

## 2005 MIDWEST CLINIC

# YOUR ORCHESTRA HAS ACHIEVED ITS GOAL WHEN IT CAN PERFORM WITHOUT YOU

or

## HOW'D THEY DO THAT?

The Concert Without a Conductor

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Presented by Lyndon Lawless

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Assisted by members of the Youth Performing Arts School Chamber String Orchestra

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The Youth Performing Arts School Chamber String Orchestra (Louisville, KY) performed at the 2004 Midwest Clinic minus a conductor (Mr. Lawless) with just 26 hours notice due to an unexpected medical emergency. This clinic will explore ways of rehearsing that help create the kind of ensemble that can play together with understanding and involvement—whether conducted or not. Many of the points below will be demonstrated with members of the YPAS Orchestra in a rehearsal of Ravel's "Enchanted Garden" from the *Mother Goose Suite* arranged by Michael Hopkins. The attached score is reproduced with the generous permission of Highland/Etling-Alfred Publishing.

### I. GENERAL APPROACH

Playing successfully in an orchestra is a very, very challenging task. It requires great focus and attention to many simultaneously occurring variables. Young musicians have to be *taught* how to play in an orchestra. It requires skills not generally taught by private teachers.

The five biggest challenges are--

BASIC PULSE

COUNTING

APPROPRIATE USE OF THE BOW

ACCURATE RHYTHM

ENSEMBLE LISTENING

I have found that *all* of my students need to learn most of these *from the ground up!*

### II. HOW TO CREATE GROUP AWARENESS, PERSPECTIVE & RESPONSIBILITY

- Make clear to the students the conductor's role in performance.
  - Conductor functions as guide, coach, cheerleader.
  - Conductor is the unifier, sets and changes tempi, inspires the affect and style, adjusts balances, shapes the ensemble sound...
  - The conductor does NOT keep the group together. For the most part, that is up to the players themselves.
  - The players in the orchestra are the driving force.

- The audience is present at every rehearsal in the imaginations of the performers.
  - A recurring question posed to the students is: “How will this be experienced by the audience?”
  - Promote the emotional impact created by true unity of purpose and execution.
- Every member of the ensemble is of equal importance regardless of where he or she is sitting. Absolute unity in each section is our goal with an equal contribution from EVERY individual.
- Make students sensitive to the functioning hierarchy of responsibility within the orchestra (concertmaster and section leaders) and how leadership constantly shifts as the requirements of the music change.
- Be a constant watcher of and listener to individuals, holding each student responsible for making the music come alive. No slackers allowed! The students must feel that everything they do and every sound they make can be seen and heard by the conductor.
- Honest and frequent detailed feedback from the teacher is essential. Do not give compliments unless they are deserved. Progress toward the common goal can be acknowledged while it is made clear that the goal has not been reached. Strong progress should elicit authentic excitement from the teacher.
- Have the students listen to recordings of their own rehearsals and performances.
- Start each rehearsal with stretches for health, group cohesiveness, and promotion of physicality.

### III. PULSE & COUNTING

- These are the No. 1 and No. 2 challenges with young players -- most students do not have a pulse!
- Pulse is the basic impulse of each beat that is the framework on which all rhythms hang.
- Pulses must be *felt* by the musician in a physical or imaginary manifestation.
- Techniques to instill the pulse and keep it steady--
  - Counting is essential—Red Flags: 1) long notes 2) ties 3) rests
  - Marching, head-nodding, counting out loud while playing
  - Employ an amplified metronome in class to develop a better awareness of the pulse. This also promotes listening while playing
  - Give individual playing tests with the metronome.
- Individual pulses become the group pulse when individual musicians constantly monitor the group pulse around them and compare it with their own. No one can afford to be passive.
- Orchestra members should pick up & maintain the tempo from the preparatory beat.
  - EVERYONE must prepare. EVERYONE must be responsible for keeping the beat.
  - Urge them to MOVE.
  - Everyone must constantly monitor the beat going on around them.
  - “Make yourself part of the action. Don’t just watch—anticipate & participate”
- The HUGE advantage of frequent and intermittent *non-conducting*.
  - Forces the students to take responsibility for keeping the pulse & shaping the music.
  - Keeps the students on their toes & forces them to become self-reliant
  - Frees the teacher to move around the room to observe and coach
  - Helps the teacher to become more objective
- If the ensemble is conducted, the conductor must be responded to for tempo changes, phrasing, balance, etc.
  - This adds a layer of complexity to the act of music-making because the musicians must keep their own beat, listen to the group beat, AND respond to the conductor. Wow! They must be in control and yet remain flexible at the same time. This is a very big challenge.
  - Change the tempi unpredictably.
  - Insist that the players execute what you conduct.

## IV. RHYTHMIC ACCURACY

- Rhythmic accuracy depends a great deal on achieving a consistent & steady pulse (see III. above).
- After, this, most rhythm problems are caused by inappropriate or unsophisticated use of the bow.
  - The bow is a very crude tool when it comes to producing complicated rhythms. As a result, teaching proper bow use must be painstakingly *taught and drilled!*
  - The correct rhythm must be understood first & then the bowing must be managed to produce it.
  - Demonstration and/or detailed illustration with absolute insistence and endless repetition are required if the students are to master this difficult and neglected aspect of string teaching.
  - Proper bow management requires constant attention to the changing *expressive* and *rhythmic* requirements of the music. This alone is a huge and complicated challenge for young players which involves controlling the following variables AT ALL TIMES!
    - Geography (frog to tip)
    - Contact point (bridge to fingerboard)
    - Speed
    - Weight into the string
    - Direction (down or up)
    - Tilt
    - Style
    - Changes during the stroke
    - Thinking, planning, and preparing ahead

## V. PLAYING IN TUNE IN AN ENSEMBLE

- Initial tuning procedure is critical and sets the stage.
  - Use tempered fifths - perfect fifths create tuning problems in the harmony.
  - Use a tuner to tune the cello. All other tuning is by ear except for the basses which use tuners for all strings.
  - If the open strings are to be *actually in tune*, the orchestra should tune open strings one at a time to the cello. This also helps students get used to listening to the cello for ensemble tuning.
- Tuning during performance--
  - During performance, stress listening to the bass line (usually cellos and/or basses) as the key to tuning and all ensemble work.
  - Major thirds with the root of the chord should be PURE.
  - In general, sharps are low, flats are high to produce pure thirds.
  - Tuning problems are often a result of not understanding the fingering intervals involved.

## VI. EXPRESSIVE ENSEMBLE PLAYING

- Job one is to play *everything* that is on the page—a most demanding task!
- Details, details, and more details are essential to create expressive and unified playing.
- Carefully marked parts *at the outset* with fingerings and bowings are extremely helpful.
- Bowing variables must be hammered at constantly (see the last point under IV. Rhythmic Accuracy).
- Students need repeated demonstration of how a phrase should sound *and demonstration/explanation of how to achieve it with the bow* through one or more of the following methods--
  - Teacher demonstration playing on instrument (preferably a string instrument) or singing
  - Graphic visualization with the hands or drawing on the board
  - Student demonstration with comments from the teacher
  - Recordings

- Structure illumination: phrase, melody, section, movement, work
  - Why did the composer do this?
  - Where are the phrases?
  - Where does the phrase peak?
  - How do the various sections of the orchestra interact in each phrase?
  - Elucidate the dramatic structure of a movement or piece.
  - Use the score to teach the big picture (pocket scores or overhead transparencies can be used).
- Unified technical mastery is a prerequisite for truly expressive ensemble playing. Often, the latter will arise naturally once the former is solidly implemented.

## **VII. ENSEMBLE LISTENING**

- After reaching an acceptable level on the proceeding points, this is the FINAL STEP to developing ensemble musicians.
- This is what makes music-making fun!
- Students do not naturally do this and it cannot be practiced at home.
- Students will start listening IF THEY HAVE TO! Playing without a conductor REQUIRES listening.
- Teach awareness of the other parts--
  - The students may say they cannot hear another section in the orchestra. Hearing the other parts is an acquired skill. Here is one method for developing this...
    - Sit at the back of a section to make sure YOU can hear all the other parts.
    - Have a section listen to another part while not playing.
    - Ask them questions about the other part.
    - Now, have them play and see if they can hear the other part better.
  - Change the seating arrangement by mixing sections to make it easier for students to hear all of the other parts. Then change back to standard seating and stress still hearing the other parts.
  - Frequently question students on what another section is playing at any moment.
  - Have students sing the other parts.
  - Have a discussion of the exact function & resulting style of each voice in the score at given moments.
  - Explain what parts to listen to and when.
    - Everyone should always tune in to the bass line.
    - Melodists especially should focus on the bass.
    - Harmonists should focus on the bass and melody
    - Bassists should focus on the melody.
- Explain dissonance resolving to consonance as it occurs in the music. Show how to use these contrasting elements to communicate tension and relaxation in the harmony.
- Clarify the difference between expected and unexpected harmonies as they are encountered in the music. Teach how and why performers execute these differently.

## **VIII. ENSEMBLE INTERCOMMUNICATION AND TEAMWORK**

- Hierarchy of leadership within the ensemble is essential whether there is a conductor or not.
- Promote physical leadership and active participation rather than passive "followership".
- Insist that students get eyes and ears off the printed page.
- Build the ensemble incrementally from one on a part to the entire orchestra starting with your best players. Each additional stand of players should reinforce rather than dilute the message of the music. This allows students hear a good example as well as a clearer opportunity to perceive how all the parts fit together. It also helps them to see their individual value to the group as they add on.

## IX. MISCELLANEOUS NOTES

- Don't accept anything less than all-out performance mode from the orchestra during rehearsals. This is essential for students who do not perform often.
  - Fearlessness must be promoted in the rehearsals -- don't let left-hand difficulties intimidate the bow hand/arm. Incorrect dynamics do not make up for out-of-tune notes. This takes much persuasion.
  - The teacher's role--
    - The choice of music is critical. Don't waste your students' time by rehearsing inferior music! Music of depth and sophistication will keep them involved and challenged. However, music that is too difficult cannot be mastered technically. Too much time and effort will be expended just trying to meet the left hand challenges at the expense of bow hand development.
    - Be creative. Experiment! Be spontaneous during rehearsals. You need a very large bag of tricks.
    - Strategies often don't work as planned. No strategy works every time. Be ready at all times to switch gears quickly. Try approaching a problem from many different directions.
    - Constantly stress what you hear in their playing. Imitate what they did and contrast that with what you should be hearing (through your own singing and/or playing).
    - Let them know if it is boring (it often is!) and why.
    - Help them appreciate how they will be seen and heard by the audience. Recordings and videos can help with this, but your constant feedback is more handy.
    - Student musicians tend to take the middle road in everything. Make them stretch and exaggerate. Don't accept a lazy one-size-fits-all approach to music-making.
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If you have any questions about this clinic or other aspects of school orchestra rehearsal techniques, please feel free to contact the clinician at [lyndonlawless@att.net](mailto:lyndonlawless@att.net).

## THE CLINICIAN'S BACKGROUND

Mr. Lawless is in his 10<sup>th</sup> and final year of teaching and conducting at the Youth Performing Arts School (YPAS), an arts magnet high school. Starting next year he will be available for guest conducting, clinics, workshops, consulting, etc. At YPAS, his orchestras have appeared by invitation at the Midwest Clinic (1999 & 2004) and at national conventions of the MENC and ASTA. In 2004, the YPAS Philharmonia was featured on National Public Radio's "From the Top". In addition to the Philharmonia and Chamber String Orchestra, Mr. Lawless works with two less advanced levels of school orchestra consisting of students from the high school adjacent to the performing arts school.

Mr. Lawless presented an all-day inservice orchestra-teaching workshop titled "How Do You Get Your Students to Play Like That?" for Clark County (Las Vegas) middle and high school orchestra teachers in May of 2004 and then returned there in November to rehearse and conduct the All-County High School Honors Orchestra. He has been invited to rehearse and conduct the Louisiana All-State Orchestra in Baton Rouge this coming February. Also in February, he will serve as adjudicator/clinician at the University of Illinois String and Orchestra Consortium.

Prior to arriving at YPAS, Mr. Lawless was founder and director for seventeen years of *Ars Musica*, a professional period-instrument chamber orchestra based in Ann Arbor, Michigan.