrument parts. All the instruments play the same melody in unison and I adjust the ranges as needed. This is most useful for students who might be assigned parts where they might not have many melodies in the music. I add other exercises on the back side of the melody sheet such as rhythms, bowing exercises, scales that correlate with skills needed to perform the piece. Occasionally, I will assign melodies as playing assessments—especially for bass, which may not have the most exciting part!

### Create your own Solo and Ensemble Festival.

This is a great opportunity for advanced students to shine! They are able to select their own music to play and receive feedback from a judge. Many high school programs already have access to an organized Solo and Ensemble Festival but most middle and elementary school programs do not. In my school district, we have run an internal Solo and Ensemble event for grades 7-9 for many years and it has been quite successful. If you are interested in setting up your own Solo and Ensemble event, I'm happy to share my resources.

### Advanced Edition Parts.

Do students sometimes complain that the music is too easy? I often choose one piece from our concert and create an "Advanced Edition." The music contains shifting and position work that might not be in the original part from the publisher. Occasionally, I reach out to local private teachers to

help me with this.

### **Secondary Instrument.**

For one or two pieces, you can ask a violinist to switch to viola or have a cellist switch to bass. It's best to offer this on an "easy" piece for the concert. I find that it's best to offer this to students who are independent learners and offer to check up on them frequently at the beginning of their transition and less frequently as they build their skills on their secondary instrument.

### **Leveled Playing Assessments.**

For some playing assessments, I have students self-select the way they would like to demonstrate the skill we are learning in class. Here is an example:

7<sup>th</sup> Grade Orchestra, Slurs Assessment

- Level 1: *London Symphony (Essential Elements Book 2, #5)*
- Level 2: *Chester (Essential Elements Book 2, #13)*
- Level 3: Your Choice. Must be

approved by the teacher no later than one week before the assessment is due. Please include a digital copy of your music with your recording.

### **Individual Practice time.**

My teaching space allows for students to practice on their own (I have two practice rooms that can be used for this). Before allowing a student to practice on their own, they are required to state a purpose for their practice. I check in with any student who is practicing on their own during class by having them record themselves for accountability and feedback. This can easily be done using Loom or a shared Google Folder. You might need to rotate with other students but know this can open up a can of worms because other students might want this option, too!

### **Let it go.**

Sometimes it's best to just let a student leave the program. In these cases, I've tried my best

to provide rigor and keep the students motivated and they just don't seem to want to stay. So I give myself some grace and let it go.

### **Let's learn from one another!**

I'm sure there are many more ideas to share! Please use the QR code to share your ideas that have worked on my Google Form. Or you can see ideas that others have shared by going to the ideas board. Thanks for contributing!



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