



ORCHESTRA

Surviving and Thriving Through the Winter Doldrums

by Wes Myers

The world is awash in greys and browns. Some places may have snow on the ground, icy and cold. The lights of the holiday season have faded into memory. New Year's resolutions may be holding strong, but the hardest part of the year is fast approaching.

The months of January and February can be the hardest part of the teaching calendar. The bitter cold and lack of sunlight can wear on us and the students. However, there are some clever ways to fight the malaise and revive our orchestra classrooms. None of these ideas are perfect solutions to these trying times but give one of them a try and you might find the time passes a little more easily. Perhaps your students will even find renewed energy and effort.

Warm up!

The winter months can be particularly difficult with long stretches of sub-zero temperatures. This can be a perfect time to vary your warmup routine, dive into a method book, or focus on a particular skill.

I like to vary my usual warmup of scales with some variations: thirds, playing in a round, adding the arpeggio, etc. For a focus on intonation, I like to add a drone. You can use a pitch source or have a student or section take turns acting as the drone. Perhaps it's even time to add a new scale or play that scale in a new part of the instrument. If the violins have been playing the A major scale on their two highest strings, they can learn the lower octave and join their fellow violists in using the high third finger.

You may also find that this is a good opportunity to focus on skill building. Playing in position by using a method book or some shifting exercises might be appropriate. Perhaps the next literature you'll be programming has skills you'd like to refine. That can be done within a warmup setting. The key is to be creative and varied. Students may not be motivated to engage in these activities so come prepared with energy or prep them ahead of time with the "why" behind what they will be doing.

Change Things Up

Like the vast, empty whiteness of winter, our days may begin to blend together. Constantly following the rehearsal formula can leave students going through the motions. It's a perfect time to have a "one off" day. You don't have to completely shift how you teach during the winter months, but a single day here and there can get us away from the routine in a refreshing way.

Put those instruments away for a day! How often do we find opportunities to hit those other standards? Responding, Connecting, and Creating can be left out of our curriculum when we always rehearse. Watch a performance and take some time to let students respond verbally or in writing. I often have students watch professional performances of the music we are preparing, but it doesn't have to be connected to our literature. If there's a great concerto performance you love, share it with your students. Take time to have them experience other music from Lindsay Sterling, Two Cellos, or other non-traditional ensembles. Have them learn some music history or find connections between music and their daily lives. Try some composing or improvisation activity you've investigated. It's ok if it's not a big hit. Just give it a try once.

My big idea for this year is to have a "Rest Awareness Day." Students often struggle more counting the silences in their music than the notes themselves. Taking a whole day to focus on counting rests, or whatever concept you feel deserves attention, can be a good way to break the cycle of rehearsal and emphasize something important.

Short Term Goals

One of the things that can make this time of year difficult is the lack of proximity to performance. Students find motivation in preparing for concerts, but the next one might be months away. Creating some short-term goals can help students find their direction in the classroom. I've found

students are particularly motivated by competition or rewards. While I try to foster intrinsic motivation most often, it can help to provide some external encouragement.

Consider creating a practice minutes challenge where students add up their collective practice minutes to hit a particular goal followed by a reward. Enticing students with a little free time or a movie day can be worth it when the number of minutes they spent practicing outside the classroom exceeds the time you are giving up for the reward. Other challenges can center around proficiency on a musical passage or demonstration of a skill.

You can also create competition between your classes if you teach multiple grades or levels. Posting the progress on the wall in the form of a poster helps students see their progress and may push them to work harder when they see their group falling behind. I recall my own middle school days where the class was challenged to perform a set of scales. I worked harder on those scales than any other music I can remember. The students that passed all of them went on a trip. Of course, you may not be able to use a trip as incentive. It's often more about the attainment of the goal rather than the reward itself once it's complete.

Put Some Air in The Tires

The winter months often include the need to put additional air in our car tires. We and our students can feel deflated at this time. Perhaps we would benefit from some added pressure? Consider doing so with the addition of an adjudicated festival or bringing in an outside clinician.

While it's too late for this year, Middle Level Orchestras should all consider attending one of the MNSOTA regional festivals. Preparing for a performance in front of your peers, for judges, and a clinician can be the right amount of pressure for this time of year. I try to take my students yearly and our preparation for the event includes some of our most focused work. High School

ensembles can consider MSHSL Large Group Contest as well.

If you can't attend a festival or contest, you can also bring in a clinician to your classroom. Consider contacting a nearby university. Music faculty will often work with local schools to promote their college, and you can avoid the high cost associated with bringing in a big-name clinician. For students, it often doesn't take a nationally recognized musician. It's mostly a chance to hear from a different voice. If you have more than one orchestra teacher in your

district you can trade classes for a day. If not, your choir or band colleagues still have things they can share with your students regarding musicianship.

All Seasons Come to an End

Hopefully you've found an idea or two in this column. I would not recommend doing all of these things. Pick one and commit to what you are doing. My goal was to brainstorm some possible ideas to help us through the winter months. This season will come to an end eventually. If we can survive

the winter doldrums and come away with some skill building or renewed motivation that is a win for all involved.

Wes Myers is the 4th–12th grade orchestra and High School Beginning Guitar teacher in Marshall, MN. In addition, he is the assistant director for marching band, jazz band, and directs the pit orchestra for the fall musical. He is also the principal bassist with the Southwest Minnesota Orchestra and a conductor of the Marshall Municipal City Band. †