Habits of a Successful Orchestra Director

So, What's the Plan?

Creating Meaningful Daily and Long Range Plans in a Successful Orchestra Program

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Key Point! Instead of challenging students with difficult concert music, challenge them with exercises that prepare them to play difficult music—exercises like scales in difficult keys, sequenced shifting exercises, bowing etudes, sight reading exercises and music theory.

The goal of concert music is to make music, not teach technique. So, pick concert music that your students have the skills to play well; they (and you) will enjoy the music more, and focus better on ***making music together***—which was the reason they signed up your class.

Concert music can help us identify the skills students need to learn, but then it's up to us teachers to create a well-sequenced plan to teach those skills. Separating skill development from concert music is the first and most important step to answering this common question:

I know what I want to rehearse, *but what am I supposed to teach?*

The Three Questions:

1. What do I want my students to learn by the end of the year?
2. What is my plan for reaching these end-of-year goals?
3. What is my plan for today, on the path to help students reach these goals?

Lesson Plan Format

Unpack, Stretch, Tune

Fundamentals Time: For Teaching Technical Skills (50%)

Scales, Arpeggios
Left Hand (LH) Skills
Tone & Articulation
Literacy, Creativity, Chorales, Theory

Rehearsal Time: For Making Music (50%)

Goal: Express clear musical ideas and styles as an ensemble through orchestral music

Objectives: Students make the 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 musical **tempo**.
3. Perform with a well-blended ensemble **tone** and **timbre** with other members of the group.
4. Finely tune one's own notes to be **in tune** with other musicians.
5. Perform the same **bowings, articulations and styles** as other members of one's section.
6. Use a **volume** that agrees with other players **dynamics** and **phrasing** and that **balances** the importance of one's own part with respect to the parts of other sections of the ensemble.
7. Convey clear and **musically expressive ideas** including character, style, interpretation, beauty, intensity, mood and emotion.

Key Point! When you carefully select concert music that is "easy" enough for your students to play well--music that does NOT have a lot of new technique that you need to teach--then you can use concert music objectives that work for all orchestra pieces. It also allows you to plan your concert repertoire more easily:

Fall Concert: _____ _____ _____

Winter Concert: _____ _____ _____

March Concert: _____ _____ _____

Spring Concert: _____ _____ _____

Long Range Planning for Teaching Technique in 8th Grade and High School Orchestra

1. **Organize Technique into "Units."** Orchestra units are different than academic units.
    - **a.** Scales & Arpeggios
    - **b.** Left Hand Skills—Patterns, Positions, and Shifting
    - **c.** Right Hand Skills—Tone & Articulation
    - **d.** Additional Units: Rhythmic & Tonal Literacy, Chorales, Music Theory
2. **Create a sequence of the skills in each unit.** Try to include all skills, including skills that lead up to your class, and also the skills that are too difficult for your class. See below.
3. **Identify the "Frontier Skills" in each orchestra class/level you teach.**

Scales & Arpeggios. Instead of giving all keys/scales equal time and attention, focus more on the "**frontier keys**," where your students (especially cello students) start to struggle. What is the frontier where the kids in each of your groups struggle?

# of Sharps/flats: 1 2 3 4 5 6

Write down the frontier keys/scales for a specific class/level in your program?

	Orchestra A	Orchestra B
Sharp keys:	_____	_____
Flat keys:	_____	_____

Left Hand Skills. Evaluate your class's mastery of left-hand skills; where is their frontier?

_____ 1st Position Finger Patterns and Extensions
_____ Playing music and exercises in keys from 0-2 sharps/flats.
_____ Vibrato
_____ Basic Shifting (1st to 3rd Position)
_____ Playing music and exercises in keys from 3-4 sharps/flats.
_____ Intermediate Positions (2nd to 5th Positions)
_____ Chromatic scales and diminished arpeggios
_____ Playing music and exercises in keys from 5-6 sharps/flats.
_____ Advanced Positions (Higher than 5th position, including thumb position)

Right Hand, Bowing, Articulation Skills. Use the same method to evaluate the following:

_____ Relaxed, well-set bow hand, arm, and shoulder technique
_____ Basic bow strokes: quarters, 8ths, triplets, 16ths
_____ Basic articulations: marcato, staccato, slurs, hooked bows,
_____ Simple spiccato: Eighth notes in pairs and triples in scalar music
_____ Moderate articulations: fast hooked bows, syncopated and dactylic rhythms
_____ Advanced spiccato: arpeggios, and in upper positions
_____ Sautillé notes in groups of fours, twos, and single note sautillé
_____ Ricochet

Other Categories. Use the rating scale to help you determine what to teach in categories like:

- Sight-Reading exercises or chorales with dotted rhythms, sixteenth-notes, 6/8, 12/8, 3/2 and 6/4, in keys with three or more sharps/flats, in positions higher than first?
- Music Theory, history, creativity (composition and improv.)

Technique Daily Lesson Plan

1. Unpack, tune, cross-tune, stretch.

2. Warm Up: _____

Tuning Canon, chords, 1, 2, 3 Octave scales, Dominant Arpeggios and Thirds.
Sometimes I choose a frontier key, and other times I choose a review key to polish intonation.

3. LH Technique: _____

1-2 exercises a day, gradually making my way through technique I want my students to learn. Do these regularly, but not necessarily every day.

4. Bow Technique: _____

A few minutes of bowing variations; I play a scale with an articulation I want my students to learn, and then they play it back for me. We work together to improve student tone.

5. Other Categories: Sight-reading, chorales, music theory.

Use these units to teach specific skills like practicing sight reading exercises in 3/2 or 12/8 before sight-reading a piece in those meters. You may also use these units to fill in the gaps after concerts, break up rehearsal monotony, or (in the case of music theory) when you are out.

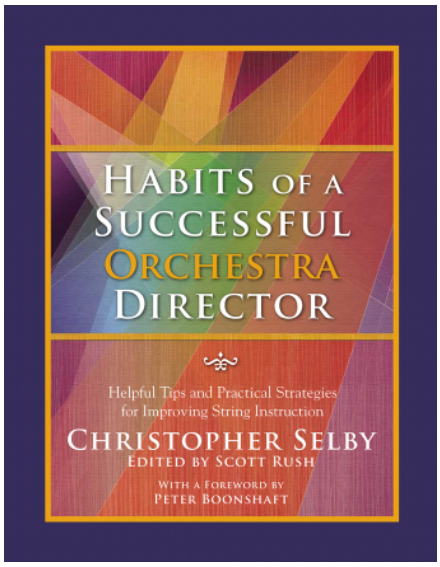
Planning Everything Else—Procedures to Program Logistics

1. Plan Your Procedures for EVERYTHING, including how you want the students to:

- Enter and leave the classroom; Unpack and pack up; drop off & pick up instruments
- Tune with fine tuners, pegs, what to do if a string is stuck or has slipped
- Know when to play, when not to play, and how to ask questions
- Turn in written or playing assignments, written documents, money
- Also know your plan for the other "What Ifs:" What if a student gets sick in your class, forgets their instrument or music, cusses you out in class, hits another student, etc.

2. Program Logistics—Field Trips, Fund Raisers, t-shirts/uniforms, and other stuff.

- Over the summer, make a list of everything that needs to get done. It will be a long list, but seeing it all written out will lower stress and it will help you plan.
- Figure out which tasks you must do, which ones you *want* to do, and which tasks you can delegate to someone else.
- Delegate as much as possible to parents.



This book will inspire young and veteran orchestra directors looking for fresh ideas about teaching orchestra students of all ages to:

- Perform with refined intonation, expressive musicianship, and a beautiful tone
- Develop advanced performance technique, rhythmic precision, and ensemble skills
- Sight-read better, rehearse more efficiently in class, and practice better at home
- Become orchestra leaders and take greater pride and ownership in your ensemble

Additional sections address rehearsal strategies, classroom policies, long-range planning, assessment, tips for building an orchestra program, and suggestions for communicating with parents and principals to better support the orchestra.

"This book is a must-read for all interested in teaching string orchestra at the K–12 level! It is chock full of great teaching ideas that will help you be successful in your classroom! Buy it, read it, and keep it in your library—you will come back to it time and time again!"—Mary L. Wagner, Former National ASTA President and co-author of the ASTA String Curriculum