

Student Seating In An Orchestra

Tonight, I had a private student come back for lessons after not taking lessons for a couple of months during the summer. I asked this student how school orchestra was going. They did not tell me how much fun it was or how much they loved the people in section or how great the music is. Instead, they gave a long story and explanation about the seating and their rank in the orchestra. I find this sad and also common when teachers rank the students in their classes for seating.

I have seen this situation many times before. Years ago, I had a very fine cellist named Jennifer. She had just returned to class after a Labor Day weekend Orchestra retreat with the local youth symphony. I asked her how she liked youth symphony and her first time at the retreat. Jennifer began to tell me all about her seating and that she could challenge and get a better seat in the future weeks. Again, nothing about the music, the conductor or the artistic experience. I had hoped for “Wow, I love Beethoven” or “my section members are really good and fun” or even “the conductor is fantastic”. Nope, Jennifer got ranked and that’s her take from a weekend of music making.

By the way, these two events are I have described here are probably 25 years about. Jennifer is a grown woman with kids now.

Imagine, professional orchestra members competing for chairs on the stage week to week. Do science and math teachers seat their students in rank order based on grades?

Most full-time professional orchestras use some kind of a rotational seating system now days. Principal players in professional string sections audition for that job. They get paid more and they have special responsibilities such as bowing parts , solos and sometimes protecting their section members from a nutcase conductor.

I strongly encourage conductors and music teachers not to emphasize seating or rank players in your ensemble. Rotating seating will make a friendlier ensemble and a happier music making environment. Music making should be a collaborating cooperative experience rather than a competition with more losers than winners.