

# Key Areas of Instruction in the String Orchestra Classroom

By Carolyn Sechrist, Southwest High School/ El Centro Elementary, El Centro, CA

As string teachers our task is daunting. A successful musical performance reflects an aggregate of acquired skills that need to be addressed daily in rehearsals. Sensitivity to the pitch, rhythmic, tonal, and musical demands of any given piece of music should be the focus of each lesson. The earlier in their training students display success with these elements, the more distinguished will be their future performances.

Although my current position involves teaching strings in elementary, junior high, and high school, I have found that junior high environment offers the most significant opportunity with five daily rehearsals a week to develop young musicians. The students at that age are most receptive and readily respond to the success that comes from daily, focused instruction. Having a successful junior high program is critical to sustaining any effective program at the high school.

Developing a sense of pitch in your students should be a priority. I begin my elementary students with tape on their instruments to foster correct finger placement and practice at home. I also tune individually my junior high string players each day. Students that hear correct pitch daily beginning with the open strings are far more apt to develop sensitivity to it. Each year I spend the first three months of the junior high class with either "Basic Scales and Two Part Inventions" by Muller/Rusch (now out of print) or alternative years - the relatively new - Essential Elements, "Intermediate Technique" Bk 2. These studies take the students through major and minor scales to three/four sharps and flats along with corresponding melodic material. If they are well grounded in the finger patterns required in these scales and corresponding melodic material, they are ready to tackle the literature. Heifetz once said in his master classes at USC that if you have a half hour to practice each day, you should spend 25 minutes practicing scales and the remaining 5 on the difficult parts of your repertoire. If students have difficulty with accuracy, isolate the problem and drill as needed until fluency is achieved. My high school students memorize their scales. I like to pair parallel scales in consecutive study (G major - g minor/ D Major - d minor).

Rote exercises serve to focus the class's attention on finger placement and agility. At the beginning of each year I review with the students the three basic tetrachords presented in Book 1 and 2 of most beginning methods. Beginning with the open string we play the minor, major, and whole tone tetrachords. The students obtain a sense of tonality, additionally, from doing these. You can make a guessing game out of which pattern might be played at any given time. Different bowings and rhythms may be added along with transfers to other positions. Sherri Kloss, a student of Heifetz, introduced me to an outstanding shifting exercise for class instruction. Beginning with your first finger, slurring on the "A" string B to C - C back to B in first position, then repeating the pattern, but shifting with your first finger moving to low second position and back again. This pattern is repeated to high second position (B to C#), then low third (B to D), high third (B to D#), and finally fourth (B to E). Students develop as well an awareness of the sound of a half step and subsequent interval relationships. Beginning with other fingers and moving to still higher positions are more advanced renditions of this basic exercise.

Once the students learn a new scale, I add rhythms to it. These are always first placed on the board. Sometimes I demonstrate the rhythmic pattern and then have a volunteer write it on the board and more importantly put the beats under the notes. Clapping notation highlights the rhythmic content of music. We might review just a pattern or an entire piece. At the junior high level I select specific pieces to reinforce rhythmic concepts (for example: Mancini's "Pink Panther" for the dotted 8th followed by the 16th note). There's a marvelous new book entitled, "A Rhythm a Week" by Witt which is an excellent training tool for the jr. high string class. Should students find difficulty with some rhythmic passage in a selection you're currently working on, incorporate it in a scale or rote warm up. Selected sight-reading will also aid in reinforcing previously learned rhythmic concepts.

## **Key Areas of Instruction in the String Orchestra Classroom (cont.)**

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There is no substitute for demonstrating to the students what constitutes a good tone. If you can't do this, have your best student play for the class. The assistant superintendent arrived to visit my class while I was giving a test on the F major scale. Although most the students received an "A" for their rendition, she quickly noticed each child's tone quality was entirely different. The students learn from listening to peers perform the same exercise as to what is the preferred sound. Soliciting from the students technical ways of improving a classmate's tone quality is an effective way to check on the class's awareness of correct tone production. Playing for each other is a great motivational tool!

Drawing of the bow is the most challenging aspect of string performance. The right thumb must be curved. Have the students check each other occasionally to see if they still have the proper grip. Students should be bowing from their elbows with a pull and push motion from a flexible wrist. Practice bow placement at the frog, middle, and then tip. Play scales all up-bows; all at the frog or tip with the correct arm and wrist motion. Strengthening all parts of the moving bow should assist them in obtaining a more uniform sound. The Suzuki pieces in book one are wonderful teaching tools for reinforcing the placement of the bow for given rhythmic patterns. The string class can learn these pieces in the key of D.

Correct position of the left hand and elbow is also essential in producing a great sound. I give all beginning violin and viola students a sponge at the beginning of their instrumental career. Students should be able to hold their instruments without the aid of the left hand. We play games to develop a sense of security about this. Elbow placement is also crucial. If the elbow is not correctly positioned, the fingers will not be able to work efficiently and shifting fluidity will not occur. If the violin and viola players cannot see their elbow under their instruments, it is not sufficiently under. Fingers must stand up on the string. My students practice without the bow hammering down each finger one at a time, then two at a time. More challenging exercises can be created by placing 2 or more fingers on different strings, simultaneously then lifting them up and down. These exercises will greatly increase the students' dexterity and improve their tone. Having good position enables the hands to better accomplish the task of tone production.

Musicianship can best be developed in your students by selecting quality music for them to study. It is significant to find music that is challenging for all players. Give special attention to the parts for the lower strings. Expose your students to a variety of musical styles and periods of composition. The students need to know what a musical phrase is and how to shape it. (bow speed and placement, fingering, dynamics, and vibrato). The relationship of the melody and harmony needs to be discussed, tuned, and balanced. To encourage sensitivity to the ensemble effort, I frequently have the students perform works conductorless with the orchestra relying on body language from the concertmaster. With this experience the students tend to be more aware of each other and the role of their part to the whole. Their listening skills improve. This activity also is a great introduction to chamber music, which is an integral part of my instructional program.

Public performance offers an opportunity to share the results of the rigors of the classroom. If you've spent your time wisely in patient, structured, and focused instruction, it will reveal itself in the performance displayed by your students and in the response of your audience.