FEATURE

THE MANY SIDES OF SETUP, PART I: REHEARSAL ROOM RELATED ISSUES

by Kasia Bugaj and Selim Giray

Introduction

One of the fundamental tasks of a string instructor is to realize an optimum individual instrumental setup for each student and to maintain this setup within any given classroom setting. In this two-part series we will address the issues of ensemble setup in terms of performance-rehearsal space and individual student setup.

Proper individual setup—which we will discuss in the second part—allows for the production of a beautiful, resonant, and enjoyable sound; provides an ease of playing; and decreases the likelihood of pain or injury in the performer. However, the reality of this task is often complicated by issues such as a large number of students in the ensemble or the nature (and often shortcomings) of the teaching venue.

In this article, we discuss various approaches to ensemble setup from the beginning to the advanced stages. We also explore common challenges—as well as strategies for overcoming these challenges—with suggested realistic string orchestra setup possibilities that take into consideration the type and level of ensemble.

Lastly, we examine various traditional ensemble configurations and their historic context, illustrating that there is not a solitary "correct" ensemble configuration and further suggesting that as musicians and educators we should consider being open to creative solutions to everyday problems as long as those solutions support our greater musical purpose.

Educational String Orchestra Seating

Much depends on the structure of the program itself when it comes to educational string orchestra setup. In secondary public school systems across the United States, the standard seating (1st violin, 2nd violin, viola, cello, and bass) is used. In published educational materials, the only offered alternative is the Row/Grid Seating for beginning string classes with Dillon-Krass's (1999) warning that "Row seating is not a performance seating when students are to be conducted." However, this configuration allows the teacher to freely travel between the students, assess their progress, and make adjustments and corrections.

Pre-elementary violin programs occasionally employ the grid with children sitting on the floor with the violin in "guitar position," alternately standing. Another alternative arrangement used for rote learning is a circle formation around the teacher where the teacher has close visual contact with each student and can be used for heterogeneous and homogeneous teaching. This setup model (standing for violins and sitting for cellists) can be seen in action at the Indiana Jacobs School of Music String Academy.

In his ground-breaking research, Rolland preferred the use of a room spacious enough for the teacher to move around students and for rhythm activities. Also he advocated that the violin students stand and the use of rote technique in "eliminating the paraphernalia and distraction of music stands" (1970, 5). Currently, a number of elementary string programs throughout the state of Indiana follow this model. Having the upper string players stand not only makes efficient use of precious space, but also tends to result in better posture and consequently better sound quality.

Realities and Challenges of Public Schools

One need not look far to find string and orchestra teachers working in rooms long outgrown by their ensembles or engaging in occasional territorial conflicts with equally disenfranchised colleagues in their fine arts departments. Perhaps we should look with optimism at the current situation where string programs exist and grow in portable classrooms, cafeterias, broom closets, and choir rooms. On the other hand, these conditions can be harmful to the physical wellness and development of our students, to the musical experience, and to the quality of the ensemble as a whole.

In the world of public school teaching, shared spaces are a reality—and unfortunately the situation is not always perfect for string classrooms. Often times, permanently installed crescent-shaped risers, otherwise stepped rooms, discommoding weight-bearing columns, and all other kinds of irksome immovable objects contemptuously stand in the way of providing a healthy, accommodating string classroom.

Since our silent antagonist often is immovable, we need to be flexible. Conductor, author, and professor Benjamin Grosbayne stresses the qualities of a good seating arrangement that allows all players to see the conductor's face and baton without any visual obstacles and vice versa. He emphasizes that regardless of the seating arrangement "straining to see on the part of the conductor or performers should be avoided at all costs" (1973, 213).

Seating both in the classroom and performance hall should allow players to perform without any physical strain to maintain a good setup or to see the conductor. Whether a student is sharing a music stand or not, he or she should have enough room to move around and always be situated to face the conductor.

These critically important orchestral requirements are not readily apparent to students (or some students may have motivation to hide from the conductor/teacher). It is the teacher's responsibility to explain and implement seating. Some students may be aware of a problem or discomfort, but often do not wish to seem disruptive or confrontational and

therefore will not speak up. Again, the responsibility falls to the teacher to empower and condition the students to react when setup issues arise.

Working with Immovable Obstacles

If the classroom is set up with load-bearing beams or columns, steps, and/or permanent risers, the exercise and flexibility of alternate seating will be most helpful in finding an optimum solution. If the orchestra teacher is sharing a room with the band (as many do), they are likely to find a room composed of multiple crescent rows. The first order of business is to break the crescent rows. Crescent rows are rather inflexible, do not leave enough room to play a string instrument, do not allow individual chair rotations, and do not allow teacher access to the students (see fig. 1).

Figure 1. An inflexible crescent step

To alleviate the space problem, it is a good idea to split the first and second violin sections antiphonally—as two facing rows—and take the violas, cellos, and basses on the top platform. This seating will allow all sections more room to move and allow them to rotate as needed. However, we must stress that to be able to use the antiphonal seating, both violin sections need to be independently strong. In the words of Arturo Toscanini as quoted in Meyer's *Acoustics and the Performance of Music*, "Like shoulders, they must be equally strong and equivalent" (2009, 264).

With the understanding that initial and long-term postural setup is detrimental to the success of the student and the program and with the acceptance that the reality of our rehearsal spaces is unlikely to instantly change in the short term, as educators we have a tremendous potential to improve our situation with creative solutions.

Perhaps we can separate this issue into three elements: understanding and optimizing the nature of the given rehearsal space; deciding on the optimal ensemble setup for that particular space; and cultivating the best possible individual physical setup for each student.

By focusing on individual setup, possibly one of the most valuable and scarce resources in the music classroom is the attention of the teacher, who cannot realistically assist every single student at the same time. However, many of the most successful and experienced teachers instruct their students on setup routines—resulting in each student being able to independently and competently assess their needs, setup their instruments, and be ready to work.

As we delve into the issues of space and the best setup for the particular ensemble we should first consider several notions. In the majority of string ensemble programs, the students sit and are arranged in American Orchestral Seating Style; perhaps they begin in a grid during the first few months. Why? Is this the only way?

Looking around the world and throughout history, there are many other successful models of ensemble setup. Teachers

> **"We must act on account of our students to provide a healthy learning environment for their success."**

should not feel like they must adapt to the one way that might not be optimal for their situation. In the following section we will explore some of these models.

The Many Models of Ensemble Setup: Professional Symphonic Orchestra Seating

General seating preferences of today's professional symphonic ensembles are influenced by the vision of music directors with the assistance of advisory boards. In the decision-making process, acoustical considerations, architectural features and limitations (as in permanent risers, stage shape, and position), and artistic considerations all play a role.

In addition to seating, moveable riser selection and placement are critical components of the overall orchestra setup. Generally speaking, winds and percussive instruments are placed on risers (and sometimes the last few upper strings stands and basses). If the stage setup dictates otherwise, aside from the core few stands, the string section may be spread across several levels of risers.

When it comes to seating of strings, presently both the American and European (or German) orchestra traditions continue. Having started due to recording equipment deficiencies in the 1920s and spread with Leopold Stokowski's efforts, the American seating became popular around the world by the mid-twentieth century (Melichar 2009, 267).

Orchestral seating as late as the nineteenth century varied wildly. The conductor did not face the audience but stood halfway toward the orchestra, sometimes surrounded by the musicians. As a matter of fact, throughout the eighteenth and

well into the nineteenth centuries the musicians often were not even seated except for the cello section.

Austrian music critic and historian Eduard Hanslick (Koury 1986, 175) credited the "Viennese custom" as to the origins of playing while seated. However, ensembles such as the Australian Chamber Orchestra continue the practice of performing while standing to this day, with the cello section seated on raised box platforms.

A few standard string section seatings are as follows: US string quintet setup (see fig. 2); its alternative also known as Furtwängler variation (see fig. 3); the European (or German) antiphonal seatings (see fig. 4); and its variation (see fig. 5) (Dickreiter 2000, 252).

The European seating can be traced back as far as circa 1777 with church orchestra seating in Mannheim under the direction of Abbé Vogler, where basses were located centrally and violins were placed at either side of the conductor (Myer 2009, 264). Aside from tradition, some conductors prefer antiphonal string seating because it endorses absolute reliance on the conductor's beat and players can no longer rely on listening alone (Williams 2010, 2). Also, it allows the second violins a sound and entity of their own. The separation of the 1st and 2nd violin sections supports and improves their individuality, where the second violins step under the limelight from the shadow of the 1st violins.

The same argument can be made for the violas, where moving them down stage close to the audience (as in the Furtwängler variation) will promote the individuality of this section. Furthermore, the middle voices of 2nd violins and violas are often buried within the texture and can truly use the help of those alternate seating arrangements. It must be noted that it is impossible to perform all repertoire with alternative seating and without issues—especially when score order scale handoff gestures or any other score order fugal interjections are present.

In the words of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "the instruments of each section, except the basses, should be grouped together in the interest of unity and precision. The basses should be deployed around the two [harpsichords] and throughout the orchestra, since it is the bass that must control and support all the other parts, and every performer must be able to hear it equally well" (1951, 307). Separating cellos and basses into both wings of the stage was a practice in the mid-nineteenth century, found both in Europe and the United States. The harpsichordist/conductor's tempos were dictated by the bass player, standing adjacent to the harpsichordist.

Experimentation with Various Seating Plans

Experimenting with various seating plans will provide a new sort of rotation—the rotation of sections—and will afford students a different perspective on stage both visually and aurally. Splitting sections would not be advised in an educational setting, although moving the basses to middle of the stage may be a good compromise so that their centralized position would make them more prevalent on both wings and equally audible to all sections.

The European seating plan of antiphonally splitting the first and second violins is a good start to break away from the current American standard of score order left-to-right string section. As antiphonal seating variants do not necessarily lend themselves as easily to all repertoire (Williams 2010, 2), by nature, they prepare the conductor and players to accept seating change as part of the orchestra experience.

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Conclusion

As string teachers, the more knowledge and awareness we possess, the more options we will have and the more courage to experiment with those options. Seating is no exception.

Students' physical well-being is paramount in all activities undertaken and physical environment is central to it (NASM 2016). All rehearsals and performances—be it daily teaching or special occasions as in music theater pit playing—must comply with good judgment on the teacher's part, so it is important to understand potential challenges and ways to overcome them. This article attempts to present some of the challenges, possible solutions, and innovative ideas to make things work. As teachers, we must act on account of our students to provide a healthy learning environment for their success.

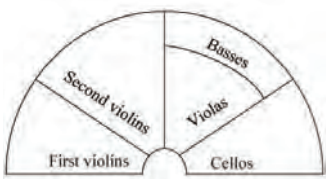

Figure 2. American Seating

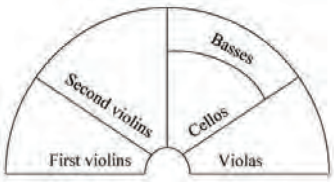

Figure 3. An Alternate American Seating

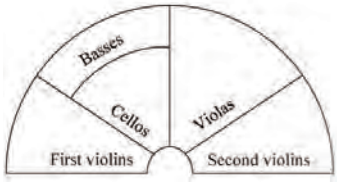

Figure 4. European (or German) Seating

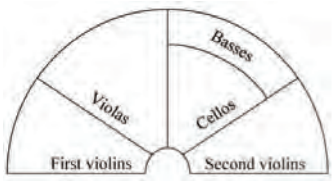

Figure 5. An Alternate European (or German) Seating

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