



## Strings Curriculum at a Crossroad

I have been crafting instruments for professional string players for the last 20 years and have noticed a disturbing trend dealing with professional symphonies. In the last two years, the Honolulu, Syracuse, New Mexico, Philadelphia, Louisville and Napa Valley symphonies have gone bankrupt. Presently, the Detroit, Cleveland, Baltimore, Seattle, Atlanta, Minneapolis and Indianapolis symphonies are having significant financial difficulties. Other major symphonies are following this trend, their operations burdened with growing financial strain. "All over the Western world, the alarm is sounding that classical music is in trouble. Orchestra subscription sales are dropping widely, in some cases by as much as two percentage points a year. Ensembles are not balancing their budgets. Audiences are getting older; young people are turned off by classical music. The Chicago Symphony can no longer sell decently even at its own festival," wrote Anne Midgette of the *New York Times*. The data is strongly pointing to the conclusion that the state of professional symphony orchestras are in an accelerated decline. I believe that at this rate, in about 10 years from now we can be down to as few as ten major symphonies operating in the U.S.

In contrast, the rock genre is listened to by hundreds of millions of people throughout the world and is today's most successful form of music. This is because rock musicians, from the time they are kids, are constantly striving and competing to create new music. Yet the rock music that was created decades ago, now branded as classical rock, continues to gain in popularity as well. While the success of the classical rock seems contradictory, it is simply an indirect outcome of new rock music that touches more and more people who, in turn, rediscover the original classics that started it all. Similarly, centuries ago, the new bowed string music being created throughout Europe was the rock of its day. People trampled over each other to get into the concert halls. People fainted and cried during performances. The emotions

that new music induced were so intense that it inspired huge innovations that pulled an entire continent out of the Dark Ages and into the Renaissance. Now that type of music is also branded as classical.

In my opinion, there is one main reason for the radically different outcomes of the two music genres. Bowed string musicians, from the time they are a kids, are NOT constantly striving and competing to create new music. Therefore, there is no new bowed string music that touches more and more people. This concept, of new bowed string music creation, intertwines the future success and failure of professional symphonies with the present day culture of young bowed string students. And that culture is nearly entirely formed by the curriculum of school orchestra programs.

School orchestra programs are fantastic at teaching students instrument playing, techniques and how to perform written music in large group ensembles. Student playing/practicing at home is done for the end support of the orchestral performance. Consequently, the students develop very specific skills and knowledge to be successful in an orchestral performance. These skills of concentration, synchronicity and participation within a larger purpose are all very beneficial. But these skills do not include the creative skills of improvisational playing. To my knowledge, there is currently no organized strings curriculum for teaching those improvisational skills.

In contrast, developing the creative skills of improvisational playing is standard within rock groups. Therefore, developing those types of creative skills should be offered to strings students as well. This secondary set of skills should be complementary to the ones being taught now. With a growing knowledge and confidence of how to create their own music, strings students will understand music at a much deeper level and will be:

- A. More engaged with their school orchestra and other outside music groups;
- B. More engaged in being able to use their playing skills into adulthood without having to be part of an orchestra (I see yearly how the majority of students quit playing strings after graduation because there's little motivation to continue); and
- C. More engaged in attracting a broader general public with new bowed string music.

This type of complimentary curriculum could be used in middle school and high school. It would be voluntary. Entailing teaching individual improvisation techniques as well as dividing kids into smaller groups so they can learn improvisation within a group. The music the students create doesn't have to be long. Amplified instruments are fine, as well as improvisation with songs that already exist. Then, during concerts, those participating students should be encouraged to perform their own created music as part of the performance. I think most strings teachers would agree that this type of new improvisation curriculum will, at minimum, engage their students more. The success of clinicians Mark Wood, Martin Norgaard, Julie Lyonn Liebermann and others are a testament to that.

To help accommodate this process there needs to be a cohesive methodology for improvisational playing written for string teachers to use. I have corresponded with Martin Norgaard and Shelton Berg, both well known jazz method book composers, about writing a method book strictly for improvisational playing. They both think it is a great idea to develop the material. But, even with improvisation method books, this type of curriculum innovation will be challenging and time-consuming for string teachers to implement. Many string teachers may feel that such a fundamental change is not warranted because they do not agree that the school orchestra curriculum is intertwined with the declining viability of professional symphonies. After all, school orchestra programs today are very

popular, with rising enrollment in some schools.

But, from a national perspective, classical music is a cultural eco-system in which we are all intertwined. Consequently, if nothing different is done within this eco-system, I foresee that after there are 10 or so professional symphonies left, a public case will start to be made by administrators that classical music losing its relevance within western society. Then, after much hand-wringing, future funding cuts for school and university strings programs will quickly follow.

So the present popularity of school orchestra programs is not a vindication to continue with current strings curriculum. It is more like a window of opportunity because of the inherent desire of students to create. Art and music school programs are simply the most accessible vehicles for students to create. But unlike art and other academic subjects that encourage future research and development, the classical world does not encourage the creation of new compositional development at a young age. The fact that students have a desire to create with a string instrument should not obscure the critical crossroad professional symphonies and classical music are at now.

Part of the solution may be in websites like StringsHub.com, a new social network to facilitate the ability of string students to engage with each other and showcase their new music. StringsHub allows players to link their videos, win prizes in peer-reviewed contests, and find each other by way of geography and playing styles. With classical music as their foundation, string players will strive and compete to create higher and higher levels of new music. In time, the popular strings groups can perform in school auditoriums attracting a vast array of teens. And the best groups can be the opening-act for major symphony concerts. The possibilities are endless. We just have to open our minds to a different way of looking at strings players and their potential. The cumulative effect of these types of actions will bring a tremendous new energy to classical music and the bowed string world.

My hope is this article will allow for an open conversation on how to better engage string students by introducing them to improvisation. By training the next generation to acquire both traditional classical and creative improvisation skills,

the classical world will be better connected to the general public, thus ensuring that professional symphonies stay viable and relevant in the modern world.



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concentrated on the restoration of valuable instruments at different prestigious shops in New York. In 1992, he moved to Kansas City to start his own shop where he and his team

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