

## String Observation Report

Over the course of this term, I was fortunate to be able to observe intermediate strings and advanced strings at Lansdowne Middle School, with Brian Anderson. Intermediate strings are a group of mostly grade 6 students who took strings the previous year in grade 5. Advanced strings are a group of players who have played for at least 2+ years.

Some things that I observed between the two groups:

- A call & response style warm up was used on the D major scale for both groups. For the intermediate group, Brian had Garageband drum loops playing as their metronome, which is something I have never seen before and was funny and interesting. The advanced group did not need the metronome. The call & response warm up worked really well in both groups – it got students listening and creating good tone without having to worry about reading notes on a page. It also was a good ear training exercise when leaps within the scale were involved.
  - With the advanced group Brian had them listen first to a person sitting beside them, then to a person across the room (they were sitting in a circle) and trying to match the sound of the other person that they were listening to. It really improved the tone of the group a lot, and it also helped them stay in time with each other.
- Something that surprised me with the intermediate group is that the longer notes in the pieces they were playing (half notes and up) were actually where the piece began to fall apart a little bit, but the shorter notes (quarters and eighths) were strong and together. In the concert band world this is usually the opposite. It seems to be a tone and subdividing issue – this would be something to think about while teaching future strings groups.
- Brian focuses on tone as a fundamental. Tone comes first in his strings classes before anything else. This means that in intermediate strings they do not focus much on dynamics – he says this is because tone always gets sacrificed if young players

focus too much on dynamics, especially in the softer range. Tone is one of the most challenging aspects of the string family and it takes years to develop, and that's why tone is an important focus in these middle school classes.

- If the repertoire choices are familiar, students will rush. An example of this I saw was in advanced strings where they were playing Orpheus in the Underworld (the can-can). Any time the can-can motif came up, the group was not together because many students were rushing.
- Bowing replaces air. A lot of the things you would say to a beginner band about air can be replaced with bowing in strings.
- Instruments WILL fall apart, break in class, get destroyed on the bus after school, etc... In the short time I was there I observed a cello player whose cello was completely collapsed and broken on the bottom, and a violin player whose bridge popped off in the middle of class. Also, with the change in weather as we're heading into winter, tuning took an extra-long time because so many students came in from outside with wildly out of tune instruments. String instruments are sensitive to heat and cold, and this is something to account for in planning.
- A lot of things that happen in band also happen in strings. For the instructor, you can use a lot of the same concepts and ideas, just with different wording. A lot of the musical things that need to be fixed can be fixed in a similar way. An example of this was when celli and basses had off-beats transitioning into on-beats – they were struggling with it, and Brian fixed it in exactly the way I would have fixed it if we were in band class (rehearsing a small section, playing all the eighth notes, then eliminating the eighth notes that were not needed, etc)
- I noticed a lot of young string players have a hard time watching the conductor. Not only do they have their heads in the music, some of them are actively watching their fingers of their left hands the entire time because they don't have the muscle memory yet to know where to put their hands. This will be something to think about in future planning.

Overall, my experience at Lansdowne was incredibly valuable. I would love to go back and get the chance to observe more, because it seems like this is a place that it is being done right. I know I will be able to use some of the strategies I observed in my future practice.