

Benefits of Orchestra Playing for Young Musicians

By Jennifer O'Bannan, Spokane Youth Symphony Executive Director

Team Players

An orchestra musician must be a good “team player.” This involves three main aspects.

1) Individual musicianship

The young musician learns the necessary techniques of their instrument and learns to read music. The student works to achieve a quality performance as the two aspects are put together. The student must be able to play their part accurately (good intonation, rhythm, correct instrument technique) and expressively (tone quality, articulation, and dynamics.)

2) Cooperative participation with a group

Participation in an orchestra requires the players to learn to cooperate and perform their instrument in a way that brings a unified, quality sound from the group. Each player must learn to play in a way that blends with the others and does not stand out or disrupt the quality of the sound.

3) Positive response to leadership

An orchestra is an excellent way for young musicians to learn to respect authority figures and show support for leaders. Each section has a leader (principal player) and the orchestra has a conductor. Musicians learn to follow their leaders and show proper respect when communication is required. This requires learning to “watch” the conductor for tempos and expressive directions as well as following the section leader, particularly in string sections, by following with correct bowing directions and articulations.

Mental Clarity and Focus

Playing and performing music requires mental clarity. Gaining mastery of the instrumental technique required to perform musical compositions takes concentration and focus. The young musician learns to focus on what is printed on the page and interpret those musical notes, rhythms and expressive details through their instrument. While all this is happening, the musician, along with the other orchestra members, is taking direction and lead from the conductor and principal players with whom they must coordinate to perform the musical composition as intended. Putting it all together is truly an example in multi-tasking.

Excellence applied

Each young musician must play their part in an excellent way to help achieve the goal of a quality performance. Auditions are often used to determine seating based on the level of performance that each student demonstrates for the conductor or instrumental coach. This process helps maintain high standards for the entire orchestra.

Participation instead of passivity

Our culture is increasingly passive. Our young people spend much of their time sitting and listening or watching electronic media of some kind instead of actually participating and creating. Performing music in an ensemble is an amazing and wonderful way for young people to use their minds, bodies, and emotions to produce music that moves and benefits other people.

Time management and discipline

In order to become a fine musician, a student must be committed to the process of practicing their instrument on a daily basis. This habit of practicing will enable a young musician to attain the skills and technique needed to learn to play. Playing in an orchestra does require a commitment of time for rehearsals. With the demands that are made on most students, all of this musical activity requires planning and scheduling. The student who learns to schedule their time will have gained an extremely important skill needed for success later in life. As a member of the orchestra, each student is expected to come to all rehearsals on time. This is good preparation for responsibility in adult years.

Expressiveness, creativity and sensitivity

Playing music well requires an individual to get in touch with their emotions on a different level than is usually asked of students. Musicians learn to express through their instrument in a wide variety of emotions that help make music come alive for the listeners. When this is done corporately with other musicians, a shared experience on a very human level takes place.

Stage presence / audience preparation

Orchestral musicians learn to become comfortable performing in front of audiences. This is good preparation for any situation in which they may need to make presentations, musically or verbally. One requirement that is usually made of youth symphony musicians is that of auditions. This is another situation in which a student learns to function under pressure. The more a student has these experiences, the more comfortable he or she becomes in handling them.

Relationship building

The shared experiences that students have making music together often forge long-term, quality friendships. The youth orchestra experience also gives them a group of students with whom they can relate who share their passion for music and excellence.

Draws families and businesses

A youth orchestra program is a community gem that can serve to draw new members into the community. Young professionals and working families relocating to a new area often look for opportunities in the arts for their children when considering a community.