FULL ORCHESTRA REHEARSAL TECHNIQUES

Rehearsal protocol, elements of good ensemble playing, bowings, wind articulations and intonation issues, percussion techniques and the cultivation of a full, resonant symphonic sound will be discussed and demonstrated. Conducting techniques and the response of the orchestra to these techniques, involving articulation, bow speed, air speed and support, dynamics and style/character will also be demonstrated.

Combining winds, percussion and strings for a dynamic full orchestra provides benefits for the entire music program. Full Orchestra (strings, woodwinds, brass and percussion) brings some of music's greatest works to the classroom.

A Full Orchestra is a plus for everyone.

Rehearsal strategies, non-verbal communication skills and high expectations are all essential components of a teacher's toolbox. Too often teachers follow younger groups, rather than lead them in performance. There are critical steps, which can be taken to transform a young orchestra into a group, which responds to conducting gestures and other orchestral protocol. The sound of the group, and its range of expression and dynamics, are impacted by the confidence and conducting skill of its teacher.

I. Responding to the conductor

A. Orchestra involves **Right Hand** Skills to a greater extent than Left Hand Skills for strings:
1. Articulation
2. Traction
3. Bow Speed
4. Bow speed in tandem with conductor stroke

B. Woodwinds and Brass:
1. The prep breath
2. Articulation
3. Support
4. Abdominal breathing, articulation and support combined

C. Percussion
1. Eyes, sticks, mallets, hands coordinated with conductor during preps
2. Rebound (sticks, hands) controlled
3. Instruments (triangle, tambourine) held at eye level, when appropriate

II. Ensemble Problems (Conductor and player)

A. Group is **ahead** of conductor (failure to link articulation, bow change or pizzicato to visual beat)
B. Bow speed, percussion prep gesture is **slower** than conductor stroke
C. Conductor finishes stroke ahead of the bow speed of the players, requiring a meaningless "loop" added to baton stroke to make up for this.

D. Conductor **holds no sound in the stick** – players relate only to beat and not to sound quality of conducting stroke. One-size-fits-all conducting stroke yields one size-fits-all bow stroke and bow speed (and, of course, a monochromatic sound)

E. Softer or slower passages drag or do not sound energized

1. Strings lack the flexibility to realize more than one combination of bow speed, traction and tempo and dynamics; cannot match a fast bow speed with a soft sound, for example
2. Winds lack both support and air speed to play and articulate assertively in soft dynamics or slow tempi
3. Percussion cannot control rebound in soft dynamics

F. Use of a fast bow speed causes the tempo to rush and slower bow speed causes tempo drag

III. Conductor Problems

A. Conductor does not "hold" the sound, nor the focus of the students (with hands, eye contact and general podium protocol), nor the attention of the audience. There is neither tension nor drama

B. The group never really sounds strong or interesting, because it is not following the conductor

C. Time is not felt with subdivision

D. Group is ahead of conductor because it is not watching

The music should be solid and logical without being predictable and automatic

IV. Conducting and Performing Solutions:

A. Conductor needs to lead the group (non-verbally through conducting) and the group needs to respond

B. Rhythmic clarity through awareness of subdivision is critical

C. Strings must be comfortable playing off the string

D. Woodwinds and brass must be comfortable with supported, resonant staccato

E. Strings must be willing to risk playing with very fast bow speeds

F. The group needs to find its biggest sound before moving to softer dynamics G. There should be propulsion in the music without the tempo rushing

H. Accompany subdivision rehearsal with off string bowing or smallest Rhythmic units played on snare drum or timpani rim

I. Find the strongest sound or articulation by concentrating on playing **one note**, out of context, concentrating on this one note until the desired sound is reached

J. Truly match bow speed, air speed and percussion prep to speed of conductor's stroke

K. **Follow the conductor for the placement of every beat**

V. Orchestral String Playing

A. NEVER match a slow tempo with a slow bow speed.

B.. Calibrate traction to attain a piano, rather than slow down the bow speed

C. Default quarter notes and eighth notes should **be played off the string, near the frog**, in most Allegro contexts
D. 16th notes, on the contrary, should be played with **as much bow per stroke as possible**, on the string.
E. **Dotted rhythms** (double down bows or double up bows) in most contexts should be played **off the string**
F. Repeated up bows will rush; get **both the first and the second up bow off the string** (flipping pancakes) which stabilizes the tempo (through inconvenience) as well as energizing the sound (fast bow speed) and providing resonance (by leaving the string)
G. Reduce bow contact time to **moment of impact** and **leave the string** to allow **resonance** during the follow-through when bow is in the air (bunting, designed not to send the ball far, involves no follow-through as opposed to a full swing of the bat with follow-through which sends the ball into the stands)
H. Begin each stroke **at the frog** as the default setting
I. Experiment with combinations of traction and bow speed for a variety of attacks (striking the match)

VII. Orchestral Woodwinds and Brass

A. Students will generally be playing with a stronger articulation and at a Higher dynamic level than they would in Band
B. Abdominal breath support is critical for both articulation and long lines
    1. Supported articulation solves subdivision and rhythmic problems
    2. Supported articulation enables woodwinds and brass to project their sound through the wall of string players in front of them.
    3. Without the immediate response of strong, clear articulation, the rhythm of the entire group will waffle
C. Intonation strategies for winds, which are voiced differently in Orchestral writing than in Band

VI. Orchestral Percussion

A. Texture of orchestral percussion is Highlighting and reinforcement of the bass (in Band it is traditionally more of a continuo and propulsion device)

    1. Much orchestral percussion will need to be more strongly articulated and at a higher dynamic level than in Band
B. Staccato articulation for stick and mallet percussion (controlled rebound) is Critical
C. Segments of music, including rests, need to be organized into phrases and memorized.
D. Ways to generate maximum tone for highlight notes (bass drum, cymbals)
E. Smaller instruments (tambourine, triangle) require proper technique. Clips and matched beaters for suspending triangles, playing with two beaters. Thumb roll technique for tambourine (needed for Russian Sailors' Dance), hand/knee articulation

What to look for in selecting literature for **Middle School** (or less advanced HS Full Orchestra):

Cross-cuing (bassoon, horns, oboe solo lines should be doubled or cued on other parts) Any writer/arranger who does not cross cue at this level does not understand the medium

Either friendly crossover keys (F, C, G) or courtesy accidentals for sharp keys

Meaningful (involved) percussion, but not constant (continuo) percussion
Timpani part is a MUST and is more important than any other part

Doubled bass line using EVERY resource possible (cello, bass, bassoon, bass clarinet, trombone, tuba, timpani)

Optional Piano part which reinforces bass line and harmony (not melody lines)

Bass Line Secret Weapons: piano or electric keyboard, E flat contrabass clarinet (read bass clef parts in treble clef, adding three sharps) Baritone horn bass clef reading trombone or doubling tuba parts. Arrangements for young full orchestra should include a B flat bass clarinet part. **The more instruments assigned to the bass line, the better the group will play in tune, the fuller the sound. Bass line should be doubled at the octave for biggest sound and best intonation.** Bass line instruments define the sound of the orchestra and can make a smaller orchestra sound fuller than a much larger group which does not address this.

BOWINGS in detail, designed to get articulation at the frog and off-the-string, when appropriate. Good bowings can make a smaller group sound more powerful than a much larger group which says on the string. Double down bows indicate smart bowings which will generate a lot of sound, in characteristic style. Bowings should follow same logic for young groups as they would for professional orchestras – if the bowings have been decaffeinated, the work will never sound authentic, or maintain good rhythm and subdivision.

Sandra Dackow 201-574-5782
drdackow@aol.com www.sandradackow.com