Teach Strings? But I’m a Band Director!!

At some point, all of us will get forced out of our comfort zone. Think about the first day you spent in a methods class unrelated to your primary instrument. At the Crane School of Music, I found myself (a tuba player) in a string methods class for string majors and was handed a cello. While everyone else immediately sat down and started making quasi-musical sounds, I sawed away on “Mississippi Hotdog.” In the next semester I was handed a variety of woodwind instruments. Keep in mind that tuba players go through a mind-blowing experience when they transition from a three-valve to a four-valve horn! Many of us band geeks find ourselves at some point assigned to teach strings. Do not despair!

Like any task, you need to first brush up on your fundamentals. A terrific reference is “Guide to Orchestral Bowings Through Musical Styles: A Manual to be Used with Video” by Marvin Rabin and Priscilla A. Smith. It has examples of all kinds of bowing techniques with excellent videos. I strongly recommend any conductor who primarily works with winds to use this resource, so they can communicate properly with string players. However, as with any skill, the best thing to do is to get in and observe successful string teachers and then shamelessly copy them.

Here’s the good news that is often kept secret*. Teaching strings is in many ways*

*easier than teaching band.*  Instead of dealing with a wide variety of instruments, transpositions, and sound producing devices (single reed, double reed, brass, percussion), when you discuss bowing, left and right hand positions, bow placement, bow speed, tuning and playing in tune, and all of the other teaching points, whatever you say will largely apply to everyone in the ensemble, from violins to double bass. If you think of the movement of the bow as the air stream and the hand positions as embouchures and you are half-way there.

One of the big differences is the approach to the initial tuning of the instruments. A string instrument that is tuned improperly is useless to the student and the teacher. Some teachers tune every single instrument in the ensemble, usually using a tuner sounding an “A.” This obviously requires all the other students to sit relatively quietly. As soon as possible, try to get them to where they can tune their open strings in unison. Then you can sound E, A, D, G, and C and only focus on those students having trouble.

When I substitute teach, clinic, or guest conduct, I love working with string orchestras! There’s no sound on earth like a big fat resonant string ensemble. As a wind director, you can help them to incorporate breathing into their playing, to play with greater rhythmic precision and accurate subdivision (usually a weak area in string ensembles) and strive for a greater dynamic range than is typical in strings. Your knowledge of wind articulations and bowing techniques can also get them out of the “every note sounds the same” effect found in many string ensembles.

In schools with smaller music programs it may not be possible to have separate performing groups for winds and strings. Luckily, there are an increasing number of excellent compositions and arrangements with flexible instrumentations or with “string packs” that allow string players to perform with a band. When I’m adjudicating I often see schools with very undersized separate wind and string ensembles both playing pieces with many parts missing. Thankfully, an increasing number of directors are using strings and winds performing together, often with wonderful results. Strings and winds learn how to balance with and tune to each other, and more importantly, they all get to perform music that sounds good and is something they can be proud of.

In next month’s issue of SBO Magazine, I’ll share some ideas on how to succeed in your first (or next) job. As always, please share your thoughts by contacting me at www.ThomasPalmatier.com.