Cochrane
Common Problems in a Jr. high school orchestra & their attempted solutions.

COMMON PROBLEMS IN A JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL ORCHESTRA AND THEIR ATTEMPTED SOLUTIONS

A ~~Four-hour~~ Two-hour Problem

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THESIS

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COMMON PROBLEMS IN A JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL ORCHESTRA AND THEIR ATTEMPTED SOLUTIONS

I. Purposes of this paper

Having had to meet each of the following problems not once, but many times in the past ten years of public school teaching the author has made an attempt to solve in a practical manner the common problems current in many junior high schools so that those having the same problems may profit by his experiences.

The writer does not mean to infer that his solutions are the best, or that they will always work, but they are solutions which have met with a fair amount of success.

The writer is also of the belief that a method or teaching procedure will many times succeed because of the personality and drive of the individual teacher. What will work for one person or in one situation will not necessarily work for another person or in another situation.

II. Administrative problems

Building a school orchestra is one of the most challenging problems in American education. It is generally agreed that an orchestra contains most of the major problems in instrumental technique, music equipment, musicianship, and music literature which characterize the field of instrumental music.[1]

The interest of the children in learning an orchestral instrument must first be aroused. This may be done in one of several ways. Illustrated talks may be used effectively for this purpose if they are presented in an interesting and enthusiastic manner. Another tried and good method is to give each pupil at all grade levels a musical aptitude test. The Kwalwasser-Dykema tests are a good standardized group. One can also be made by the instructor. These tests are not necessarily true pictures of a child's musical ability because determination and other factors enter into the picture, but they do act as a stimulus and create interest among the students for procuring and

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[1] Dr. Clyde Vroman---"First Steps in Building a School Orchestra"---The Etude (January 1945), p. 18

learning to play an instrument. It is best to start these classes in the grade school, preferably in the fifth and sixth grades.

After the interest of the student has been aroused a questionaire may be sent to the parents of the promising and interested student and then these may be followed up by personal calls at the homes of the students if time permits, otherwise a meeting may be arranged to meet small groups of parents at school.

Each child should be allowed, as far as possible, to choose his own instrument. An instrument forced on a child usually ends in disappointment for the child, his parents, and also his teacher as he will very shortly lose all interest in learning to play the instrument and in becoming a part of an orchestra or ensemble. Of course there may be some physical handicaps which would make it inadvisable for the child to learn the instrument of his first choice, but he usually has one second choice at least to fall back on. In no case should the teacher or parent force an instrument on a child when he is set against it.

Of course, there always are those students who decide to start instrumental music in the junior

high school period, and their needs must be met. But in the main, this three-year period should emphasize ensemble organizations.

There should be three separate classes started; one for strings, one for winds, and one for percussions. It must be remembered however, that no single pattern or plan of organization will fit all schools. In general, there should be from two to five rehearsals per week depending upon the size of the school, the music staff, and the scheduling problem.

In the Flint, Michigan, Zimmerman Junior High School, the string classes are taught only the first semester as scheduling does not permit more than one beginning class in a semester. It should also be explained that our beginning class must be scheduled during the noon lunch hour and that students in the class must be allowed time for their lunches, allowing us only about forty minutes for class work. However, since we have an elementary school in our building this system permits us to draw from the 6A's as well as the 7B and 7A grades.

The last three weeks of the second semester and the first two weeks of the first semester must then of a necessity be used as organizational time.

Actually as long as the first two weeks must be used for organization, the other period can best be used by giving students demonstrations of the various stringed instruments and by trying to build enthusiasm. Since classes can not be started until the next September, the pupils have the summer to look for their instruments. During the first two weeks of September, some students are still looking for instruments so the time can be used profitably by reviewing or teaching the "language of music" (fundamentals of musicianship).

By teaching only strings one semester and only winds the second semester, the inevitable competition between the strings and the winds is eliminated. The result is usually a more complete string section in the orchestra.

The wind instruments usually need little more 'selling' than a demonstration. However, because of the greater variety of instruments offered and of the greater popularity of some, perhaps added care is needed in helping the students select instruments to which they are suited. Along this line it will help the instructor to keep in mind his future needs for instrumentation.

In most schools the students in the wind and

string class have had some musical background and have some reading ability. But it must be admitted that the students without this background are the ones that usually find their way into the percussion class. This is due in part to:

1. The lack of consideration given to the selectivity of percussion students.

2. The lack of proper guidance for students possessed with the necessary qualifications.

As a result, the general attitude of many drummers is not toward mastery of their percussion instrument but toward just plain noise making.

A capable percussionist must possess an innate feeling for rhythm, as well as considerable musical knowledge, patience, and perseverance. Any competant teacher knows the difference between a student capable of learning and one totally indifferent to teaching. Just why conductors continue to fill up their sections with players lacking any ability or aptitude has always been completely beyond comprehension.

In selecting students for the percussion section, the first requirement is that the students have an enthusiasm for the study of percussion instruments and a keen desire to become well-routined musicians and not just drummers. The second and as

equally important requisite is that the students possess an instinctive feeling for rhythm.[1]

A survey should be made as to the instrumentation needs of the future by grades and let that govern the approach to new students for beginning instrument classes; i.e., if French horn were the instrument most needed, talk more about the French horn and its possibilities and a little less about some of the other instruments. A student, of course, should not play an instrument to which he is not adapted.

Some safeguard should be introduced to protect the parent and the student from getting inferior instruments. Usually the local music stores will co-operate if they know what your requirements are. However, the safe thing is to find out the kind of instrument the prospective buyer is interested in and then give him a written list of things to watch for. Any reputable dealer will take an instrument back for refund or trade if it is not satisfactory. Watch out for the instrument which comes out of the attic and was played by some relative in the far distant past. Chances are that it is obsolete or

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[1] William D. Revelli---"Percussionists - The Forgotten Men"---The Etude (September 1944), p. 511

worn out, thus giving the youngster a terrific handicap. It pays in the long run to insist on the higher quality of instruments, rather than to fill your organization with sour notes at the beginning.

There are a number of factors for teacher and pupil to consider before a decision can be reached in selecting an instrument. There are definite differences of opinion among teachers of instrumental music as to the influence of physical characteristics of a pupil in his success with a given kind of instrument. At present, the majority of teachers in the field believe from their own experience that a careful examination of teeth, jaw formation, and fingers of the prospective pupil is an essential step in the selection of the instrument he is to study. They also believe that the musical ear of the player influences his success in the field and determines to some extent his choice of instrument.

Emotional factors must be considered in helping the child to decide upon the choice of an instrument. When he has such a decided preference, he should be permitted to study the instrument, provided he has at least some of the necessary qualifications.

Parents, too, occasionally are determined that their child should play a particular instrument simply because they have heard someone else play it well or perhaps lying about the house is an old instrument that someone in the family has played and which has been kept for the use of the children. It is often difficult in such instances to help the child or the parents to a sound decision as to the instrument for which the child is best adapted. Comparatively few pupils fail to make acceptable progress on their instruments if given the right instrument and the right instruction.[1]

Scheduling in a small school is a real problem, but one that can be worked out through co-operation of the administrator and music supervisor. Administrators have found that one means of avoiding conflicts is to set up the music program first and then place alternate classes around it. Another way is to reserve one class period for semi-extra-curricular activities, such as debate, drama, operetta, band, orchestra, chorus, etc. It must be pointed out that the music program, especially orchestra and band, and sometimes chorus is the only subject that

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[1] "Music Education in the Elementary School", published by the California State Department of Education, Sacramento, 1939

draws from all grades and all courses of study. The easiest way to avoid conflicts is to set up the music program first and fit all other classes around it so as to allow any student from any class the opportunity of electing the music class of his choice.

Sectional rehearsals once a week for all sections is desirable, but scheduling during school hours in most cases is impractical. If one sectional rehearsal per week can be arranged, then four days of full rehearsal should be sufficient.

Class lessons, however, in the larger school, expecially for beginners is very desirable. Classes should be arranged for students of like ability on the same instrument with no less than two or more than seven in a class; a group of four is ideal.[1] Class lessons on like instruments may be impractable in the small school.

Administrators, however, many times cannot justify the expense of such small classes to the Board of Education. Again in many schools scheduling does not permit homogeneous classes and the result is heterogeneous. Taxpayers, parents, and

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[1] Kenneth L. Bovee---"Developing a Band in a Small Community"---The Etude (March 1945), p. 139

boards of education have not as yet fully realized that the director of a school orchestra is a teacher of many subjects, not just one. The subjects he is expected to teach include flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, saxophone, violin, viola, 'cello, string bass, cornet, French horn, trombone, tuba, and all percussion instruments. In addition, he teaches orchestra, which is the co-ordination of all these various instruments into a well-balanced musical organization.

It is recommended that violin classes be offered as early as the fourth grade, with classes also scheduled in all of the intermediate grades and in junior high school.[1] The transferring of students from violin to viola, violoncello, and bass viol should, if possible, be accomplished at the beginning of the sixth grade. Violin classes will show the most satisfactory progress if the membership to each class is limited to a maximum of ten students, six or eight is even more desirable. The classes should meet at least twice weekly, the periods being from thirty to forty-five minutes each. The instructor should have

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[1] William D. Revelli---"Developing the School Orchestra"---The Etude (December 1944), p. 693

acquired the necessary teaching skill, playing experience, and technics to enable him to achieve maximum results within a minimum of class time.

The primary reason for the adoption of the small string class program is because of its efficiency in the teaching of the numerous problems present in beginning string groups. The handling of the instrument and bow, the tuning, the left-hand position, finger technic, control, intonation, relaxation, and numerous other elements of performance require such emphasis that individual attention is an absolute necessity.

Repair of instruments is always a problem and the repair of many of these can be successfully handled by the director. A frozen trumpet mouthpiece is best treated by passing the frozen part over a flame until thoroughly warmed (not enough to melt the solder), apply penetrating oil and tap with a leather mallet until the part is loosened. Never use pliers or any other means of force. A frozen valve is uaually a job for the repair man. A nick in a trombone slide must be removed by an expert. An assortment of clarinet and saxophone pads and a tube of pad cement will usually take care of emergencies for reed instruments. Unless the

school is in the habit of furnishing reeds to reed players, it is usually well to have an assortment of reeds on hand for emergencies. However reed players should be trained to have their own emergency reeds on hand. The use of plastic reeds should be avoided until some future date when they have been proved more practical. Springs for reed instruments do sometimes break but they may be made to work by substituting rubber bands. This should be considered a very temporary repair and should not be tolerated for any length of time. Violin, viola, and 'cello strings are usually breaking at inopportune times. The players of these instruments should have their own extra strings, but usually they do not. The A string of each of these instruments is the one most frequently broken and so it is advisable to have some strings on hand.

The desire for visible recognition of merit is almost universal, and at no period in life is it stronger than during adolescence. Since a student is extremely sensitive to the approval of members of his group, an award sets the stamp of official sanction upon his skill and ability. He gains the approbation of the group in having attained distinction in some worthy line of endeavor.

When properly managed, a system of awards has considerable merit in developing a co-operative attitude and in stimulating higher standards of performance among the student group.[1]

The most comprehensive award system in print is undoubtedly the "Prescott Technic System for All Wind Instruments," by Gerald Prescott. This is a carefully graded outline of technical study for band instruments arranged into weekly assignments so that the player develops a well-grounded technic as he progresses through its twelve years of study. A pin is awarded for completing each annual assignment. Membership in the first, second, or third band is dependent upon one's achievement in the course of study.

As an alternate plan a committee of instrumental students, with the instructor as advisor, could work out an award system to present to the P.T.A. or music parents' organization to finance. Many such groups would enthusiastically finance an award plan. An award program if properly carried out will definitely stimulate musical interest.

The general public judges a musical organization

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[1] T. F. Normann---"Instrumental Music In the Public Schools"---O. Ditson Company, 1941. p. 121

in its public performance on the following points: appearance, attitude of students, and playing ability. A uniform of course helps appearance, but an organization can dress neatly and uniformly so as to present a good appearance without the aid of a uniform. The attitude of the students indicates whether or not the director has the respect of his students. Every director desires a group which is attentive and enthusiastic to all details and is well organized. Playing ability is listed last because, while it is our ultimate aim, it will, to a certain extent, take care of itself if all other details are taken care of.

Some form of achievement card is advisable to keep parents advised of students' progress.

Practice cards can sometimes be used to advantage, but there is a danger of forcing students, who are always trying to be looked upon favorably, not to tell the truth. Contests, solos, and tryouts for playing ability help eliminate any need for practice cards. The real problem is to keep students interested. If they are not interested they will not practice anyway.

III. Instructional problems

Tuning is an ever present every day problem, especially for the stringed instruments. A - 440 is the ideal pitch and the piano should be kept as close to that pitch as possible.

It is advisable to have the student learn to tune his instrument as soon as possible since the teacher cannot afford to take a large share of each period checking the individual instruments. The students should tune at first by matching the pitches as given on a pitch pipe or on the piano. It will be found with beginners that tuning may be expedited if the class sings the pitch while tuning. As soon as a child has tuned his string so that it matches his voice he places his instrument in resting position but keeps on singing until the last child has finished tuning. The teacher may quickly check by drawing fifths on the various instruments, encouraging the children to listen carefully to the sound of the interval. In large classes time may be saved by having the entire class sound a string in unison while the instructor passes quickly up the aisle checking those instruments that are not

in tune.

Students will need to be taught how to turn the peg and to screw it gradually into the peg box to avoid its jumping loose. The most important string is the A as all tuning is done from this point. If the A string is slightly off pitch all other strings will inevitably be out of tune. This stage of learning is an excellent time in which to induce students to listen for "beats." Indeed, no satisfactory tuning can be done until pupils are cognizant of the throbs or waves which occur when tones are not in complete accord. If the "beat" cannot be eliminated, it will almost certainly be due to a flaw in the strings. When a tone is very slightly sharp, it may be adjusted by pulling the string a wee bit.[1]

The Bb-466.2 is the ideal pitch for wind instruments, especially in band work. Some instructors tune all instruments in orchestra to A-440, while others tune their strings only to A-440 and their winds to Bb-466.2. I believe the Bb-466.2 is ideal for wind instruments because the trombones can tune to a closed position and the trumpets and

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[1] T. F. Normann---"Instrumental Music In the Public Schools"---O. Ditson Company, 1941. p. 162

tuba to open tones. To the other wind instruments it makes practically no difference.

Tuning of percussion instruments is divided into two classifications: those of definite pitch, and those of indefinite pitch. Under the first classification comes the timpani, hand-tuned and pedal. Two drums are generally used. Each instrument covers a range of five tones, the one instrument being most frequently tuned in the tonic, the other in the dominant. When tuning with hand screws, the tuner should make sure that all screws are equally tight. This is best done by turning taps on opposite sides of the drum and by giving a slight twist to each in turn. Tension should be equalized over the entire surface of the drumhead. This may be tested by snapping the head near each tap with the middle finger.

The bass drum and snare drum are classified as instruments of indefinite pitch. Both should have separate tension rods as they allow for a more flexible adjustment. The batter head should be slightly tighter than the head not struck.[1]

Snare drums need not be loosened except when

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[1] T. F. Normann---"Instrumental Music In the Public Schools"---O. Ditson Company, 1941. p. 333, 335

tightened during damp weather. Then the heads should be loosened to approximately normal tension.

The seated musician should be in a natural, comfortable position, shoulders erect, back away from the chair back, and both feet on the floor, one slightly ahead of the other.

The violin student must assume a posture that is at first, uncomfortable, to say the least. He holds the violin between his shoulder and chin - or rather the left side of the jaw. This necessitates a slight elevation of the shoulder and a turning of the head. The neck of the violin is held between the thumb and first finger of the left hand, with the elbow drawn sharply in, and the wrist slightly out, and with all the fingers turned sufficiently towards the left to enable them to approximate a position over the strings.[1]

The viola position should approximate that of the violin.

The 'cello is held firmly between the knees. The spike should be extended only enough so that the pegs are just above shoulder height.

The string bass should be upright with the

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[1] J. C. Cook---"The Right Beginning"---The Etude (July 1945) p. 381

right side leaning against the player.

The violin, viola, flute, trumpet, and trombone should be held up on a level with the floor. The clarinet should be between and slightly above the performer's knees.

The bassoon, saxophone, and bass clarinet are held with a neck cord at the right side.

Percussionists always stand in an attentive position while resting during the playing of a piece.

Under articulation let us take up breathing, tonguing, and bowing. Diaphragmatic breathing is proper for all players of wind instruments. In order to get students to see how to breath through the diaphragm, have them stand, place their hands on their hips with fingers forward, exhaust all air from diaphragm and squeeze tightly with the fingers. Suddenly gasp for air with the mouth open. The diaphragm will force the fingers apart with the intake of air.

Tonguing differs somewhat for the various families of wind instruments. For reed instruments (clarinet, oboe, bassoon, and saxophone) the tongue may be shaped to form the word <u>thud</u>. The <u>thu</u> starts the tone while the <u>ud</u> stops it. Cup-mouthpiece

instruments are similar except the syllable tu-ut is used. For French horn a spitting motion is used as if spitting a piece of paper from the end of the tongue.

When considering the bowing of the violin, let us first take up the position of the right hand on the bow. Pick up the bow with the left hand, holding it by the frog, with the hair up. While holding it thus, place the thumb of the right hand in its proper position, partly on the frog and partly on the stick, with the second finger opposite the thumb. The stick should rest comfortably in the first joint of this finger. Now turn the hand over and allow the other fingers of the right hand to fall upon the stick. Remove the left hand from its original position and take a new hold on the stick at about the middle in order to give the fingers of the right hand freedom in adjusting themselves into their final proper places. Draw the bow into a position somewhat diagonal to the contour of the hand, so that the stick may cross the first finger at the second joint, and that the fourth finger may rest on its tip. The first, second, and third fingers should mould themselves around the stick in

such a manner as to ensure perfect control.[1] Most school editions of junior high school music come with the bowings marked and therefore our main problem is to see that the students are uniform in their bowing.

Intonation of strings is best helped by playing scales slowly in unison.

Intonation of winds and strings together in an orchestra is also helped by unisonal scale studies, but in addition a simple chorale may be used in the same key of the scale studied. Perhaps a good procedure would be to play the chorale, play the scale, and then repeat the chorale for improvement. A little of this work every day brings remarkable results.

Various rhythm patterns may be clarified in a student's mind by substituting words for the rhythm. For example a 3/4 rhythm with the bass as one, and the horns as two - three, could be ham - burg - er. A 2/4 rhythm, hot - dog, and a 4/4 rhythm, a - malt - ed - milk. Such patterns appeal to a youngster's imagination and many times will establish a rhythm that otherwise would be very hazy.

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[1] J. C. Cook---"The Right Beginning"---The Etude (July, 1945) p. 381

Then, too, imagination can be used in letting a youngster see that musical phrases are at times like hamburgers. The bass is the ham. The horns are the burger. The first violins may be catsup. The flutes and clarinets the various relishes, etc. until finally we have a deluxe hamburger.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion it is necessary to bring to the attention of the reader the fact that what will work in one situation will not work in another. While all schools have their similarities there are still enough differences to warrant a carefully planned experimentation of methods, materials, and teaching procedures.

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Form for Obtaining Information Necessary in

Organizing Instrumental Music Classes

Name _____ Age _____

Address _____

Phone _____ Grade _____

School attended _____

Your schoolroom number _____ Date _____

1. Do you want to play in the band or orch.?____
2. What instrument do you have in your home?____
3. Have you ever taken music lessons? _____
4. If so, on what instrument? _____
5. Are you taking music lessons now? _____
6. Your father's or mother's name? _____

Place an X after the instrument you would like to play.

Violin _____	French Horn _____	Flute _____
Viola _____	Trombone _____	Clarinet____
Cello _____	Baritone _____	Saxophone___
Trumpet _____	Bass Horn _____	Drums _____