

Middle School Full Orchestra - Making It Work For You

Dr. Sandra Dackow

Music Director, Hershey Symphony Orchestra
Music Director, Ridgewood Symphony Orchestra
Arranger, Ludwig Music Publishing Co., Inc. Cleveland, Ohio

“Just Do It” (Nike)

Begin combining strings, winds and percussion by the third year of study, or:
when there is sufficient overlap of common key areas
when wind players are well enough developed to maintain a variety
of lines and parts as individuals

Continue separate band and string orchestra activities in addition to full orchestra.

Work as a team if there are separate teachers for winds and strings. **FULL ORCHESTRA BENEFITS ALL WOODWIND, BRASS, PERCUSSION AND STRING STUDENTS.** If one teacher teaches in both areas, he/she is set up for immediate success.

Orchestra is for EVERYONE!

Perhaps not exactly, but a full and balanced compliment of winds, brass and percussion should be utilized from the very beginning. Involve more students rather than fewer. Ideal balance can be tinkered with once the program has been successfully established. Cultivating a positive image among wind and percussion students is critical for success.

Avoid Slow Death By Chamber Orchestra,

Nothing against Chamber Orchestras, but it is recommended that full orchestra be launched with a bang, with full instrumentation and exciting (however easy it may be) literature.

Suggested wind and percussion instrumentation for middle school orchestra:

Piccolo (doubling Flute)	2- 4 horns	timpani (always use timpani
2 - 4 flutes	2 - 4 trumpets	even if you must write
1 - 2 oboes	1 - 3 trombones	your own parts)
2 - 4 clarinets	tuba (write a part if	2 - 4 other percussion
bass clarinet (write a part if	necessary)	harp (if you have one write
necessary)		parts and rejoice!)
1- 2 bassoons	piano (optional for harmonic and bass line support)	

euphonium, contrabass clarinet, saxophones can be used, if necessary as substitute instruments and/or to reinforce the bass line.

The more players on the bass line, especially the lowest octave (double bass, tuba, contrabass clarinet) the more orchestral the group will sound. For the same reason, timpani are critical.

If players of these instruments are participating in the band, get them involved with the orchestra from the very beginning. **GET THE BAND DIRECTOR INVOLVED AS WELL**, in as many capacities as possible. The more students, staff and parents with a sense of ownership, the greater the success.

FULL ORCHESTRA IS THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE ENTIRE INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC STAFF

It is neither a wind, nor a string activity but an exciting *combination* of the two which will strengthen the entire department. A department without a full orchestra shortchanges string, woodwind, brass, and percussion students. A program cannot be considered excellent if full orchestra is missing. The entire student body of the school (including non-players in the audience at school assemblies) comes up short. Every school child should either be playing in the orchestra or have a friend who does.

2.

There is ALWAYS room for CELLO

Full Orchestra can be scheduled if the staff wants it to be scheduled. It may not be easy or convenient but, if done well, it is always worth the effort. Take time to explore non-traditional options and to put sacrifices and compromises on the table.

With such a variety of schedules in use, there is no one recommendation. Possibilities include:

before school after school
during lunch, activity periods, etc.
spring wind students periodically to meet during string orchestra
spring string students periodically to meet with band
special time created by administrative decree (especially just prior to concerts)
many other local variations

Rehearse strings separately and have them concert-ready before adding the winds, brass and percussion. Once these players have been added to the group, work primarily with THEM and with shaping the sound of the orchestra as a whole.

Tune the strings first; have an efficient routine

Tune the woodwinds to A concert

tune flutes and piccolo to A above the staff
tune clarinets to written B just over the break
tune bass clarinet to written B below middle C

Tune brass to B flat or both A and B flat

tune young horns to written E or F above middle C
tune really young trombones, if they are having difficulty, centering a pitch on the upper B flat, to F below middle C instead

If the wind players are especially young or inexperienced, tune brass to F concert as needed, or follow a variation of the band tuning for that particular school

Greatest Problems for Strings

70% - 95% of all orchestral playing should be off the string AT THE FROG. Not observing this simple fact keeps the majority of young ensembles from sounding remotely like real orchestras.

Bow speed is usually too slow for the sound to be focused, energized and offering any substance. Bow speed in young orchestras tend to be from 100% to 400% TOO SLOW to be effective.

One-size-fits-all Bow Speed = Death by Blandness

(*** Once students begin using a faster bow stroke, be prepared to deal with the issues of not allowing the music to rush and being sure to follow the conductor)

Bowing tends to be exclusively horizontal and lateral rather than getting in and out of the string (vertical). The result is too much bow at too slow a bow speed, yielding very little volume and a sound that is dull and unexciting.

There is very little attack and definition to each stroke, even in forte passages; there is little or no resonance with the bow remaining on the string between each stroke.

Dynamic range peaks at somewhat below a true *mezzo forte* and is usually substantially less.

Once you've agreed on all the notes and all the low two's, 98% of the rehearsal should focus on the RIGHT HAND issues such as attack, bow speed, bow placement, resonance, etc. Try to deal with these BEFORE the winds and percussion arrive.

Greatest problems for Woodwinds and Brass

Sound is not supported

Sound is not generated with fast enough or strong enough air stream, especially in soft passages.

Initial attack of each note (other than truly legato or slurred passages) is not explosive or "popped".

Articulation is “skin deep”, i. e., only generated by the tongue rather than by using the tongue in conjunction with the abdominal muscles and an explosive air stream. This superficial articulation results in little definition and absolutely no resonance, the same sort of deadly dull sound as a string section never getting off the string. Abdominal breathing and articulation are not stressed enough in most wind programs, older and younger players alike.

Great intonation difficulties on different instruments in different parts of their respective ranges.

Strange postures which affect the sound.

A recent study indicated that choral conductors prefer blended singing over soloistic singing. The choral ensemble ideal is one in which individual voices cannot be identified. A blended sound requires less energy than a solo sound. Often the sound ideal for a large band with much doubling of parts is the same as that of a blended choral ensemble. While this blended ideal is called upon in some orchestral contexts also, just as often are wind players expected to soar above or cut through a mass of string players to reach the listener with important ideas. Developing this **highly energized and soloistic style** is critical. Projecting an assertive sound and strong personality is required of orchestra-1 wind players and, as a rule, these characteristics are not encouraged or developed within the context of young bands. **An abdominal, rather than a thoracic mode of breathing is required to meet the demands of orchestral playing.** Young wind players are usually amazed to learn how much more physically demanding playing in an orchestra can be than playing in a large band. For the benefit of young woodwind and brass students these contrasting approaches should both be taught and experienced during the middle school years.

Greatest Percussion Problems

Tuning the timpani, not enough definition, improper sticks for different passages, too much loose rebound and not enough “snap” for the strokes.

Not being aware of proper techniques for playing usual traps (cymbals, bass drum, triangle, tambourine, etc.).

Bass drum mallet too soft, not struck in the proper part of the head, sound not focused, drum out of control, too much resonance (except when you want it).

Cymbals choked after every note, suited to much band music but not much for orchestra.

Triangle not struck with tip of beater.

Tambourine players not aware of thumb roll.

Snare drum played with too loose a stroke, resulting in a lack of definition.

Remember - Much percussion writing in band literature is a sort of **rhythmic continuo** and a part of the measure-to-measure texture. Orchestral percussion (other than timpani) tend to be used for emphasis and color and usually demands a much more assertive approach. Though there may be fewer notes to play, these generally are required to be brought “to the fore” more often than in band literature. Cymbal crashes and bass drum notes in particular tend to be underplayed by students new to orchestra.

Greatest Ensemble Difficulties

When learning new music, the orchestra will drag and produce a superficial sound totally lacking in rhythmic subdivision.

When the notes have been learned, the orchestra will rush and produce a superficial sound totally lacking in rhythmic subdivision.

(have you detected a pattern, yet?)

Students don't watch.

Students watch but don't follow

4.

Students honestly think they are watching but they **STILL** don't follow
AND the sound that results is superficial and lacking in rhythmic subdivision.

The two **GREATEST** ensemble problems for young players:

KIDS DON'T SUBDIVIDE

KIDS DON'T ACTUALLY FOLLOW CONDUCTORS

And we consistently **allow** this to happen - we don't (really) **INSIST** that they follow and subdivide - the two most defining traits of a good ensemble player.

Please have confidence in your own conducting and insist that your students respond to your gestures and your eyes.

Middle School Orchestra conductors should approach score study as though they were preparing for All-State Orchestra. Analyze and learn the music, then rehearse with your head and eyes out of the score. The sound will improve immediately, as will compliance with verbal instructions and conducting gestures.

YOUR STUDENTS WILL REFLECT YOUR OWN PREPARATION AND SKILL AS A CONDUCTOR.

Remember: Eye contact + knowledge of the score + good conducting skills = a more focused orchestra and a more compelling performance. Students really appreciate your ability to unlock their potential as a large ensemble.

Finally : Require **PENCILS** at every rehearsal and require that they be **USED**. Insist on a focused and on-task rehearsal atmosphere where the pace is brisk and the musical rewards are evident.

REMEMBER - this is a **TEAM** effort to benefit the **ENTIRE** instrumental music program. We create the climate - the students take their cues from us. If the teachers, working as a team, want a full orchestra to succeed, it will succeed.

Demonstration Music

Finale, Symphony #2 in C Peter Illych Tchaikowsky

Arranged by Sandra Dackow Published by Ludwig Music Publishing Co., Inc. (Grade II)

Dance of the Tumblers from *Snow Maiden* Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakoff

Arranged by Sandra Dackow Published by the Ludwig Music Publishing Co., Inc. (Grade III)

Sandra Dackow
27-33 Corsa Terrace #5B
Ridgewood, New Jersey 07450
201-444-6621
drdackow@aol.com