



ORCHESTRA: Prioritizing Your Rehearsal Strategies

BY KYLE DAVIS

It's time for rehearsal to start, and you find feelings of inadequacy and anxiety washing over you. You struggle with the big things—where to start, what to focus on, how to keep kids engaged. You struggle with the little things—addressing intonation in that one spot, fixing the precision issues in the other, correcting bowing style, and more. In moments like these, we might question our choice of profession.

Early in my teaching career, one of my biggest struggles was knowing where to start and what to prioritize in rehearsal. I would find myself at a bit of a loss when trying to plan rehearsals to make the most out of the limited time I had with students. There always seemed to be more to address than could possibly fit within the given time. I needed to get a good grip on recognizing what was critical to our success and figuring out where to fit everything else.

I've been blessed to know some incredible veteran teachers whose wisdom still guides my daily planning and rehearsal strategies. Karen McAfee, my mentor and high school orchestra director (whom I affectionately refer to as “my other mother”), impressed upon me the importance of ensuring young string players are always performing with good tone. She emphasized the fact that *no good performance could come from a bad sound*. Dr. Mark Bartley demanded rhythmic integrity of me and all other students in the West Texas A&M Symphony Orchestra. My own musical experiences have taught me that nothing will derail a performance faster than rhythmic inaccuracy.

My cello teacher, Emmanuel Lopez, loved to remind those of us in his studio and in chamber music—coaching that playing with good intonation is like bathing every day—*everyone around you will appreciate it*. I also fondly recall a lunch with Charles Nail where he spoke at length about addressing style from the first reading and never letting my students rehearse or perform a piece without the appropriate style. I quickly realized that this would require me to have clear musical direction and firm decisions regarding the music before ever passing it out to students. From Dr. Chris Reidlinger, I learned the importance of being consistent and persistent as I watched him check bow holds every day in every class, not taking for granted that even his most talented students would benefit from review. This list could go on, but that would require another article entirely.

Once I established a list of priorities, I worked to develop a plan to address each issue. Below are some rehearsal strategies that have worked well for me when I've encountered issues:

Tone:

1. Students warm up using long tone exercises on all their strings and at various dynamic levels.

2. Students perform a short exercise or line from a method book in different parts of the bow (lower half, middle, upper half) to establish a good tone in all parts.
3. Students practice passages with various bow speeds and bow placements on the string to compare and determine which sounds the best.

Rhythm:

1. Review the rhythm slowly and check for understanding.
2. Count and clap the rhythm simultaneously.
3. Count the rhythm aloud while clapping or tapping the downbeats.
4. Clap the rhythm while counting only the downbeats.

After following these steps, we play the rhythm on a single note before playing the passage again as written.

Intonation:

1. Check for understanding of key signature and corresponding scale.
2. Isolate the problematic note and establish the finger pattern.
3. Have students sing the passage on the syllable *la* (bonus points if they can sing it with solfège).
4. With more advanced students, have them transpose it to another key and then come back to the original.

Style:

1. Review appropriate bowing styles for the period of the music selection.
2. Practice scales using various bowing styles that correspond to the music.
3. Have students listen to and watch performances of professional groups to get a sense of style.

Decide what is most important to you and what needs to be addressed first. For me it is always tone, rhythm, intonation, and style. Once you are clear about your priorities, lean into them, keeping in mind that success often comes long after the struggle. Be patient, be persistent, and keep the first things first.



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