The O'Connor Orchestra Method

Holistic Orchestra Training
by
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"Out of the box" is a phrase that comes up often in conversations about Mark O'Connor and his music. Indeed, Mr. O'Connor has pushed so many proverbial envelopes in so many directions over the past 35 years that this phrase is almost always appropriate. I would argue, however, that one of his newest ventures – his beginning orchestra method – puts beginning orchestral music back "in the box": the "box" of how music really works.

Mark O'Connor was never "in the box" of the currently common style of Elementary School level orchestra training. He never experienced how music is chopped up into "testable" bits of information and isolated "elements" that would eventually be assembled into something called music. Mark O'Connor's music and creativity developed in the *American Music System*, a system of treating music as a whole – whole forms – rhythmic grooves – harmonic chord progressions supporting strong melodies.

Most currently used approaches to beginning orchestra training assume that students need to learn to play their individual instruments to a certain level of competency and learn to read music at a basic level before coming together in an ensemble or orchestra. It is further assumed that this "coming together" will happen primarily by perfecting individual parts in isolation, counting and watching a conductor. Pre-orchestra training is accomplished by chopping up music into its component parts (small melodic snippets, scales, rhythmic patterns), isolating them from the music as a whole and schooling them with exercises that usually seem pointless or meaningless to struggling beginners.

O'Connor's concept of beginning orchestra playing is certainly "out of the box" by this standard. He advocates teaching an orchestra as a whole - orchestral music as a whole – right from the very beginning. No chopping up of parts or musical concepts into isolated skills that will sometime in the future be put back together into "music." To me, this holistic approach puts Mr. O'Connor back "in the box" of what music really is – back "in the box" of how orchestral music really works – back "in the box" with Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and every other composer of great orchestral music. What is "out of the box" is the idea that this can be done with a beginning orchestra. However, I believe that coming from Mark O'Connor's lifetime experience of how music is learned, it wouldn't make sense to do it any other way. The question for him would not be "why" but rather "why not"?

Starting with the whole instead of the parts is indeed a paradigm shift. Teachers will undoubtedly find this concept a bit daunting. Real orchestral playing for beginners?

Surely this must come later! How can one possibly teach a whole orchestra of beginners before they even know how to hold their instruments properly? Well, thanks to the masterful presentation of some of the world's greatest music in easily accessible orchestrations, *The O'Connor Orchestra Method* shows us how. (Refer to score of "Boil 'em Cabbage Down" attached.)

Day One:

1. ***Teach your cello players how to balance their cellos and bows well enough to produce a simple rhythm (4 eighths & 2 quarters) on their open A Strings.*** A high level of success (posture, tone production) may not be instantaneous but enough can be accomplished for a first step.

2. ***Teach your viola players how to balance their violas and bows well enough to produce this same rhythm on 1st finger on the D String (E).*** "Well enough" is the operative concept here. Perfect posture is not a reasonable goal for beginners. Insistence on perfect posture before any music can be made turns many students off to the whole process. Posture can be refined and developed like any other skill on the instrument. Students will quickly find as they progress through the book that better posture makes things easier and will not regard it as some sort of necessary evil or even a punishment.

3. ***Teach your violin players how to balance their violins and bows well enough to produce this same rhythm on 2nd finger on the A String (C#).***

4. ***Now all play together!*** And listen to this beautiful A Major chord! Repeat the rhythm and feel the groove. Rhythm and harmony! Music!

The project presented on "Day One" may take several weeks to accomplish depending on the number of students, time allotted for class periods, number of class periods per week, etc. This step will be pretty "rough" on the actual "Day One," but the sound can be refined over the next few (or many) class periods. Children can be taught to "tune-up" their notes by listening to the other parts and finding out how to make their note sound well with the other sounds. Teachers can create games involving pairings of students on different instruments to learn how to find their notes by tuning to the chord. And so forth. Because this first step is musical, it is satisfying in and of itself and can withstand many repetitions and variations created by the teacher: play it softly, play it slower, play it very fast, sing it, create a different groove with different tempos, etc.

The concept of orchestrating for three parts only at this beginning stage is brilliant. Three notes define most harmonies. Three parts do not create an overly complicated sound for the students to hear and absorb. Three parts are enough to demonstrate contrapuntal movement of lines. Three parts minimizes "wait time" for the instruments that are not being coached at the moment. In "Boil 'em

Cabbage" Variation 1, at least one of the three parts has an open string at any one time. Activities or games featuring different pairings of individuals or instrument groups can be used to help the students find correct intonation by "harmonizing with" the open string part. If two students are selected, one with an open string and one with a fingered note, the rest of the class can be asked to listen to the sound of the one part trying to tune up to - or harmonize with - the other. Listening to this process of tuning up can be very instructional in and of itself. Further, the open string is given to each of the three parts at some point in the variation so each part has a turn at "holding the standard" while others "tune in."

Step Two:

1. ***Cello players learn how to transfer their rhythm to the open D String (down a 5th).***

2. ***Viola players learn how to transfer their rhythm to 2nd finger on the D String (up a whole-step to F#).***

3. ***Violin players learn to transfer their rhythm to 3rd finger on the A String (up a half-step to D).***

This is a new chord – a D chord – a IV chord in the key of A. The students do not need to know the theory behind this move, they can merely learn that this new sound has a name. They can practice (as a whole) moving from the first chord (A) to the second chord (D). The whole orchestra can be taught the concepts of half-step, whole-step and fifth by watching and listening to what each of the parts "does" to change the chord. The students can also learn the principle of contrasting (contrapuntal) motion – the violins and violas move up to higher notes while the cellos move the other way. Students can be coached to hear and appreciate this interesting movement – right from the beginning – in the very first two measures they learn to play on their instruments. It may take weeks or even months to accomplish the move from the first measure (A Major triad) to the second measure (D Major triad) but just look at what is happening during this very first experience – orchestral music! The students are learning many basic concepts of what ensemble playing is all about in a holistic way. So much healthier than having their initial experience be learning their own parts in isolation and then fitting together with other parts by counting and watching a baton!

Step Three:

1. ***Back to the A chord (measure 3).*** Home! Tonic. I chord.

2. ***A new "move" to the E7 chord (measure 4) is taught by showing each instrument its new note.*** Special recognition goes to the violas here playing

open D or the lowered 7th of the chord. Such a special sound! And the cellos "get to" use a finger for the first time (1st finger on the D String) making the E or root of the chord!

The orchestra has now learned to make a I-IV-I-V7 chord progression ***and*** rhythmic groove ***and*** a simple melody. Whole music! Made together!

Two important things can be pointed out here. First of all, the chord names are the same names as the cello notes. This means that the cellos are playing the "roots." Also, the E7 chord has a different sound (provided by the violas) than the major triads in the first two chords. A left-brain understanding of the theory here is not necessary. The students will start to absorb the sound of the V7 chord and its relationship to the music as a whole. They will also start to absorb the names of these more complicated sounds (chords) and understand that just as notes have names, chords do too. They don't need to know the theory behind naming the notes or chords. That would be like asking them "why are you named Danny" or "why is she named Caroline." Children will accept seemingly random naming without question. The theory can come later and, because of this early experience, it will have meaning when it does.

The process described above can be accomplished either with or without reference to the printed music. The best approach is probably some of each: here's how the music sounds and here's what it looks like.

Next:

1. ***For measures 5 & 6, the orchestra uses the "moves" it already knows.***

2. ***Measure 7 also contains a familiar move (A to E7 or I to V7) but the violas "get to" add an interesting texture by playing a different rhythm from the other parts (all eighth notes).***

3. ***Measure 8 moves all parts to a unison A with the cellos and violas finding 1st finger on the G String and the violins playing an open A to help the lower strings tune up.***

Variations 2 & 3 of "Boil 'em Cabbage Down" introduce further subtle moves using this same basic structure. In Variation 2, the cellos learn to move to a different note in the IV chord (F#). They "get to" do this move all by themselves with the rest of the orchestra remaining on their pitches and listening to the difference being made by the cellos. In Variation 3, the violas start on the root of the chord doubling the cellos. Here it can be pointed out how different the chord sounds with no fifth. Simple notes can gain interest and significance by hearing their relationship to the whole. The chords in measures 4 & 7 are also "different" here – the absence of the D note and the open fifth orchestration is an opportunity to teach how a 7th chord sound is different from a root-and-fifth-only sound.

A whole piece of music! With variations! Learned together! By listening and understanding how the other parts move and contribute, an individual player can experience so much more than by just playing his individual part correctly, counting and watching a conductor. How much more interesting and musically satisfying than the other model of practicing isolated elements of music for some future goal that only the teacher understands and the students don't relate to. This approach is not only more engaging for the students but also so much more to the point and final goal of music education – creativity! Students learning this way will be subtly absorbing fundamental principles of composition and experiencing music in an organic and holistic way right from the very beginning.

And so forth throughout the book. The pieces in ***The O'Connor Orchestra Method Book One*** are sequenced from simple to more complicated. The process above describing the building of "Boil 'em Cabbage Down" can be applied to each new piece. A teacher need only guide the orchestra as a whole from piece to piece pointing out and helping with each new "move" and "groove" along the way. And all the while there is whole music making going on. Skills are added as needed in an organic, purposeful way always serving the music at hand.

The basis for Mark O'Connor's ***New American String Method*** (the solo and orchestra books, the piano accompaniment books, the supplemental 3-part violin arrangements, etc.) is his own experience growing up in the *American Music System*. In this system, music is a shared experience and a communally creative one. Beginning students learn simple tunes but whole forms. Students learn rhythmic groove and a sense of harmonic movement (chord progressions) way before they learn theory, counting, spelling, isolated techniques, etc. All those things are important to be sure, but they don't have to come first – before the music itself. On the contrary, insisting on perfecting posture and certain bow strokes, for example, before being allowed to play any real music at all can be a defeating and destructive experience for young children. Refining of posture considerations and bow and left hand techniques can be incorporated along the way. A child can be coached that if he holds his violin more level and brings his left arm and hand around a bit more, the note he is trying to tune-up with the orchestra will "work better." But he will have a reason to do it: to fit into the orchestral sound. Subtle peer pressure can be a wonderful motivator. A student who is using "better" bow technique and getting a "straighter" bow can be singled out and asked to show the other children "how" he gets "such a nice sound." Others will naturally want to copy.

One of the great characteristics of a typical American musician in the *American Music System* is a willingness and eagerness to share – to ***make music together.*** American music has developed into the creative wonder that it is by this process of sharing and needing others to make the music whole. Singer-songwriters need guitar players, lead rock guitar players need bass guitar players and drummers, fiddlers need other fiddlers to "trade licks" with, and so forth. Germans settling in northern Mexico (Texas today) wanted to share their music (and accordion playing)

with their new neighbors - the Spanish settlers and natives. Together they created mariachi music. African American slaves wanted to share their music with their European American masters and vice-versa giving rise to the American hoedown and consequently to blues, jazz and rock-and-roll. The sharing nature of the musical experience itself brings out the best in human nature and should be nurtured from the very beginning of music education.

Orchestra players need each other to make sense of their own individual parts. I truly believe that children whose first experience in orchestra or ensemble playing is modeled on this holistic approach will be not only better musicians in the long run but happier ones. My own 28-year experience in the second violin section of a major regional orchestra supports this belief. During my tenure as an orchestra player, I was also attending jam sessions and playing in folk and fiddle bands with friends. I also learned to play the guitar to accompany my students in places that had no piano. These experiences taught me to listen to and participate in music in a holistic way. I developed skills that allowed me to not only play my own part but to listen to the whole music and enjoy how my part was contributing. It always puzzled me that many of my colleagues in the orchestra would consider our 2nd violin part to be "boring." How could it be boring? It was Beethoven! Or Mozart! My experience was one of not only playing the 2nd violin part but being engaged in the entire symphony – dozens of different parts – and always aware of how my part was contributing to the whole. So many of my colleagues were not having that experience and I began to realize that it was because they had been trained to be invested in only their own individual parts. I began to have discussions with other players in my section and the rest of the orchestra (even the 1st violins!) about this. Several of them were interested in my perspective and said they wanted to "try" to experience the whole. Most of them couldn't do it! They were astounded to realize that they could not focus on anything besides their own part, counting and watching the conductor. It had been trained out of them. How unmusical. And how sad!

Mark O'Connor has done many incredible things. Many look up to him as a "hero" because of his incredible technique and creative genius. Many credit him with keeping the violin alive in recorded country music. Many revere him for elevating American musical language to its rightful place in complex classical compositions. Many believe that his compositions are a leading influence in the saving of American string music in general. Yes, to all. But I believe, however, that giving us a way to teach orchestral music to young children in a holistic, organic – yes musical! – way may be his greatest contribution to society. ***The O'Connor Orchestra Method*** is truly a gift we should not ignore.

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