

True sonic concurrence within individual string sections

Developing the ability to play simultaneously An opportunity for string students

The situation of orchestras is one of constant pressure with regard to the demands levelled in terms of musicians' expressive capacity, in relation to the concert market, the media, the value of orchestras in society and – last but not least – the filling of their vacant chairs. Audition candidates today are faced with enormous competition, and at the same time orchestras are increasing their requirements to such an extent that all players are expected to be up to the standard of soloists.

The task of training string players to soloist standard is fulfilled by conservatories around the world well to excellently. At first glance, many musicians, winds and strings alike, have abilities promising uncomplicated integration into existing section structures.

The students' tasks of learning to master their instrument optimally in line with the talent they have at their disposal, of becoming acquainted with as comprehensive a repertoire of solo literature and chamber music as possible, and, above all, of developing their musical understanding and taste are already testing the boundaries of possibility for those majoring in music.

Occasionally, one also encounters a pleasing knowledge of orchestral literature: after all, there are the books by Schmallnauer and Gingold, and CDs are readily available. And of course, student orchestras also perform a concert here or an opera project there, although the system often dictates that students' current learning targets and requirements are not always put first.

It is still common to observe that students, with their solistic training, have primarily set their sights on solo careers. At the very least, they intend to play chamber music. "Join an orchestra? Well, maybe if I don't make it as a soloist...."

At the very latest, this lack of fascination with orchestra playing becomes apparent when it is time to perform orchestra excerpts during auditions. The quality of execution of these excerpts is usually far lower than the quality of the solo performances. An experienced orchestra musician will hear that the notes at least may well have been learnt quite diligently. Their interpretation, however, is unfortunately seldom appropriate for an orchestra, as the parts are played "solistically".

In my opinion, this is primarily due to a lack of understanding of how solistic qualities – which are indeed needed in the *tutti* section of an orchestra – are applied correctly. In many cases, a work experience placement in an orchestra helps students gain an initial understanding of the specific demands placed on a good *tutti* player.

Nevertheless, the requirement remains for students to develop these abilities to a far higher level than is currently the case in the course of their studies.

What is “true sonic concurrence”?

In order to achieve a homogenous sonic image in a string section, one first needs an understanding of the hierarchical structure of a group consisting of concertmasters, section leaders and *tutti* players.

It is the sole responsibility of the first concertmaster to implement the sounds the conductor wants, both in the string section as a whole and in particular in her or his own group, the first violins. If this is to work well, its consequence is that each member of the group must follow the concertmaster in each detail of her or his execution. But how is this possible if a section consists of 18 or 20 violinists?

Section rehearsals take place in small chamber orchestras to achieve this homogeneity in, for example, a four-piece string group. Here, the three *tutti* players align all aspects of their playing with the techniques employed by the concertmaster: intonation, bowing technique and length of bow used, bow speed, pressure on and point of contact with the string, *spiccato* height, and, most importantly: a very slight gradual reduction in volume. Fingerings are chosen that are compatible with each other but need not be identical within the group. Sometimes, a *tutti* player may well have selected different fingerings if they were playing the same passages in a solo setting. Speaking figuratively, in order to achieve complete simultaneity, “the *tutti* player places their ear in their section leader’s f-hole”.

Even though deputy section leaders in large *tutti* sections really have no true function as deputies in terms of filling in for the concertmaster, except in extremely rare cases of absence due to illness, they actually have a very important function here – passing on the impetus of the first concertmaster or section leader. If the first three musicians behind the first section leader adapt their playing to that of the first concertmaster or first section leader in all the aforementioned areas, as in a small chamber orchestra, “amplifying” her or his impulses in their movements and intensity, every *tutti* player at third desk or behind can easily take these up from those before them in the chain and therefore also adopt the properties of the concertmaster’s playing. At the same time, *tutti* players, as with the deputy section leaders before them, should make a small downward dynamic adjustment – simply to avoid playing their way into the foreground unintentionally. This is referred to as “playing defensively” in orchestra jargon, even though what this really means is that the *tutti* player should take an anticipatory stance, not showing too much initiative in their playing in order to avoid “running their concertmaster down from behind”. Matters become really complicated when one considers that, in addition to staying in contact with the colleague before them in the chain described above, each *tutti* player must play absolutely simultaneously with their desk partner, look at the hands of the conductor occasionally and, if necessary, glance at the music every now and then....

How does one develop this ability to play simultaneously?

It is thus obvious that the requirements placed on a player’s ability to concentrate are great indeed, and that it is far from sufficient to merely be able to play the notes well.

This is all clearly too much to cover in core subject lessons at conservatories. How is a student supposed to learn this in class?

I think it is too late if these issues are only realised during a trial year. Many students make use of the opportunities presented by youth orchestras and festival orchestras – which offer more extensive rehearsals, often including sectionals led by a teacher. Here again, however, this is quite good – but not good enough.

It is essential that students begin to develop these abilities at conservatories. Ideally, courses of eight semesters would be offered for a minimum of six to a maximum of fourteen students. Students should preferably prepare whole pieces from which excerpts are required in auditions alongside key pieces from the standard repertoire. Between six and ten pieces could be learned each semester using the aforementioned techniques. Students with section leader qualities would benefit from such courses just as much as born *tutti* players. They can all then put what they have learned into practice straight away in student orchestras, and will realise far earlier that playing in an orchestra is fascinating and offers an excellent opportunity to achieve musical objectives. And that one is seldom too good to play in large orchestra...

A beneficial by-product of this preparation for later auditions is that because pieces are learnt in their entirety, the incomplete test piece manuscripts soon become unnecessary. The candidate now knows exactly which passages are to be performed in which manner and is aware of the other key factors in each individual section of a piece. And those listening at their audition will notice this too! The student will have really learnt to keep their ears open, to listen simultaneously to other players with whom they have to align their playing, and they will be able to adopt the correct “partially defensive” playing style with adaptive intonation and tone colouration in an orchestra right from the start.

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