BEYOND THE BATON

Teaching String Ensembles to Play Without a Conductor

Friday, October 30, 2026 | 2:00–2:50 PM | Student Union Room 4

Presenter: Justin Enright | The Livermore High School Honors Chamber Orchestra

OVERVIEW

In Fall 2019, Livermore High School launched its first audition-based string ensemble: the Honors Chamber Orchestra. What began as an experiment for our Fall concert, performing just one piece without a conductor, quickly transformed our ensemble. Thrilled by the standout performance, the students embraced the challenge, and by our Holiday Concert, the entire repertoire was performed conductorless. This was the beginning of something special!

When emergency closures hit in March 2020, our momentum came to a sudden halt. Devastated but determined, I spent the following year and a half researching chamber music pedagogy, studying ensemble communication, and designing targeted exercises to cultivate student leadership and musical independence. That work culminated in Spring 2022, when our Honors Chamber Orchestra took the stage at Carnegie Hall, performing completely conductorless.

Today, Livermore High School has grown to three orchestras and they all perform without a conductor. Through scaffolded warm-ups, intentional repertoire selection, and non-verbal communication frameworks, students learn to listen, lead, and make artistic decisions collaboratively. This session details the step-by-step process, practical exercises, and pedagogical strategies to empower your own ensembles to perform beyond the baton.

1 | GETTING STARTED: "MAKING IT AUTOMATIC"

Consistency and predictability are everything!

- Conductorless playing starts with the right leaders.
- Selecting the right concertmaster is paramount, but it's not the only position that needs to be considered.
- All principal and assistant principal positions are crucial to the success of the group.

A good routine sets the tone!

- From the start, group accountability must be established.
- Students are responsible for tuning themselves before rehearsal starts.
- The concertmaster tunes the orchestra exactly 5 minutes after the bell rings.
- Almost every rehearsal starts with carefully chosen warm-ups, exercises, scales, or a combination thereof.

Look the same, sound the same!

- Before a note is played, technical, and non-verbal norms must be established.
- Posture, bow placement, and contact points must match from front to back.
- The group must lift and breathe together EVERY TIME they play.
- Bow speed should match throughout each section.
- Body movement should shape the musical lines while creating ensemble unity.
- Bows should lift off the string together at the end of each note/phrase/exercise.

2 | TRAINING YOUR LEADERS: "MAKING IT PREDICTABLE"

A good leader is first a good follower!

- All leaders must be engaged with each other at all times.
- In order for leaders to engage with each other, they must first be a master of the music.
- Engagement is centered on getting out of the music, making eye contact, and moving together.

Teach your leaders to conduct!

- As a leader who is also an ensemble player, "conducting" is a natural mix of lifting and movement.
- Lifting and breathing *in time and in the appropriate style* is crucial to consistency, predictability, and ultimately success.
- Navigating entrances that are rhythmically difficult, off the beat, or start in the middle of a bar are tricky.
- Leading a group through tempo changes, ritardandos, accelerandos, and the like takes careful planning.
- Getting in and out of extended holds with and without space also require advanced consideration.

3 | CREATING MUSICAL NORMS: "MAKING IT TOGETHER"

Every piece requires its own musical decisions, but I have found a set of norms that works across much of the repertoire and many ensembles. These ideas, all borrowed from other musicians and teachers, give students a foundation from which to build their own interpretation.

"Breathe together, play together"

"In tone, in tune"

"Pick-ups lead"

"Get softer to get louder"

"Get louder to get softer"

"Lean into the dissonance"

"Save and spend on longer notes"

"No whopping up bows!"

"Last notes should (almost) always be longer than you think"

"Always protect the moving line"

"Execute with Intention"

4 | MOVEMENT: "MAKING IT AUTHENTIC"

How do you teach authentic movement? That is the million dollar question!

- Fake it till you make it. Try something. Movement only looks strange if you're the only one doing it; not moving looks strange if you're the only one standing still.
- Avoid bouncing at the knees. Keep most movement in the upper body.
- Think "in and out," opposite to the bow.
- Recognize that body types differ, so individual movement will differ, too.
- Sometimes individuals can have too much movement.
- Match the broadest movements across the group or section. Let it "sway."
- Let the music shape the movement, not the other way around.
- Watch and study as many strong professional examples as you can.
- Be vulnerable. Let your body and face reflect the joy of performing.

The Development of Movement in Music

Individual Execution

Group Interpretation

Musical Expression

"By moving together, ensemble musicians may facilitate shared attention towards aspects of their collective interpretation. Coordinated motion may also strengthen the relationships between performers, thereby enhancing experiences of togetherness. Some recent research has shown that coordination in body motion increases audiences' perceptions of group strength and synchronization; it may therefore affect an ensemble's presentation of themselves as a unified entity."

Jakubowski et al. (2020); Lee et al. (2020).

5 | OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- Group size has a significant influence on the success of conductorless playing.
- Will the ensemble sit or stand? (I prefer standing.)
- What will the seating plan look like? Will it change from piece to piece?
- How will rehearsals be structured to build independence over time?
- Rome wasn't built in a day. It can take months or even years to build up consistency and leadership.
- Memorizing the music can always help!