



Brittney Newell: **Incorporating eclectic styles into your school orchestra curriculum**

Here are some thoughts from our chair on eclectic styles, Brittany Newell, on including styles beyond western classical to your orchestras :

Objective: To provide a venue for string players to apply their musical skill to concepts of improvisation, learning by ear and playing “off the page,” as well as arrangement. To preserve traditional American fiddle music and understand its history and context, including its evolution and timeline in relation to Jazz.

Implementation: Offer an extra-curricular time and place to rehearse a small “chamber” strings group. I recommend extending the invitation to students within the wider school community, by audition. Instrumentation may include violin, viola, cello, bass, guitar and mandolin. Don’t forget to include a strong vocalist as well! Look for venues in the area to host your fiddle group for performances.

To gauge interest in your orchestra for “Eclectic Styles,” spend a day or two throughout the year exposing your students to fiddle music. Or course, you can choose where to fit this in during the year. I’ve found that teaching a fiddle tune to the orchestra can be refreshing after a concert or festival. Either bring in a guest, or teach a tune to your group by ear. One format I’ve used starts with all instruments learning the melody by ear, with a model leading the “call and response” format. Then I’ll teach an accompaniment part, and chart out the chords to the tune someplace where all students can see them. Then, create a quick “arrangement” of the tune, using student input, including an introduction, groups of soloists, a form, and an ending. A few “beginning” tunes that I have had success with teaching to my orchestras (grade 6-12) include: “General Garfield’s Blackberry Blossom,” “Cluck Old Hen,” “Big Scioty,” “Red Prairie Dawn,” & “The Tam Lyn.” There are literally thousands of great tunes to choose from, but those are ones that are fairly straightforward to learn on any string instrument.

Advice: Use your musical skill and intuition to guide your teaching, and treat the rehearsal process like you treat your classical repertoire rehearsals. Be specific about bowings and articulations, and listen for the balance between the melody, accompaniment and bass line. Teach students ways to create convincing performances and to have poise on stage.

I primarily have my students learn songs and tunes without sheet music, to retain some authenticity within the tradition, and because I believe strongly in developing that set of skills. However, if sheet music works for you and your students, there are plenty of ways to be creative and retain authenticity!

Resources: I have called on several performers in the area to lead workshops and perform. Some of those people include: Brittany Haas & Lauren Rioux, Tashina Clarridge, Devon Leger, Charlie Beck and Charmaine Slaven. Check tour dates and schedules to see if musicians are in the area. It can never hurt to reach out and ask for a visit! For sheet music, the “Fiddler’s Fakebook” is a fantastic resource.