

Teaching young musicians to play expressively through movement in the orchestra classroom

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Abstract

Over the past few years of teaching, I have realized that there are many pedagogical elements to consider when teaching students to perform with musical expression. One of those considerations is the movement of the body while playing. Students will perform a series of steps to produce a more musical tone and better musical expression through bodily movement. Movement will focus on unilateral and bilateral movement of the upper body in relation to the individual's bow direction. The lessons outlined in my report will demonstrate how to introduce expressive movement through simple open-string exercises and scales. Students will eventually apply these movements to their repertoire.

When exploring the topic of movement while playing, I realized, as an educator, you cannot leave anything to chance. Expectations for students learning need to be defined by what the educator can and is willing to introduce, not what the students might learn on their own. If something is important to know, then the educator must incorporate it into their teaching. During my coursework, I became aware that playing practices I thought came naturally to musicians were not always so. Through teaching four grade levels, it was always curious to me why some students were so stoic in their playing by the time they entered 8th grade. At some point, I became aware that moving in music does not come naturally to most students. Then I came to my second realization: I am the one who encouraged these stoic movements from the onset. I had overemphasized posture and form. I realized that my students were trying to emulate perfect playing posture, which made them very rigid. I forgot to teach them to move within the confines of good posture. I also have made the mistake of not incorporating movement early enough. It is my conclusion that all students can be taught to play expressively through movement of the body.

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Chapter 1 - Teaching Philosophy

Why Education

Formal education is tasked with the job of educating students to have basic knowledge in areas that will make them a functioning member of society. Public school employees should be knowledgeable in their content area. This allows for teachers to create an atmosphere that will effectively engage students in social and emotional learning activities in addition to their core curriculum. When teaching these academic areas, we also need to ensure that students have a safe place to learn these competencies. If students do not have their basic needs met: safety, nutrition, health, cleanliness, etc., then we cannot even begin to expect them to be invested in what we must teach them. What worth will our words be to students if we are not first listening to their needs? Once this foundation is laid, then schools can begin to be proficient in their duty to educate children.

Beyond the core subjects that should be taught, education is also a place to help students understand and acquire skills they need to know in order to function among their peers and others around them. Education is an integral step to achieve higher status within society. We have decided that this is the means to which our children will learn and achieve knowledge. This means that education is necessary. Whether we agree with that or not is, to a point, irrelevant. This is the system we have set up for ourselves, so we must find a way to make it work and it is the teacher's obligation to initiate the best learning environment that they can for the betterment of the child and the improvement of society. Recently, our nation was thrown into a shock with the very real possibility that we may not be able to send our students to school but will be instead be forced to create a virtual platform of learning. I believe that, even within a virtual platform, our principles should not change. Our duty is to provide a safe environment, meeting students'

basic needs so they can flourish, and, within those parameters, teach the content while also adhering to the responsibility of teaching students the other social and cultural aspects of society that enable them to function with learned content.

Ultimately, public education should support students to find their path. Public education should give students as many opportunities as possible to find what they need to get them through life. Some students will easily find their path, but others will not. They will need encouragement, options, and at times just a lifeline back to society. Helping students to find their purpose will inevitably help their social and emotional well-being. I think this is crucial given that staggering recent statistics on suicide amongst young people. According to a study done by the CDC, “The suicide rate among persons aged 10–24 was stable from 2000 to 2007, and then increased 56% between 2007 (6.8 per 100,000) and 2017 (10.6). The pace of increase for suicide was greater from 2013 to 2017 (7% annually, on average) than from 2007 to 2013 (3% annually)” (Curtin, 2019, p. 8). Those are harrowing statistics. We need to build confidence within the student. We need to infuse schools with character education and kindness. We need to make sure that we, as teachers, are reflecting good character and maintain a zero-tolerance policy for unkind words and actions within our schools from students, teachers, and any other staff that works within the school. Public schools should serve as a support system for students and families.

Why Music and Education

Music could be someone's path. Public education does not have the right to rob someone of their path. Music is a potential opportunity for many people. As someone who currently maintains a career in Music Education, I have a vested interest in its preservation. Music would still exist if it was not within our schools, but you would have less people exposed to how to

efficiently participate in the art which would therefore result in less people doing it and an overall denigration of the quality of music within society. High quality musicians would still exist, but you would have a greater percentage of a smaller population of people that did music less proficiently, unless the place that you live has another way of educating people in music at a high standard that is not within the school system. The problem is that societies that have a surplus of time and income would likely be the only places that this type of system could sustain itself. Low-income areas would have more difficulty finding the time and money to provide a path to music. We need to make sure that students are receiving equal opportunity. This type of system might also lend itself to music being only a pleasure activity that would not result in any type of lucrative income. With the unemployment rate already a problem, we need to make sure we are creating as many outlets for work as possible. Music is a great source of income for many people. Let us not take those jobs away.

Music helps to create a positive culture within school. One only has to consider alma maters, the National Anthem, pep sections at games, halftime shows, or the school dances. Can you imagine all of that without music? Public schools might be fine without music, but I assert that it is a defining and enriching part of our culture. With music being such a huge part of what we experience within our culture outside of school, how could we say that it is not something worth teaching? How will music continue to live and thrive at a high level if we are not educating people to maintain high standards? How can society ensure those high standards if we are not demanding it to be a core subject?

We still have an issue in this country when it comes to demanding high-quality arts education. By high-quality, I would rather refer to proper technique and quality of sound as opposed to how technically difficult a student can play. I have seen first-hand many programs

that work on pushing students to the next technical level instead of working to refine skills so that the next level is easier to obtain. Initially, it might appear that if a program does not get to a certain technicality by some arbitrarily marked time, then they are lesser of a program, but I would much rather hear a Grade 3 orchestra piece played beautifully with musicality and technical efficiency than hear a Grade 4 piece played moderately-well without a true understanding of the music. Music should be a place that we can build foundation, acceptance, and understanding. Do these things for everyone in the entire group, and you have created a beautiful, safe place where everyone contributes, and no one feels left out. This feeling of inclusion is so important to the well-being of our students. They need at least one place they can go to everyday and feel accomplished and not have to worry about anything else. We can provide true, full understanding, and acceptance. Let music be the place that students can feel a part of the whole. It might be the only place they get it. Music has the great ability to be an individual accomplishment for some, a group accomplishment for others, or both simultaneously. It is a flexible education that can teach students how to be absorbed into a positive culture if done the right way.

Chapter 2 - Lesson Plan

Reflection on Body Movement Lesson Plan

My goal in focusing on movement while playing was to help students play more expressively. My lesson plan was inspired by many ideas developed by Michal Hopkins in *Ten Simple Ways to Improve the Musical Expression of Your Orchestra*. It is my belief that movement allows for the body and mind to have an emotional response to music. One can properly play what is on the page (notes, dynamics, articulation, etc.) and still be missing an expressive quality that cannot concretely be put into words because everyone's emotional response to music is unique. "Performing with the whole body is an important aspect of expressive orchestra performance" (Hopkins, 2016, p. 20-24). Emotions are elicited through our behavior and music is no different. How we move or behave while playing a song should match what the song is trying to communicate. It is important to learn how to move in a manner that matches the music style and what it is trying to elicit. The lesson plan presented aims at giving students tools to aid them in understanding how movement is incorporated into playing. Students will be given parameters as to how to freely move within the confines of good posture.

During the lesson plan, students seemed very responsive to moving during slow open string and scale exercises. Moving unilaterally with the bow looked natural and easy for most students. A few students had to be coaxed to explore their movement, but the majority took to it very fast and accurately. The orchestra sound was immediately more open and resonant. Just the nature of moving in the same direction helped to cue more in-unison bow movements (length and style) and bow changes which allowed for a more robust sound. On an individual level, I could see more relaxed left-hand frames and more relaxed vibrato from students who have been working on that skill. Moving unilaterally appeared to help the entire body relax. This

encouraged me to study further. In my research, I came across Paul Rolland's journal stating, "A fixed and restricted violin hold causes static tension in the neck and shoulder area. Tension then spreads into the arms and fingers hampering their free movement" (Rolland, 1979, p. 8-11). Even though only directly related to violin playing in Rolland's article, it was apparent to me that this seemed to hold true for the other string instruments as well. I also noticed that the exercise encouraged more bow usage which helped those who generally have difficulty utilizing the entire bow. When reflecting on our movement and exercises, students unanimously agreed that our sound was much better and that playing felt more natural when they incorporated movement. They felt like they had elevated their playing to a higher level.

The bilateral motion was not as easy to do. Some students were able to get it, but overall, it seemed to be difficult for the students. I think part of this may be still needing to have control and master playing fast notes on their instruments. They also just learned a new skill and were being asked to learn yet another new skill that required completely different coordination from the first. I also believe that I personally do not have a clear understanding of my bilateral movement. I know that I exhibit bilateral motion when I play, but it is not a skill I have methodically picked apart with the intention of teaching. Until I can pinpoint the proper progression of bilateral movement, I will not be able to teach it effectively.

When it came to incorporating movement into repertoire, the unilateral motion was easy for students to identify. More discussion needed to take place as to what exactly needed bilateral movement. Even then, students could not agree on what needed bilateral motion. Some students preferred not to use it at all. We also discussed how we must be careful to not put too many parameters on exactly how to move. We agreed that there should be a certain freedom of choice when it came to moving to aid expression. Students were able to assess the necessity of

unilateral and bilateral sections of music, but also that other places need individual choice and freedom of movement.

Being able to model different skills on all the orchestral instruments is imperative at every level of learning. Modeling, in my opinion, is one of the most important instructional strategies you can employ when teaching. For every activity, I begin with modeling for students. Once the motion looks correct, I then encourage them to use their aural senses to hear how moving has affected their sound in a positive way. I also encourage them to realize the other positive and somewhat unexpected outcomes that resulted from moving (like having a more relaxed vibrato or using more bow). Each skill was also built upon being able to play expressively with movement in our repertoire was introduced with scaffolding. Finally, students were highly encouraged to observe professionals who are already proficient in playing and to self-assess their movement in comparison to professional musicians and to also compare the progression of their movement throughout the semester.

In assessing students, I made sure to scan the room for students' proper motion. Most students were able to catch on very quickly. The most interesting assessment was having the students watch themselves back on video and write a reflection on their own personal movement, their movement as a class and then finally we made some comparisons to professional orchestras. It was fascinating how insightful students were when comparing themselves to professional orchestras. The way that they were able to assess and assert that they too could do what they saw professional orchestras doing because we had started the process of exploring what they see when watching elevated musicians. It was a wonderful and inspiring moment as a teacher.

In the future, I hope to start the process of moving while playing much earlier. I think as soon as beginners are set up in a proper playing position, I want to start incorporating open string movement exercises. I would also like to explore activities that encourage movement from the very beginning stages. I am not sure what that looks like yet, but it is something I hope to have a better understanding of moving forward. For all my students, movement activities, like seen in my project, will be incorporated (in smaller components) daily.

I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to create a lesson that will help me teach students to move while playing. This is going to help each individual student play more expressively while also enhancing the sound of the entire ensemble. I did not expect the methodical teaching of learning to move while playing to go as well as it did. I thought that the older students might think it was goofy and try to exaggerate their motions. Or think it was juvenile and not move at all in protest to the activity. It was humbling to see just how graceful my young students can be while playing. This is a new concept that I know will help me grow as a teacher and will help my students as musicians. I know if I can get students to understand and feel the expressive qualities of music, I will inspire more of them to love music and continue the art of playing an instrument. As a public-school orchestra teacher, my hope, is that music can be a part of every student's life. I hope to make a positive and lasting impact on students' lives. I believe music has the power to do so many things and the longer students pursue music, the greater impact it will have on their life. As humans, we are driven by emotion and more likely to continue to pursue something if we have had a positive experience. So, it is my hypothesis that if I can get students to understand and feel the expressive qualities of music, they are more likely to continue participating in orchestra. It is within my vested interest that the program sees a lack of

attrition. The better I can teach; the more likely students are to stay. Having a tool to help students play expressively most certainly makes me a better orchestra teacher.

Lesson Plan: Body Movement

2014 Music National Standards (NAfME, 2014)

Common Anchor #5

Prior Knowledge/Skills

Students' prior knowledge for this activity consists of proper seated posture, correct left- and right-hand frames, G Major scale two octaves, notes, and rhythm of music excerpts.

Rehearsal Objective

Students will be able to incorporate unilateral and bilateral movement to enhance the expressiveness and ensemble cohesiveness of performances repertoire.

Assessment of the Rehearsal

Students will be moving in such a way that is unified and properly expressive while also maintaining accuracy and quality of music.

Relevant Contextual Factors and Modifications/Accommodations Needed

Context-dependent on the educator's classroom and students.

Instructional Materials, Resources and Technologies

Instruments, stands, bows, sheet music, projector

Strategies

Cooperative Learning, Kinesthetic/Experiential Learning, Aural Learning, Tactile Learning, Visual Learning

Rehearsal Plan

Level 1: Open String Bowing with Unilateral Movement

1. Explain unilateral motion (moving with the direction of the bow)
2. Play whole notes on open string with metronome at 84 bpm using unilateral motion
3. Repeat step 2, but now playing with half notes

Level 2: Incorporate unilateral movement with left hand using the G Major Scale

1. Play G Major Scale two octaves using half notes with metronome at 84 bpm
2. Repeat step one, but with students playing in a three-part round

Level 3: Open String Bowing with Bilateral Movement

1. Explain bilateral motion (moving against the direction of the bow)
2. Play quarter notes on open string with metronome at 84 BPM using bilateral
3. Play half notes on open string with metronome at 84 bpm
4. Discuss using unilateral movements on slower/medium notes and bilateral on medium/fast notes

Level 4: Incorporating Unilateral and Bilateral Movement to sheet music

1. Working on sheet music students are already proficient on (in our case we will be using Music from Brave measure 81-end, have students play through using unilateral motion
2. Discuss exaggerated verse natural movements
3. Repeat step one, but with the orchestra watching section leaders for cues on movement

Assessment

Level 1: During class make sure students are moving together with proper movement and not moving in a way that over exaggerates the purpose of moving musically.

Level 2: Have students watch a professional orchestra play and observe their movement.

Students will write a short response to what they observed.

Chapter 3 - Reflections

The Masters of Music Education program at Kansas State University has been tremendously beneficial for my professional career. I have been teaching orchestra for many years, but I have been exposed to concepts and philosophies that I do not think I would have discovered without the challenge of earning a Masters from this program.

One of the best parts of the program was being instructed by seasoned orchestra professionals who take the training seriously. From the start of every class, it was abundantly clear that the faculty had enormous experience and had spent a great deal of time distilling that experience into lesson plans and assignments that would benefit me.

Lesson planning for orchestras at the middle school level is a unique challenge. There is a vast difference between introducing a student to, not only a brand-new instrument, but the concept of musicianship in general. To move from those starting years in the 5th grade to developing the students to the point where I was refining an experienced team of musicians was a professional pleasure that is difficult to put into words. It was so terrific to be around other orchestra professionals who understood that feeling and who were dedicated to achieving the same outcomes as me. As beneficial as the professor-level instruction was, working with my fellow students, from all different walks of life, was also invaluable. Working on a Masters at K-State has introduced me to other orchestra teachers from across the nation at every different level. The ability to draw from their experience and teaching strategies will be a priceless benefit of my degree.

To say that the last few years of in education have been challenging would be an obvious understatement. From the teaching restrictions imposed by COVID-19 to the recent upending of

teacher-lead curriculum at the political and school-board level, there has hardly been a less “interesting” time to be a teacher.

Every summer, however, this degree was a bedrock goal to which to return. Going remote was a challenge most teachers and students had to work through, and there are some that bent and others that broke. It was hard and it was frustrating for everyone involved. Whether you were a student, teacher, parent, or administrator, we all did some soul-searching, not least of all me.

I questioned whether or not it was prudent to pursue a Masters degree when there was already so much uncertainty and fear in the profession. In some of the more frustrating times, I questioned whether I should stay in the profession at all. We all remember the last recession and we all know what programs school boards look at to cut first when budgets stop adding up. In a study completed in Kansas in 2011, “185 music education positions had been cut: 124 in the past year and 61 in the two year prior” (Burrack & Payne, 2011, p. 36-41). That being said, participating in a program that took the work seriously and surrounded me with other teachers who had been, and were going through, similar experiences was a big part of getting through these tough years. The program spent so much time thinking through how to get the best out of our students, it dawned on me later that this program was helping to get the best out of me. When we all returned and heard our students give that first concert, it was impossible for me to disassociate that with the academic work I have been doing for the last few years.

Another benefit of the program, for me, has been the assistance in speaking the language of the profession. There are instinctual things we all know as educators that we can home in on and develop lesson plans around, but it is another thing entirely to hear them described in an articulated and codified way when learning about education concepts at K-State. Developing my

understanding of the taxonomy and vocabulary of the profession at K-State has helped me to relate the value of orchestra to many different parties. Whether I am talking to a parent, an administrator, or even someone I just met at a social event, my ability to communicate what my goals are with the children has been incredibly useful.

Strengthening my ability to share the value of music appreciation has been vital to my professional prospects as well. During the program, I interviewed for various positions within the Kansas City metropolitan area, and my work in the program has helped me excel in these processes. I recently accepted a new position and I can directly attribute some of my efforts in terms of developing prospective lesson plans and my responses to interview questions to my work in this program.

How do you quantify the benefits of education? Working through this section of my Masters thesis has me asking this very question. What people do not realize is that, for some students, the time they spend in orchestra is the best part of their day. They can focus on the music, on the team that is the orchestra, on their playing, on the instruction of the teachers, on any number of elements that are part of this job. We provide an incredible outlet, and I was able to refine my ability to prove that outlet through my pursuit of the Masters degree at K-State. The techniques and processes that I was exposed to will help to ensure that I put my best foot forward every day for my students.

While there were many educational philosophies and strategies that I experienced as part of the program, there is no substitute for the ability to connect with a student and help them find a new love of music. “Do everything with your students being the focus” (Dirks, 2021). The nature of teaching, education, and the benefits of the arts makes it impossible to quantify the effect of participation in a Masters of Music Education. What I can tell you is that I got to spend

three summers surrounded by experienced professionals and colleagues that know what it takes to help a kid learn to love their instrument, and I do not think I could have asked for anything more out of the program.

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