

Playing All the Parts

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In my flute masterclasses, I teach two “orchestral excerpt” classes. Orchestral excerpts are generally solos from the orchestral repertoire that present extreme challenges in all areas of fundamentals and musicality. Orchestral excerpts are used to audition for summer programs, seating auditions at schools, and ultimately jobs in the orchestral world. One cannot learn these solos correctly without studying and listening to the entire orchestral work. Musicians who win orchestral positions spend hours perfecting the smallest of details and study their instrument’s most played excerpts for years.

For the first class, I chose to teach the lyrical solo from Brahms “Symphony No. 4 in E minor.” While the actual notes are not difficult, the expressive shapes, vibrato, soft notes, tuning, and rhythms are very challenging. I decided that instead of having a few people up to perform the flute solo and receive coaching in front of the whole group (a standard masterclass format), we would all play together. To prepare, I printed out the parts for the other instruments from the orchestra that play during the flute solo. (I had to transcribe most of these parts into the key of C because flute, unlike clarinet or viola, is pitched in the key of C.)

I gave out violin, viola, cello, oboe, clarinet and French horn parts. Standing all in a circle, **I asked one person to be the flute soloist and the rest to take parts for different instruments.** As we played throughout the hour, I switched who was the soloist, and who was on the different orchestra parts, many times. Requests were taken. I encouraged them to try to sound like an oboe or violin. I brought to their attention which instruments played at the same time, and this was effective as they were actually playing the orchestral parts. We fixed rhythms by listening to “other instruments” surrounding them and needing to make the parts fit together correctly. Of course, I also made performance suggestions to the soloists, as I would in a traditional masterclass format. My desire that day was to immerse them in the Brahms style of sound. Over the hour, they really adjusted their flute sounds to sounding similar to the instruments they mimicked. They were able produce a more nasal sound like an oboe or regal sound like the French horn. My other goal for the class was that after they experienced hearing the orchestra parts live, they’d now be more likely to realize how important listening to orchestral works when studying these excerpts is in order to play the solos correctly, with the correct style for the time period and the composer.



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