



Teaching Leadership in Our Orchestras

BY SUSAN MULLEN

When recruiting for our school programs or youth orchestras, we often refer to the fact that our musicians learn “leadership skills” in our ensembles, using that as a selling point to parents, students, and grant givers alike. But what do we mean by this, exactly? We’d like to think that students learn the characteristics of solid leadership simply by showing up to rehearsals, but we know that some never quite make that transformation. Do directors deliberately teach leadership from the podium, or do they just hope that students will glean it by being part of the group? My goal is to have an orchestra full of section players who could sit first chair and capably lead the section.

Most of us have had a student in our orchestra who seems to be a natural born leader. He or she exudes that special something that seems to make others more energetic and engaged in the music and better behaved in general. If he happens to be the most talented player in your group, it’s a huge bonus. You instantly have a concertmaster that makes your job as a conductor so much easier. She helps keep the others energized and model good orchestral behavior. You’d like to clone that child, or at least bottle the personality so that the others could take a drink now and then. You relish the years you have that student in your group and always feel an enormous void when they leave. Imagine what a difference it would make in your orchestra if all your players had that indefinable quality!

Though most students will not walk into your orchestra already endowed with the leadership skills you desire, you have an enormous impact on whether they leave with them. You can teach students how to incorporate the following behaviors into every rehearsal. In fact, I believe that these traits may be some of the most valuable that a player can learn while under your baton. Of course, it is necessary for conductors and teachers to impart that each and every player in the group is vital. And players should know that building leadership skills shouldn’t begin *after* getting the section leader position but, rather, are essential *in order* to get that seat. For those students

for whom leadership is not natural, this is invaluable. Ultimately, they will see how easy it is to transfer many of these habits into the non-musical world as well.

COMMITMENT

Be ready with your tuned instrument, music and pencil before the downbeat. Arrive a few minutes early to warm up on the hardest sections in your music.

Stay engaged with the ensemble throughout the entire practice. Don’t constantly check the time or be the first to dart out when it’s over.

Be the first to pick up your pencil to mark some-

thing in your part that the conductor has just mentioned; this could be a phrasing, a definition of a term you didn’t know, or just to mark an X in the margin of a section you need to practice at home. Do this every time and quickly. Others will follow your lead; I guarantee it.

Offer to help the conductor hand out music, arrange the room

before or after the rehearsal. It shows that you care about the group.

CONFIDENCE

In your private practice, work on the hardest sections first. Play them until they are easy! This will help you stand out in the next rehearsal.

Compliment the abilities of your stand partner and the group. Don’t panic if things don’t stay together or intonation is particularly bad that day. Avoid voicing anything negative. Setbacks are perfectly normal. “Come on guys, we can do this!” is an encouraging comment to make when the orchestra is having a bad day.

POSITIVE ATTITUDE

Show interest in what is going on around you. When one section of the orchestra is being rehearsed, follow along in your own music to see how your part fits with theirs.

Respond positively when a section or someone plays particularly well. A foot shuffle (the musician’s

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alternative to clapping) is always welcome and keeps the mood high.

When your conductor asks you to rehearse the same section for the umpteenth time, don't be a groaner! Never be the one to complain about anything, whether it's the length of the rehearsal or the temperature of the room. Your director will always address a real problem if you have one, but complaining about the small stuff only poisons the atmosphere of the ensemble and is hard for any conductor to turn around.

CREATIVITY

Ask the conductor about phrasing or dynamics if they are not marked in the music or are not clear to you. Always be thinking how to make the music more interesting.

Read up about the composers or pieces you are playing, learn interesting facts about them, and share them with your stand partner or the entire group.

Listen to a recording of one or more of your pieces outside of rehearsal to learn about other orchestra's interpretations. Talk about what you heard if you find it interesting.

COMMUNICATION

Raise your hand and ask questions whenever you have one. If you don't understand something in the music such as a rhythm, a bowing, or a dynamic, chances are someone else doesn't either. Speak in a clear, loud voice so that all can hear. Don't mumble or be apologetic about having a question in the first place.

Some orchestras prefer that only section leaders ask the conductor questions about the music and that the others in the section ask the section leader. Ask the conductor what they prefer.

If you have something important to tell your conductor, pull them aside before or after rehearsal and ask if it's a good time to talk. Look them in the eye and speak up. A director is much more likely to take even bad news well if you are up front and willing to speak to them directly. Do not disrupt rehearsal with information not directly related to the music.

APPROACHABILITY

Walk into your rehearsal without your earbuds in. Make eye contact and greet those you see with a friendly hello or strike up a conversation before class.

Examine your body language and facial expressions. Someone who is sitting slouched or slumped forward into the music stand during rehearsals can seem closed off and unwilling to talk. Those who sit erect, make eye contact with others in the orchestra and keep a pleasant look on their face give off the impression that they are willing to interact.

Maintain good personal hygiene. You are much more likely to be spoken to if you smell fresh and have your teeth and hair brushed than if you don't.

SENSE OF HUMOR

Encourage those around you to laugh at mistakes rather than be too discouraged by them. Be quicker to laugh at your own mistakes than at others', of course, or it may be taken the wrong way.

Never be timid about moving with the music. Swaying in time with a melody is great fun and usually encouraged!

Occasional jokes keep the group's energy and morale higher.

Remember, timing is everything! Never interrupt a teaching moment, or you may feel the conductor's wrath.

As directors we set the tone in our private musical communities. I suggest that our students should understand that we expect continuous improvement, both as musicians and as human beings. If we set the standard for excellence, they will strive to reach it. What changes young people is being part of a strong community that reaches unreasonably high together. We as teachers can help that process by encouraging them to take steps in that direction.

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