



# Teaching Students To Make Music

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## IN THIS SESSION

1. The common mistakes string teachers make with concert music, and how to avoid these detrimental pitfalls.
2. The Seven String Ensemble Performance Objectives, and multiple strategies for teaching each one.
3. Multiple strategies for teaching students how to listen better to each other, to take greater ownership in their performance, and develop greater independence as a musician.

**Think about your last concert, and list some of the musical elements with which your students continually struggle.**

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### **Our Biggest Mistake When Selecting Concert Music**

One of the most common and detrimental mistakes orchestra teachers make is programming music that is too difficult for their students to learn and polish in the 8-10 weeks they have before the concert.

### **Why do we do this?**

**We want to challenge students, but we don't have a sequenced plan for teaching the technique that the challenging music requires.** So, we try to teach new skills within the concert music, instead of using well-sequenced exercises that are actually designed to teach skills like finger patterns, third position, and spiccato.

### **What is the solution?**

**Challenge students during FUNDAMENTALS TIME, and use concert music to teach students how to *express clear musical ideas and styles as an ensemble through the performance of orchestral music*.** Challenge students with exercises like:

- ☐ Three-octave scales, arpeggios & thirds
- ☐ Velocity etudes, thumb position exercises,
- ☐ Sight reading in difficult keys and rhythmic exercises in compound meters
- ☐ Rhythmic bowing exercises with spiccato and sautillé strokes

### **Lesson Plan**

- **50% Fundamentals Time for introducing and reviewing skills**
- **50% Concert Music Time for teaching musical skills and ensemble skills**

## **Mistake #2. Our Biggest Mistake After Selecting Concert Music**

We tend to plan with our eyes and we fail to plan for all of the musical components that we cannot see. When we plan, we must remember to save enough time to teach the end game skills that are required in a polished and expressive performance.

- ▣ Blending Tone and Intonation
- ▣ Agreeing on the style and part of the bow
- ▣ Feeling the pulse together, even through an accelerando or at the end of a phrase
- ▣ Where is the high point of the phrase, the low point, and how loud are we in between?
- ▣ What is the character that the composer is intended, and what do we need to do convey this character?

### **KEY POINT:**

***Teaching students how to play notes and rhythms is not making music.***

## **The Goal and Objectives of the Concert Music Unit**

The goal of teach concert music is not to teach students how to read and perform notes and rhythms, or play one's instrument "in tune" with a good tone and the right articulations; the goal of teaching concert music is to teach students how to perform all of these individualized skills ***with other players to convey a clear musical idea, to make music together with their instruments as an ensemble.***

**Goal: Students express clear musical ideas and styles *as an ensemble* through the performance of orchestral music.**

We can break this goal into Seven Ensemble Performance Objectives. Each ensemble objective is related to an individualized student performance objective for teaching rhythm, tone, intonation, dynamics, and musical expression. Let's look at these one at a time.

## Teaching the Seven Ensemble Objectives

**Ensemble Technique.** Breathe, move, cue and **perform together in synchrony** with other musicians.

- ▣ Teach students to breathe and move together.
- ▣ Teach them to pay attention to their peer's technique. "Is your stand partner.....
  - Using good left and right hand technique
  - Bowing parallel to the bridge?
  - Playing the right note/rhythm?

What Questions or Strategies could be effective for teaching ensemble TECHNIQUE?

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**Ensemble Rhythm:** Perform accurate **rhythms** together within a synchronized **pulse** and a musically convincing **tempo**.

- ▣ Perform different rhythms together, by feeling the pulse together, even through accelerando or ritard
- ▣ Breathe at the end of the phrase, and let others finish one phrase before starting the next

What Questions or Strategies could be effective for teaching ensemble RHYTHM?

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**Ensemble Tone.** Use the same bow weight, speed and contact point as the other members of the section to create a well-blended ensemble **tone** and **timbre**.

- ▣ We must teach students to agree on bow weight, speed and contact point to create MATCHING TIMBRES that *blend together*.
- ▣ Leaders must be taught to blend with their section

What Questions or Strategies could be effective for teaching ensemble TONE?

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**Ensemble Intonation.** Finely tune one's own notes to be **in tune** with other musicians.

- ▣ Tuning to each other is different than "playing in tune." Students must learn to tune their notes to another person's unison, octave, fifth, fourth third, sixth, seventh and second.
- ▣ Practice tuning to and blending with each other during tuning time

What Questions or Strategies could be effective for teaching ensemble INTONATION?

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**Ensemble Articulation.** Perform the same **bowings, articulations and styles** in the same part of the bow as other members of one's section. This includes more than just bowing in the same direction, but also using the same part of the bow and stylistic stroke.

What Questions or Strategies could be effective for teaching ensemble ARTICULATION?

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**Ensemble Dynamics.** Use a **volume** that blends with the section, that **balances** the importance of one's own part with respect to the parts of other sections of the ensemble, and that agrees with other players through the peaks, valleys and points in between of all **dynamics** and **phrasing**.

- ☐ Performing dynamics is different than agreeing on which note is the top of the phrase, and how loud it should be.
- ☐ Are students getting louder and softer at the same rate?
- ☐ Do they know who has the melody, and why that is important?
- ☐ Beware of the young teacher dynamics trap

What Questions or Strategies could be effective for teaching ensemble Dynamics, Balance and Phrasing?

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**Ensemble Musical Expression.** Convey clear and **musically expressive ideas** that go beyond the notes on the page; these musical concepts include character, style, interpretation, beauty, intensity, mood and emotion.

- ☐ What "story" is the music telling?
- ☐ What is the character or mood that the composer wants?
- ☐ What do we need to do to convey that musical idea?
- ☐ What is your interpretation? Do you like his interpretation? Why or why not?

What Questions or Strategies could be effective for teaching ensemble MUSICAL EXPRESSION?  
Musical Expression

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## Seven String Ensemble Performance Objectives

When teachers use Fundamentals Time to teach individualized string skills, and when they program concert music of the appropriate difficulty, then they can spend rehearsal time teaching the Seven String Ensemble Objectives (outlined on the previous pages and listed below). These objectives are universal; they can be printed onto a poster and displayed on a wall behind the teacher, and can be used to teach string ensembles of any level.

### Ensemble Objectives: Students must make the necessary adjustments in their individual performance to:

1. Breathe, move, cue and **perform together in synchrony** with other musicians.
2. Perform accurate **rhythms** together within a synchronized **pulse** and a musically convincing **tempo**.
3. Use the same bow weight, speed and contact point as the other members of the section to create a well-blended ensemble **tone** and **timbre**.
4. Finely tune one's own notes to be **in tune** with other musicians.
5. Perform the same **bowings, articulations and styles** in the same part of the bow as other members of one's section.
6. Use a **volume** that blends with the section, that **balances** the importance of one's own part with respect to the parts of other sections of the ensemble, and that agrees with other players through the peaks, valleys and points in between of all **dynamics** and **phrasing**.
7. Convey clear and **musically expressive ideas** that go beyond the notes on the page; these musical concepts include character, style, interpretation, beauty, intensity, mood and emotion.

**KEY POINT:** Life gets much easier for teachers who create a year-long plan for teaching skills during fundamentals time, and use a fixed set of ensemble objectives for teaching new concert music. Your curriculum stays the same, even if your music does not.

## TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING ENSEMBLE SKILLS

### **The best way to develop ensemble skills: STOP CONDUCTING.**

Get off the podium, and show students how to

- ▣ Cue, move and breathe together
- ▣ Count for themselves, and be responsible for their own entrances
- ▣ Blend their tone with the tone of their stand partner
- ▣ Follow and use the same bowings and part of the bow as their section leader
- ▣ Share their own opinion for how the music should go

### **A second important strategy for getting students to pay attention to each other and play together as an ensemble: TEACH WITH QUESTIONS INSTEAD OF BARKING ORDERS.**

- ▣ What part of the bow is your section leader using?
- ▣ What kind of tone is your stand partner creating?
- ▣ Does your C# match your section's C#? Is it in tune with the cello section's A?
- ▣ Who has the melody at m. 36? Who should lead the cue, and who should play softly?
- ▣ What is happening during your rest there?
- ▣ Where is the top of the phrase?

### **Seven Conducting Tips,**

1. Stop counting off. Click, prep & breathe, play!
2. Accelerate into the ictus, and use a clean, simple pattern (no jerks.)
3. Conduct lines with your left hand
4. If students don't understand a gesture, teach and practice it
5. Change it up; use different tempos, and make them follow you
6. If they are performing well, stay out of the way—remember your role.
7. Record yourself with a video camera



## Selecting Concert Music

What level of music is appropriate for my students?

- ▣ Select music with notes, rhythms and articulation patterns that the students have already learned
- ▣ Look beyond the notes, rhythms and articulations, and ask yourself: “Can my students produce a great TONE on these notes, rhythms and articulations?”
- ▣ Difficulty Guideline: 1 to 2 difficulty levels lower than the level of the new skills you are introducing. Do NOT trust the publisher’s difficulty rating.
- ▣ Take into consideration the maturity level and popularity of a piece; program slow pieces only if your students are mature enough to perform sustained notes with vibrato.

What are two indicators that the music is too difficult for my students?

1. \_\_\_\_\_

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2. \_\_\_\_\_

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## Final Thoughts for Achieving the Most Musical (and Accurate) Performance

1. Teach technique with etudes and exercises. Teach musical and ensemble concepts with concert music.
2. If you are wondering if a piece is too difficult, then it probably is.
3. Look closely at all instrument parts on every page of the score. Watch out for technical spikes and the dreaded middle section.
4. Look at notes and articulations through a TONE lens. No spiccato, higher positions, or slow pieces until your students can perform these skills with a beautiful tone
5. Consider the time of year and your audience when selecting music. Each concert is different.
6. The more the merrier. If you have small or young ensembles (fewer than 20-25), combine them with another class.

## **String Resources Available Through GIA Publications**

*Habits of a Successful Orchestra Director*  
*Habits of a Successful MIDDLE LEVEL String Musician*  
*Music Theory for a Successful String Musician*

**COMING SOON!**

***Habits of a Successful String Musician, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (2023)***

***Habits of a Successful Young String Musician, Books 1 & 2 (2024)***

*By Sarah Ball, Margaret Selby, Christopher Selby, and Scott Rush*



**Dr. Christopher Selby** is the author of *Habits of a Successful Orchestra Director*, *Music Theory for the Successful String Musician*, and co-author of the *Habits of a Successful String Musician* series, a collection of string method books for middle and upper-level orchestras published by GIA. He is an active clinician and conductor, and has presented sessions at numerous Midwest Clinics, American String Teacher Association (ASTA) National Conferences, and state conferences across America. Dr. Selby is the 2022 Teacher of the Year at the School of the Arts in Charleston, SC where currently teaches high school orchestra. His orchestras performed at the 2019 Midwest Clinic, and they won the 2016 ASTA National Orchestra Festival's top award of Grand Champion in the competitive public school division.

Dr. Selby earned a music education degree from the Hartt School of Music in Connecticut, and a Masters and Doctorate in Orchestral Conducting from the University of South Carolina. His teaching career began in Fairfax County, VA in 1992. From 2001 to 2012, Dr. Selby was the Orchestra Coordinator in Richland School District Two where he taught high school and supervised the district's orchestra curriculum and instruction. He then moved to Charleston, SC and returned to teaching full time in the classroom in his current position at the Charleston County School of the Arts.

Dr. Selby regularly guest conducts Regional and All-State Orchestras across the southeast. He has held national leadership positions in ASTA and NAFME. Dr. Selby was the President of the South Carolina Music Educators Association (SCMEA) from 2011-2013 and he served two separate terms as the President of the state's Orchestra Division. He is a contributing author for *Teaching Music Through Performance in Orchestra*, vol. 4 and has written articles for NAFME and in ASTA's American String Teacher.