



THE SCORE

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CONTENTS

FROM THE PRESIDENT	2
REFLECTIONS	6
TEN TIPS FOR STRING ORCHESTRAS	14
ADJUDICATOR'S THOUGHTS	18

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CHAPTER 3

TEN TIPS FOR GETTING YOUR STRINGS SOUNDING GREAT!



DR CAROLYN WATSON

1. Use quality instruments and accessories

A seemingly obvious requirement, but proper equipment is essential for quality sound production on string instruments. Both bow and string instrument need to be well looked after and maintained. Strings should be cleaned regularly with a cloth and alcohol to remove excess rosin. Check regularly the winding on the strings – rusty or decaying strings have an adverse affect on pitch. Strings which are unraveling, aside from creating pitch issues, can also be painful under the fingers and cause cuts due to the loose metal coils. Bows need to have adequate hair and be re-haired and checked regularly, and good rosin is essential.

2. Attend to stage set up

Set your ensemble up with ample room between players and desks. For strings, much more room between chairs is necessary than for wind players so players' arms are able to move freely in order to bow. Enough room to bow and play with freedom will result in a better quality of sound production. Similarly, music stands should be at the correct height so players are not slouching or bending forward in order to see the music. Insist on proper orchestral posture – aside from avoiding injury and fatigue, your ensemble will sound better because of it.

3. Rehearse standing up

When sitting for long stretches of time, when tired, or simply as inexperienced ensemble members it is easy for violins and violas to adopt a lazy orchestral posture. Having them stand up to play in rehearsal alleviates this problem. Remind them of how much more energized they sound when they stand to play, and try to replicate this when sitting.

4. Choose accessible repertoire

For beginning string ensembles, this means pieces in A and D Major – the emphasis on open strings in these keys is a sure way to success! In general, flat keys are not as accessible to developing string players as sharp keys and C major isn't as easy for young string players as you think!

5. Prepare bowings and fingerings

So much of what young string players require is information pertaining to bowing and particularly fingering. Knowing which position to play something in, and which fingering to use is an absolute fundamental piece of information for young string players and without it, they are often at a loss to know where to begin.

Appropriate bowing and fingering solutions have the potential to markedly improve the musical result of any young string ensemble or orchestra. If you are not a string player, ask a colleague who is to mark parts with basic fingering and bowing. Check that bowing is uniform in all corresponding parts – doing so will save endless hours of rehearsal confusion and conversation and frustration on your part.

6. Divisi

Dividing double, triple and quadruple stops will go a long way to a more resonant and sonorous tone quality on chords and will also aid intonation. Standard orchestral practice is to divide chords by inside and outside player – outside takes the top two notes, inside the bottom. Exceptions to this general rule are double and triple stops incorporating open strings where the natural resonance of the instrument is often advantageous.

7. Choose quality repertoire

Works you enjoy conducting and works students enjoy playing is a great way to ensure a happy rehearsal room. Pieces targeting specific pedagogical aspects when structured in a logical sequential program will go a long way to developing your ensemble over the longer term.

8. Highlight your ensemble's strengths

Medium-fast paced works with a degree of rhythmic drive will generally work better with a young ensemble than slower, more legato pieces. A beautiful Barber Adagio-esque sustained legato string sound tends to be well beyond the reach of all but the most expert of developing string players. The slower the tempo, the more difficult it is for young musicians to internalize a pulse, leading to ensemble issues. Music which emphasizes pulse and rhythm, therefore, will result in more chance of success.

9. Program creatively

A mix of composers, styles and genres will help maintain interest and a sense of motivation for players. Aside from also serving as a broader musical education, this approach will also provide your audience with an interesting mix of works to hear in performance.

10. Be patient!

String instruments are not easy to play! Particularly in the beginning stages there are significant logistical considerations relating to bow hold and placement on the string, general playing posture, holding the instrument, co-ordinating the left and right hands and in changing strings and positions. And then there is the matter of doing all these things together with everyone else, at the right time!

Useful String/Orchestral Resources for the School Teacher and Conductor:

- Sandra Dackow arrangements for string orchestra/ensemble:
<http://www.tempopress.com/dackoweditions.asp>
- Stephen Chin – particularly good for beginning and young string ensembles:
<http://everythingstring.com/>
- Loreta Fin – particularly good for beginning and young string ensembles:
<http://www.wilfinmusic.com.au/index.html>
- Belwin, Highland Etling Orchestral Series – great arrangements for primary and high school orchestras/ensembles of all levels
<http://www.alfred.com/SC/SmartMusicOrchestra.aspx>
- <http://imslp.org/> Scores and parts to a wide array of public domain orchestral music.

DR CAROLYN WATSON

Australian conductor Carolyn Watson is the newly appointed Director of Orchestral Studies at Texas State University. From 2013-15 she held the position of Conductor of the Interlochen Arts Academy Orchestra and has also conducted the World Youth Symphony Orchestra and Detroit Symphony Youth Orchestra.

Prior to moving to the US Carolyn enjoyed a successful tenure as the inaugural Conductor-in-Residence at Sydney's Conservatorium High School from 2011-2013. A Fellow of the American Academy of Conducting at the Aspen Music Festival and School where she studied with David Zinman, Carolyn was a major prizewinner at the 2012 Emmerich Kálmán International Operetta Conducting Competition in Budapest. She is the recipient of the Brian Stacey Award for Emerging Australian Conductors, Charles Mackerras Conducting Prize, Nelly Apt Scholarship and Opera Foundation Australia's Bayreuth Opera Award and Berlin New Music Opera Award.

She was a 2012 Churchill Fellow and held a 2013 Dome Centenary Fellowship from the State Library of Victoria. Carolyn holds a PhD in Performance (Conducting) from the University of Sydney where the subject of her doctoral thesis was *Gesture as Communication: The Art of Carlos Kleiber*. An accomplished violinist, Carolyn is also an enthusiastic music educator.