

Charlie Heim
Music 345
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Reflection: High School Orchestra Rehearsal
Williamsport Area High School

Ah, high school orchestra – the land where the devoted and apathetic meet to play classical music together. At least, that’s the way it was when I was in such a land, and I thus projected that assumption toward the present day. That day was Wednesday, March 25th, and I was a visiting student conductor at Williamsport Area High School. The ensemble that was laid before me was a diverse group of string instrumentalists, and my charge was to direct them through a mini-rehearsal on one section of one piece. I had many preconceived notions walking into this rehearsal, many of which were confirmed by both the students and their faculty director, Mr. Tedford. However, these students were still just that; by definition, they’re interested in learning a thing or two.

Not knowing what to expect, I set out with a fairly focused plan for my short lesson with the orchestra. I was to work on part of an arrangement of the fourth movement of Beethoven’s third symphony, and had noted a number of things in the score that I felt would require some attention. My intent was to go over the first two significant melodic themes in the movement, focusing on good time, intonation, and phrasing. Since there’s a lot of “space” in the scoring, I assumed that the ensemble would have some trouble keeping a consistent pulse; their experience level determined their command on the instrument, and therefore would present some problems playing in tune as well. Observing my peers work with the students before me basically affirmed my assumptions, and I was ready to proceed as I had planned.

Standing before the students, I was met with a somewhat daunting mix of nonverbal reactions. Some were quiet, respectful, and ready to work with me, and some were talkative, apathetic, and barely involved in the rehearsal. Once I got the ensemble's full attention, I ran through the whole of my excerpt. The group followed me fairly well, making noticeable (albeit not complete) adjustments for dynamic changes, fermati, and the like. They seemed to be getting a pretty full sound as a group, and their timing was pretty decent – to me, the most noticeable detractor from their sound was shaky intonation. That said, I wanted to make sure to solidify the former two points first before attacking the larger intonation issue. Starting back at the beginning of the excerpt, I followed my lesson plan – and my wish to work on their sound production and rhythm – by working through the first theme's introductory phrase. This section involved a lot of counting, switching from pizzicato to arco, and large dynamic changes, so I was interested in making sure it was well executed. The ensemble followed me well, making a noted improvement on the section after I directed them towards my points of focus.

Much of the rehearsal continued in this manner. I had subsequent points of focus on the piece – mainly, working each melodic section individually to assure that they caught as much of the intended musical effect as possible. For the first phrase, I talked the group through what I thought were the more important voices: those who carry the repeated quarter-note theme, and the contrasting first violin melody that sits atop it. The second had similar considerations, and notably featured a mid-phrase fermata and brief pause. The group took this instruction and performed accordingly to the best of their ability. During this part of the small rehearsal, I feel that I was more conscious of assuring that the students understood the melodic material. Through that, I thought, they

could work on almost all of the points on our Rehearsal Hierarchy; sound production, rhythm, intonation, and expression all come into play (no pun intended) while rehearsing these sections. I was generally pleased with the result, as the students did as much as they could with the small amount of instruction I was able to give them. I couldn't help but feel, however, that I would have perhaps focused my lesson plan differently if I had been allotted more time with the ensemble. While I still would have wanted to focus their attention on the melodic material as I did, I would have liked to take one instrumental section at a time to focus on sectional phrasing, sound, and intonation. The latter to me was the most pressing issue, and naturally would likely prove to be the most time consuming to remedy. Only so much can be done with five minutes, I suppose.

My experience with Williamsport's orchestra was a brief one, and I gained more than just some miles on my odometer. Despite the mixed bag of emotional demeanors, ability levels, and general engagement in class, the high school students were positive and interesting to work with. More specifically, I could sense a palpable interest in learning from the students, despite what their exterior might exhibit. Even though they may have tried to act like they're too cool for school, I could still sense that they wanted to participate and get better. At the end of the day, that's all you need.