

TEN SIMPLE WAYS TO IMPROVE THE MUSICAL EXPRESSION OF YOUR ORCHESTRA

by Michael Hopkins

I have had the pleasure of working as an adjudicator and clinician for well prepared and technically accurate orchestra festivals around the country. Occasionally there have been performances that were exemplary in terms of musical expression. In this article, I will share the common features I have observed in these musically expressive performances and a few simple techniques to help develop musical expression at all levels.

The following ideas can't be addressed once or twice to be effective—they need to be assimilated into the ongoing routine and become an integral part of the music making process. By using these techniques in rehearsals, directors can improve the sound of their orchestras, help their students develop a deeper appreciation for their ensemble experience, and facilitate students' awareness of their expressive potential.

Get Students Performing with the Whole Body

All stringed instruments produce sound through body movements, therefore problems with the movements will produce problems with the sound. Lesser (2011, 28) writes, "Many musicians, regardless of their instrument, play from the mid-chest up with no awareness of the rest of their body. They are surprised to learn their sound is affected by the placement of their feet and legs, the stress in their lower back, and their shallow breath." Horvath (2003, 68) notes that, "When we focus on the elements of musicianship, we often systematically ignore the musculature that creates music."

Videos of expert string performers reveal no one correct way to move while playing a stringed instrument. However, basic principles of movement can be taught in orchestra classes.

Many articles and books have been published on the importance of free and relaxed movements in relation to string players' health and wellness (see Buchanan & Hays 2014, Horvath 2010, Johnson, Conable, & Conable 2009, Palac 2008). In addition to keeping students healthy, learning how to sit and move correctly can lead to musically expressive performances. Highly expressive musicians engage in musical movement, and a lack of movement can hinder communication in an ensemble (Neidlinger 2011).

Performing with the whole body is an important aspect of expressive orchestral performance. Teachers can use sports analogies to bring students' awareness to the fact that they play the instrument with their whole bodies, not just their hands or arms. Hitting a baseball or tennis ball, throwing a football, shooting a basketball, or kicking a soccer ball—all familiar sports activities—involve the whole body to be done properly.

In graduate school, I remember Professor Robert Culver frequently reminding us that string playing happens "from the ground up and the center out." When playing in orchestra, there are three basic ways to move: side to side, front to back, or a combination. Students need to sit toward the front of the chair with feet under the knees to take advantage of movement possibilities.

Rolland (1974) described two ways of moving with the bow: "unilateral movement" when the body and bow move in the same direction and "bilateral movement" when the body moves in the opposite direction of the bow stroke. Rolland wrote that unilateral movements are useful during long, slow bow strokes, while bilateral movements are more useful for bow strokes of fast or medium speed.

Playing open strings at varied tempos gets your students focused on their physical movements when playing. Students should shift their weight between the left and right feet and the sitz bones as they move. Movements should not be excessive, distracting, or interfere with playing. If done properly, moving enhances tone production by releasing tension from the body. Here is a list of a few warmups to try:

- For long, slow bows played with a unilateral movement, start with whole notes on the open D string at quarter = 84 bpm.
- For medium speed, try half notes at the same tempo; for fast bow strokes, try quarter notes at the same tempo.
- Experiment with different tempos and different open strings as students get more comfortable moving.
- Try moving while playing scales, then try moving while playing a familiar piece of music. Choose a piece that is well-learned and technically under control, not a piece the orchestra is still learning.
- Ask your students to think about releasing tension from their bodies as they move with the music.

Synchronizing breathing can further enhance precision and expression. Bow arm motion influences breathing—typically inhaling on up bow motions and exhaling on down bow motions, with the majority of breaths occurring when the bow changes direction (Szende & Nemessuri 1971). Try the open string movement exercises described above, asking students to synchronize their breathing. Hainlen (2005, 66) writes, "Why wait until students are in a conservatory to teach them to correlate an anticipatory gesture with a beginning breath?"

Promote Visual Communication

Expressive orchestras display high levels of visual communication between members of the ensemble. In

string education, visual cues such as eye contact, upper body movement, or head nods are encouraged among members of chamber groups (Leshnow 2001). Within an orchestra, “individual sections are chamber groups capable of reading each other through movement cues” (Neidlinger 2011, 22).

Orchestra members must overcome the psychological and physical barriers of sheet music on stands to make visual connections across the ensemble. When I work with orchestras, I like to remind the musicians that music notation is like a road map or GPS. If you stare at a map while driving, you might go off the road.

One way to promote visual communication is to have the orchestra memorize a section within a piece (or an entire piece) and then turn music stands around. No sheet music to look at instantly heightens the level of visual communication.

This becomes a great opportunity for you to connect with students as the conductor. Laycock (2013, 23) writes, “All humans respond to positive reinforcement. In the realm of

Unified articulation and bow length help to develop the expressive potential of an orchestra. Have students pass a short motive (e.g., two martelé quarter notes or a measure of spiccato eighth notes on an open string) from player to player in a moderate tempo. Pass it around a row within the semicircle, or pass it within a section.

This exercise reveals a lot. Whenever I do this game as a guest conductor, I will hear eight or more different articulations and note lengths the first time we try it. Ask students to reach a consensus about what the articulation and length should be. Govias (2014, 26) observes, “Simply asking musicians to agree, without mandating any particular musical outcome, can be an incredibly powerful and effective way to engage listening.”

Another characteristic of expressive orchestras is the front, back, and middle of sections participate equally in the tone production. Seating your orchestra so less experienced students sit with more experienced students can help balance the sound. If you have an orchestra where the front stand tends



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eye contact, the question becomes: Are the players rewarded for looking up? Are there moments of connection with the conductor, a mutual delight in the art of making music? If there is an incentive for focusing attention on the conductor, students will do so with ever increasing frequency.”

In addition to eye contact with the conductor, expressive orchestras demonstrate non-verbal cues among section leaders. Make sure you help facilitate section leader eye contact by moving your podium toward the front of the stage enough so the concertmaster and principal cellist can see each other. Ask your orchestra to begin the piece without your help. Encourage section leaders to use eye contact, upper body or head movement, and breathing to obtain a precise entrance from the orchestra. Encourage everyone in the orchestra to look to the front of their section for non-verbal cues.

Focus on Unity

Expressive orchestras play with unified gestures (Hainlen 2005). A unified approach to bowing is a key component of developing the core tone of an orchestra.

When you raise your arms to begin a piece, look at where the concertmaster has placed his/her bow on the string. Everyone in the orchestra needs to match the exact location on the bow and the bowing lane. It is difficult, of course, for those seated across the orchestra or several stands behind the front desk to see the bow placement of the concertmaster. Visual communication at this point becomes so important. The information needs to be non-verbally passed back stand by stand.

to play *forte* and the back of the section plays *piano*, try playing a game where you pick a familiar piece and ask the back of the sections to play *forte*. The middle of the sections play *mezzo-forte* and the front of sections play *piano*.

This game works wonders for getting the front stands to listen behind them, and the back of section to take greater responsibility. Be persistent. It may take several attempts to get the back stands to play out and the front stands to listen back in the section.

When discussing bowing and articulation, I am reminded of a quote from Maslow (1966, 15): “If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.” The bow is a multi-faceted tool, capable of many different articulations and tone colors—yet in the first years of instruction students may become accustomed to one bow speed and articulation. For an orchestra to be musically expressive, the musicians need to be able to alter their bow speed and articulation style to match the style of the music being played.

As one example in slow sustained works, the musicians must slow the bow speed and move toward the bridge. Weight must be added when moving toward the tip of the bow if a crescendo occurs on a down bow. In pieces requiring spiccato bowing, everyone needs to be in the same place on the bow. At the end of long fermatas orchestra members must look forward in their sections to synchronize, while section leaders and conductor clearly show the release.

Develop an Inclusive Awareness

In any genre of music, a key to expressive performance is

listening to the people you make music with (Johnson 2011). Members of an expressive orchestra have an understanding of how their own part fits into the whole. They know which section has the melody at all times, they know who they are doubled with, and they are aware of how their part interacts with other sections in the orchestra. They have developed an “inclusive awareness” of what happens within the orchestra.

This awareness can arise as a natural outcome of the conductor using inclusive language and inviting students to listen carefully when rehearsing. If a conductor needs to work with the violas and says, “Let’s listen to this very important part the violas have at m. 23. I want everyone to figure out what other section has the same rhythm as the violas”—instead of, “I need to hear the violas at m. 23” or just “violas, m. 23”—then students will develop a heightened awareness of the viola part and how it fits with their own part.

Another strategy is to frequently rehearse multiple sections together, even if the conductor’s primary goal is to fix a problem in one of the sections. For example, “I’d like everyone to listen to how the violin 2 and cello parts fit together here at m. 23.”

A fun game can promote critical listening to self and to others, such as the “musical villain” game. Ask students to close their eyes so they can’t see who you select. Walk around the room and select a few students to deliberately play incorrectly by tapping their shoulders. Tell students the one thing you want the villains to do incorrectly (e.g., play F instead of F#, play out of tune, rush the tempo, play *piano* instead of *forte*, etc.). Play a section of a piece of music. Challenge the other students to identify the musical villains, and the non-villains to avoid being accused of the crime by playing as accurately as possible! Your students will enjoy trying to catch the villains in the act—and by doing so will engage in deep, critical listening across the room.

Ask your students questions that require critical listening. For example, “Cellos, do you know which section in the orchestra is playing your part one octave higher at m. 23?” If they don’t immediately know, rehearse that section of the music and ask everyone in the orchestra to listen carefully for the doubling.

Rehearsing with the goal of developing students’ inclusive awareness will make rehearsals more productive, as individual students will assume greater responsibility for music making (Neidlinger 2011).

Address Intonation in Every Rehearsal

Expressive performances are in tune. Intonation is an important topic in string education, and many articles have been published in *American String Teacher* with pedagogical strategies (see Curry 2011, Hopkins 2012, Watkins 2004, Whitcomb 2007).

An important point for conductors to remember is that what is addressed in rehearsal tends to improve, but what is ignored in rehearsal will likely not improve. Therefore, intonation must be addressed in every rehearsal to bring awareness of its critical importance to the musicians.

Students must take responsibility for critical listening and adjustment of intonation. Conductors can help students take responsibility by communicating the specific intonation problems and by offering specific solutions to fix the problems. Students need to know what to listen for (e.g., resonance, ringing tone, beat elimination), but they also need to understand the causes of poor intonation—not just the symptoms. For example, left hand position and finger shape, shifting, and fingering choices all have a huge impact on intonation.

Intonation fundamentals are best addressed outside the context of repertoire and should be part of a daily warmup. It all starts with the tuning routine. Tuning should always be done quietly. The room atmosphere should be solemn and reverent, characterized by deep sincerity and seriousness of purpose as students tune their strings to a reference pitch. When playing scales, stop to check and tune intervals with open strings as double stops—octaves, unisons, P4, P5, 3rds and 6ths, 2nds and 7ths. Below are other ideas for scale warmups to focus on intonation:

- Use tonic drones while playing scales.
- Play scales as a call and response, with you or a student as the “call” and everyone in the orchestra as the “response.”
- Return to the tonic after each pitch in the scale.
- Place a measured period of silence between each note of scale to “audiate” the next pitch (i.e., imagining the pitch in the mind before playing on the instrument).
- Play scales in broken 3rds, 4ths, and 5ths, and play arpeggios. Orchestral bass lines commonly feature arpeggiated motion rather than scalar motion.

Students need to understand that intonation on orchestral strings is a continuum, not twelve discrete categories like on the piano or guitar. Listening and adjusting are always critical.

Engage in Listening and Critical Reflection

Expressive orchestras have spent time listening to excellent performances and recordings and have used that information to develop stylistically appropriate interpretations of the works being performed.

Research on the listening preferences of adolescents suggest that outside of school, students prefer listening to contemporary popular styles over styles originating in the past such as folk and classical (North, Hargreaves, & O’Neill 2000). When working with middle or high school students, I ask them, “If I want to be a hip-hop artist (Hip Hopkins), would it be a good idea for me to listen to hip-hop?” The students concur it would probably be a good idea. I then ask, “If I wanted to paint in an impressionist style, would it be helpful for me to study the paintings of Monet?” Of course, they say. How else would I know what it is supposed to look like?

Listening to recordings of exemplars will result in improved stylistic performance (Mixon 2009). If students listen to recordings by the finest orchestras in the world on a regular basis, they will be able to compare and contrast the phrasing, tempo, and expressive devices used by expert musicians. They

will then be able to engage in thoughtful, critical reflection on their own performances and make informed musical decisions that lead to expressive performance.

Rather than asking students to listen individually to recordings outside of class, I think it is worth using class time to provide the ensemble with a shared listening experience that leads to a group discussion. The conductor can prepare the students by asking them to listen to specific aspects of the music, such as the phrasing.

In addition to expert recordings, record your students so they can listen and critically examine aspects of their performances. Many directors make recordings of performances to listen to afterwards, but making a recording a few weeks before the

Make Connections for Deeper Personal Meaning

The National Core Arts Standards (2014, 13) include “connecting” as one of the four anchor standards (alongside creating, performing, and responding) so students will “relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical contexts to deepen understanding.” The standards call for students to have experiences relating artistic ideas and work with personal meaning.

The expressive elements of music are analogous to expressive elements in speech (pitch, rhythm, tempo, phrasing), film (slow motion scenes), drama and literature (plot themes building to a climactic moment), and visual art (color, texture,



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Experts in audio mixing often write about ear fatigue—the idea that the brain gets tired after long periods of attentive and focused listening (Izhaki 2013). School orchestra directors often experience listening fatigue. It is very difficult to listen carefully for five or more hours per day to large ensembles. Listen to recordings of your rehearsals at home and take notes. If you have never tried this, you will be amazed by what you hear when off the podium in a quiet space free from distractions.

Program Repertoire for an Optimal Experience

Expressive orchestras perform music that allows them to go deeper than simply trying to get all the pitches and rhythms correct. When the repertoire provides a balance between skill and challenge, the students can be musically expressive and experience “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi 1991). Central to Csikszentmihalyi’s flow theory is the concept of “optimal experience—defined as a feeling of being in control of our actions, leading to a deep sense of enjoyment that is long cherished.

Students assigned repertoire where the amount of challenge exceeds their skills will experience anxiety and diminished motivation for learning. “In order to focus the greatest amount of energy on the musical aspects of the repertoire, most selections should be well within the technical limits of the members of the ensemble. While some music should be selected that stretches the technical limits of the ensemble members, the musical aspects must be given the highest priority” (Reynolds 2000, 32).

contrast). Throughout history, musicians have been inspired to make connections with other forms of creative expression. Taking time in rehearsal to help students make connections between their music and other areas of their lives will lead to more expressive performances.

Refine Your Conducting

As string educators, we have a lot of responsibilities. We spend so much time focused on helping our students that we may overlook our own conducting technique and the impact it can have upon the musical expression of our orchestra. Over time, bad habits can develop. I strongly encourage everyone conducting an orchestra to occasionally video record a rehearsal for self-assessment. Below are questions to ask yourself:

- Are the orchestra members able to synchronize their entrances to your preparatory conducting gestures? Do you maintain eye contact through the prep beat?
- Are you showing a clear beat in only one place—at the end of the baton, with all beats rebounding off a plane?
- Does the size of your gestures match the character of the music?
- Are you making any distracting movements or gestures?
- Are you showing releases on long notes? Are the musicians releasing together?
- Is your left hand functioning independently of the right hand? Are your gestures connected to the music?

Through the use of video self-assessment, we can continue to develop and grow as conductors. A refined conducting technique will help facilitate an expressive performance with your orchestra.

Think About the Audience

Lastly, help students think about what they communicate to the audience through their music. Ask them to generate a list of adjectives to describe the character of the music. Rehearsals often get consumed by attention to specific technical details. Focusing on technical detail is extremely important, of course, but we also need to teach students to be mindful of the larger goal—the “big picture”—if we hope to achieve an expressive performance.

It is my hope that the use of the ideas presented in this article will contribute to the musical expression of your orchestra. We all want our performances to be a time when our students “become so connected that moments of great spontaneity, moments of natural and organic music making, or extraordinary acts of collective intuition and interaction can occur” (Govias, 2014, p. 24).

Through the use of rehearsal strategies that promote high levels of communication and awareness, students will develop a deeper appreciation for their ensemble experience—leading to musically expressive performances.

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Michael Hopkins is Associate Professor and Chair of Music Education at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, where he teaches courses in string techniques, orchestra methods, research methods, and the psychology of music. Prior to joining the faculty, Hopkins was the conductor of the University of Vermont Orchestra from 1999-

2010. He has appeared as a guest conductor at orchestra festivals throughout the United States and is the founding director of the Burlington Chamber Orchestra. He has composed and arranged over fifty published works for orchestra and has published articles in the *Journal of Research in Music Education*, *International Journal of Music Education*, *American String Teacher*, *String Research Journal*, the *Music Educators’ Journal*, and *The Instrumentalist*. He is the author of the online *String Pedagogy Notebook* at www.stringtechnique.com and has given many presentations at national and state conferences on various topics in string education and music technology.