



ORCHESTRA

Interview with Angela Harman, Orchestra Teacher and Author of Orchestra Classroom Blog

by Dan Mollick

In this issue, we are highlighting Angela Harman, orchestra teacher and author of the blog Orchestra Classroom. Angela is a middle school teacher in Utah but has also taught high school students. This spring, Angela presented Extreme Makeover: Orchestra Edition at the ASTA National Conference, March 16-19. I had a blast interviewing Angela! She is funny, authentic, and cares deeply about her orchestra students and program. I recommend checking out Angela's blog, which you can find at orchestraclassroom.com. There are a lot of great ideas for games and other fun classroom activities. You can also purchase teaching resources from her website. And now on to the interview!

Dan Mollick: Tell us a little about your professional background and why you became an orchestra teacher.

Angela Harman: I am a product of a school orchestra program in Midland, Michigan. I started when I was in elementary school in fifth grade because my friend wanted to learn the violin and I tagged along. Music quickly became my passion and I sought to learn more instruments and develop my skills. Eventually, I made the switch to viola from violin (which my parents thought was very rebellious). I was going to major in music composition and after pulling a bunch of all-nighters to meet deadlines, I was like wow, I'm not doing that ever again. So, I decided to try out education even though I never thought I would be a teacher. I'll never forget my very first time in a music classroom as a music ed student. I loved it and I knew that was what I was meant to do!

Also, I absolutely love teaching beginners! They are so excited and passionate about learning an instrument. I enjoy seeing them discover just how inherently talented they are: that anyone can get good at things, especially someone who is willing to dedicate themselves and put in a little time. They're just full of potential to learn and they get so excited about everything.

DM: What were your challenges when you first started teaching?

AH: I think my biggest struggle was just getting to know people while coming in as a new teacher. I enjoyed my first years and felt confident in my teaching, but I felt closed off by myself in my classroom. And noisy music rooms are often exiled to the farthest corners of a building. So, I think that was one mistake that I made early on: I really could have reached out to people.

DM: What strategies have you and your team put into place to grow the orchestra program in your school district?

AH: I feel like quality teaching is number one. Everything you do in the classroom is your recruiting: how you run your class and the way that you develop the climate of your classroom. It's what you make the students feel when they are in your classroom. And I like to compare that to a business: your product is what you are doing, how you're teaching, and the skills and knowledge you are imparting to your students. I want to make sure that I'm delivering the highest quality product to my students. Like if I went on Shark Tank, what would my pitch be? What am I selling here? I have to deliver a high-quality product to my students.

Number two is the actual recruiting program. I do a lot of crazy stuff for recruiting, things that maybe a normal person would not do. For example, I bought 700 fortune cookies, and my students and I used paper clips to pull out all of the fortunes. We broke about 20% of them, ate the broken ones and replaced all the paper fortunes with orchestra fortunes. A couple examples: "You belong in orchestra," or "This fortune cookie is rigged. Join Orchestra!" I put on a big show and I pass those out to the kids. The show is complete with costumes, sword fighting and T-Rex outfits. I have the audience participate by answering questions, winning candy, and I have someone come up and play a little mini-violin ($\frac{1}{16}$ size) so they can see it's not that hard. We also pass out stickers and swag. My program isn't long (only 20 minutes), but it's action packed and highlights fun aspects of playing an instrument. This year, our bus driver came to watch one of our recruiting shows and said he wished he could take my class! It's just something that

gets everyone excited.

My third thing is the way I do concerts. My concerts are unconventional. But they're a huge part of my retention and recruiting because I make sure my concerts are fun, engaging and inspirational. I will fill an auditorium with over a thousand seats with one beginning orchestra concert. It's important to me that parents and families *want* to come to my concerts. I want young children at my concert and I want them to see themselves in my program one day. My concerts are a kind of recruiting because people talk and I make sure my concerts are a highlight that people want to talk about. We play games at my concerts and I have people come up and help demonstrate stuff. I keep my concerts short with audience participation and they are very kid friendly.

DM: What inspired you to start a blog?

AH: I came back to teaching in 2012, after I had five kids. I had experience as a Suzuki teacher and I was trying all these new things in my classroom. My band teacher colleague at my school kept coming in and watching me. I had note reading packets and other materials sitting on my table. He said to me, "Man, can't believe you do all this stuff! You should just start a blog." I actually started it because he told me I should!

The other thing about the blog is that it's a nice journal for me because sometimes I forget what I do. It's hard to remember what you do every day after all these years of teaching. Sometimes I'll even search my own blog because I can't remember what I did for certain activities and I'll search for my own ideas because it's not possible to remember everything!

DM: What music education topics do you enjoy writing about?

AH: I get really excited when I find a new technique that I do with my class or discover a new game. I love it when I just create a new game or a new activity, or when I find some perfect prop that works great for fixing a common string student ailment.

DM: What are your favorite resources for teaching?

AH: Sometimes I get some inspiration from Instagram or Facebook and just seeing what people are doing in their programs. I also get a lot of inspiration from YouTube and not specifically music related. I think I have a special gift for tying everything into my class somehow. For example, I just saw a video of a guy trying to outrun an old guy at the airport on one of those people movers. I was like, I'm totally gonna use that in my class when talking about rushing! Another example is the Jimmy Fallon skit where people reach their hand into a box and have to guess what's inside. I'll use the video to talk to my class about how to find their fingerings by feel so they don't have to look at their tapes all the time. So I do get a lot of inspiration from YouTube!

DM: You offer many resources on your

website for orchestra teachers. What are your top sellers?

AH: Well, I think the top seller is probably *Be an Amazing Note Reader*. Also, *Exploring Shifting* has been another really good seller. I love the shifting book! I wrote it because I was so frustrated with method books. Many exercises are rhythmically too hard and don't devote enough time to really develop the skill of actual shifting. I use many of the techniques in *The True Beginning: Before the Method Book* with my classes and it works great. I actually wrote that for the elementary string teachers in my district. It was written as an aid for new orchestra teachers, who need help with teaching beginners. I have a little book called *From Rote to Note* and that is the book I personally use the most in my own program. It works so well for the first month of teaching beginners. Finally, another top seller is *18 Etudes for High School*. I wrote it because when I was teaching high school, I felt like we needed unison etudes to work on some advanced bowing skills. I didn't feel like I was getting that from any other resource.

DM: What are you working on next?

AH: I haven't had a big idea for like a year!

I think my brain took a break during the pandemic. I was doing a lot of work exploring technology tools that could be useful in an orchestra classroom setting. But just last week I got an idea for my next book! I've started writing it already. I'm working on a collection of bowing exercises to help beginner students (year one and year two) master bowing skills in lots of different keys. They're constantly getting messed up on slurs or they're just not comfortable with the bowing. It's inspired by the Hannon piano exercises that I used when learning piano as an adult.

Thank you to Angela Harmon for taking the time to speak with the MNSOTA *String Notes* journal. I'm sure that many of our members will find her resources useful in their orchestra classrooms! You can visit Angela's blog at orchestraclassroom.com.

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