

Teaching String Instruments in Group Lessons: Development, Considerations and the State of Teacher Training in Israel

TAMMY ORDO

Dept. of Music, Givat Washington Academic College of Education

Abstract: Teaching instrument-playing in group lessons is a relatively recent alternative in Israel to the “private lesson” with a single pupil. The paper presents an overview of the history of string lessons for groups, and the characteristics, methods and considerations involved in teaching group lessons. Described in particular are developments in training Israeli teachers to specialize in teaching string instruments in groups.

Keywords: music education, string group teaching, training teachers in Israel, professional identity.

Introduction

Teaching instrument playing to pupils in groups is a complex, dynamic process with numerous important purposes. The group lesson adds a social dimension to playing an instrument. This is achieved by making music-playing an integral part of the education system and enabling all children to study an instrument at school as a basic right of each child’s education. The advocates of group teaching emphasize that it is not intended to replace individual instruction, yet makes possible instrumental music programs in schools otherwise under-served. Children and their families are thus exposed to playing orchestral instruments, sometimes for the first time in their lives. This has been found to have a significant positive impact on pupils’ developing musical, motor (Trehub, 2003), cultural (Morrison, 2001) and social skills (Hallam, 2015). It also aims to expand the pool of string players and enriching the cultural climate of the school and the community.

One of the challenges in instrument teaching programs worldwide, and in Israel in particular, is in building a bridge between tradition and novelty. Teaching pupils to play classical orchestral instruments and making these accessible to wider populations in schools are boosted by incorporating experiential teaching methods suited to the 21st century, a period already characterized by accelerated digital advances and their impact on children. In contrast to the rapid button click and instant gratifications, learning to play an “acoustic” musical instrument is a gradual process developing patience and the ability to overcome difficulties.

Another significant challenge is the training of string teachers and string performers to teach pupils in groups (Ordo, 2017). Due to the differences between individual instruction in a music conservatory or the home, and teaching groups of pupils in public schools, teacher training has to address particular considerations involved in such group lessons. These include methods of teaching skills on the instrument along with other elements of music education, as well as pedagogical, educational, and psychological aspects. A search of the literature reveals only a handful of studies conducted worldwide on the process of training teachers for group teaching of bowed string instruments (Brumbaugh, 2003; Mills, 2005), including two studies conducted in Israel (Ordo, 2007, 2017).

Characteristics of the group lesson

Until the mid-19th century, the only model of string instrument instruction practiced in the Western world was the teaching of individual pupils (Cole, 1983; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Children learning in an individual lesson experienced social and musical isolation, perhaps stereotyped as conservative and old-fashioned by other children who were not themselves involved in such musical development. These factors were liable to act as a disincentive to pupils' continuing to dedicate time and effort to their instrument.

The group lesson's social setting not only avoids such isolation, it creates an enriched, interactive environment. Playing together in groups serves as a microcosm of social dynamics in real life (Morrison, 2001). The activity develops important social skills such as attentive listening, tolerance and appreciation of others, delaying gratification, ensemble playing as a parallel to teamwork, and belonging to a special group characterized by many shared qualities (Eidson, 1989; Gooding, 2011; Humpal, 1991; Gunsberg, 1988). Playing in a musical ensemble develops social awareness and social abilities while providing an opportunity for the individual to feel part of the larger society, to contribute to this society, and even to achieve considerable value from it (Gooding, 2011; Duffy & Fuller, 2000; Gunsberg, 1988, 1991; Humpal 1991).

Neuro-musical research shows that music and musical performance have an inborn biological, emotional, and social connection. Participation by playing in an orchestra or similar performance ensemble develops abilities in cooperation, responsibility and mutual support, trust and respect, engaging in give-and-take, and reaching compromises (Hallam, 2015; Trehub, 2003). These aspects are components of the group music lesson, in addition to the process of learning to play the instrument. Teaching group music lessons also promotes the development of listening habits, exposes pupils to varied styles and to

the music of different cultures. All these are especially desirable in teaching diverse and multicultural populations (Hallam, 2015).

Training teachers to instruct string instruments in groups involves considering these numerous aspects, along with the instrumental and musical elements relevant to all beginning pupils such as proper posture, hand position, ear training, intonation and note-reading. This multiplicity of demands may intimidate prospective teachers.

A history of music lessons for groups

The teaching of string instruments to groups began in the second half of the 19th century. The main methods for group teaching of the violin developed in England, the USA, Europe, and Japan (Sollinger, 1970). Due to economic, industrial, and social changes of that time, many professional string players and string teachers were left without employment; therefore they started teaching string group lessons in public schools.

The pioneers of violin group teaching in America were Lewis A. Benjamin and sons (1847). American violinists Charles Farnsworth and Albert Mitchell traveled to England in 1908 and 1910, respectively, to observe and learn from Thomas Mee Pattison, founder of the Maidstone Movement of violin instruction, who continued to develop the group teaching of bowed instruments. Mitchell studied Pattison’s syllabus and adapted it to American public schools in Boston. In 1912, he himself wrote two booklets for violin group teaching (Göktürk, 2009).

Following Mitchell’s direction, many programs of violin group lessons opened up, school violin orchestras were established, and in the 1920s sixty method texts were published. The following two decades, however, showed a decline in what had been a flourishing of group teaching programs. In response, the American String Teachers Association (ASTA) was founded in 1946, devoted to improving the field in both quantity and quality. Its groundbreaking professional journal, *American String Teacher*, began publication in 1951.

The period between the 1960s and the 1980s, a time of economic inflation and budget shortfalls, was marked by a reduction in string instrument teaching programs. Then in 1997, stimulated by the 1990s economic boom, the first American national conference of string instrument teachers was held. The following year, US national standards for training string teachers and school string orchestra conductors were set and published (Braumbaugh, 2003; Göktürk, 2009; Hall, 2013).

With string instrument lessons becoming established in the school curriculum, the profession began focusing on the development of pedagogical guidelines and instructional methods for group lessons in primary schools. This involved writing and

publishing study materials customized for string group instruction, and also by providing group-lesson training, whether of new teachers or veterans. While considerable efforts continued to be dedicated to increasing the number of pupils and obtaining funds to promote string programs and public-school orchestras, group instrument instruction became an accepted, effective way to maximize the impact of each teacher.

A number of pedagogical leaders emerged as the field of string instrument instruction developed. Outstanding figures such as Samuel Applebaum, Paul Rolland, Elizabeth Green, and Shinichi Suzuki paved the path toward pedagogy for group lessons (Göktürk, 2009; Sollinger, 1970). Training music teachers for instructing group instrument lessons has emerged in Israel since the early 2000s, with string teacher training programs at institutes of higher education, including the Buchmann-Mehta School of Music at Tel Aviv University and the Givat Washington Academic College of Education in Yavne, Israel (Ordo, 2017).

Group teaching methods

There are two types of string instrument teaching in groups (Göktürk, 2009; Ordo, 2017). The first type is teaching in large, heterogeneous groups where an entire class is divided into four groups by instrument: the violin, the viola, the cello, and the contrabass, learning together. The advantage of this approach is that it facilitates a fairly seamless transition to playing in school orchestras. However, it presents obstacles to teacher and pupils alike: a sole teacher has to teach the playing of four different instruments at the same time; as such, the instruction, obviously, cannot be of high quality. Another consideration is that instruction is focused upon the shared content of the four instruments in question, which have in common only three strings (A, D and G) out of the four.

Pupils who learn according to the heterogeneous method of the field's pioneers such as Applebaum, Rolland and Green, do not begin learning and using conventional Western note-reading right from the beginning, but rather at later stages. While Suzuki emphasized learning to play “by ear,” with note-reading starting only in the second or third year, Rolland and Green used an alternative note-reading system in which letters symbolized the names of the particular notes. This option generates a subsequent problem. The pupil finds the initial phase easy and enjoys the common ground created between all instruments – but then, having acclimated to the first phase, the pupil then needs to adapt to a different system. Also, a pupil accustomed to playing without notation will be reluctant to “regress” and start learning to read notes.

The second approach is lessons in small homogeneous groups in which only one instrument is taught, which enables pupils to focus on note reading for that specific instrument from the beginning. This approach is advantageous, in this author’s opinion, as it facilitates providing more attention to correcting the pupil’s hand position while playing.

Despite these two main differences, there are similarities between the two teaching methods. The first is in the practical aspect, whereby all methods, whether heterogeneous or homogeneous, involve the use of technical measures and accessories that do not exist in individual teaching. For example, the use of stickers to mark the position of left-hand fingers on the instrument fingerboard, a paper roller to indicate the beginning of the bow movement as a preliminary stage before the movement of the bow on the strings, and large rhythmic and melodic flashcards, which help orient the pupils in the first stages of note-reading.

These concrete means are intended to ease the work of pupils and teachers, to create a common technical base, and enable pupils to experience success right from outset. Usually there is no place for such strategies in individual teaching. Also, as the heterogeneous method leads to a smooth transition to school orchestras, this motivates pupils – yet makes personal acquisition of skills difficult and risks damaging the quality of the hand grip, position of hands, and the level of personal hygiene.

The second similarity has to do with educational values. All methods, the heterogeneous as well as the homogeneous, emphasize the social context of learning in a group (Bell, 2007; Garverick, 1998; Hall, 2013). The group dynamic motivates, supports, and encourages its members through relevant and enjoyable studying, as well as frequent performances in various settings.

The starting point of all methods aims to educate, socially enable, and nurture a culturally engaged human being, multi-talented and with broad horizons. These aims are profoundly valuable when the target population consists of at-risk populations (Bell, 2007) or the impoverished and under-served. Especially in such circumstances, achieving these aims calls for determination and persistence (Garverick, 1998; Hall, 2013). Developing these skills underlies the process of incremental learning to master a musical instrument and its repertoire, along which path the teacher guides the pupils.

Study material is adapted to the pace of the pupils in the group, as progress is unavoidably slower than with individual lessons. In addition, repertoire is shaped according to the school climate and local community needs. It characteristically includes a traditional repertoire of short classical masterpieces plus folksongs, arranged and adapted according to the pupils’ proficiency level and set in the initial scales relevant to learning to play string instruments: D major, A major, and G major. Repetitive drills and

scales are made enjoyable through accompaniment by a harmonizing instrument such as guitar or piano, quality acoustic playback, or as an instrumental duet serving as a dialog between teacher and pupils. Considerations of adapted repertoire can be customized to school and community preferences, as mentioned above, as well as for the yearly cycle of seasons and holidays plus the annual sociocultural topic set by Ministry of Education (Ordo, 2017). Incorporating these elements as the pupils advance helps the teacher evoke enthusiasm.

Besides the music lesson groups being arranged by level and ages, there is considerable value to creating “casual” groupings: mini-ensembles set up to perform at school events such as holiday celebrations, commemorations, and seasonal assemblies, as well as school string orchestras. This combination of different learning groups at various points in the multi-year school program is beneficial for both the young players and their peers acting as listeners in the audience.

Considerations in teaching group lessons

Opponents of teaching string instruments in group lessons claim that it is an inadequate substitute for individual teaching. They point out that talented and gifted children are liable to become bored (Babeuf, 1989), and that the teacher must overcome difficulties in reaching each pupil for correcting posture and hands. (Masin, 2012). In effect, however, learning to play an instrument in a group has been found to produce distinct benefits in upgrading the pupil’s developmental, cultural (Morrison, 2001), social (Hallam, 2015), cognitive, and motor skills (Trehub, 2003).

Broadened exposure through group instrument lessons and improved access to obtaining musical instruments has brought about a new, enhanced image of musical instruments in the school climate. Young players become valuable in populating music ensembles, which then develop into elite entities with their own rich musical content and tradition, where talented youngsters have a say, an impact, and a sense of belonging. These changes indicate transformations towards a progressive approach to music and its place in society.

The complexity and challenges of group lessons for teaching string instruments are among the reasons that relatively few instructors and performing musicians engage in this field. Other reasons have to do with career musicians’ negative attitudes toward teaching in general and group teaching in particular, as many of them regard performing as the definitive aspect of their professional lives. Rare are those music teachers whose qualifications include substantive dedicated coursework in education along with a specialization in music, and who are willing to undertake the difficulties and challenges

of instrument teaching. Musicians-performers who teach, as well as classroom music teachers, are liable to experience a non-supportive school system, problematic occupational conditions and inadequate remuneration, and a sense of professional isolation (Brumbaugh, 2003; Göktürk, 2009).

Increasing the number of teachers trained to instruct groups is likely to counteract the abovementioned disincentives. Equipping prospective and veteran teachers with the professional competence to achieve successful results with their pupils leads to improved job satisfaction. With a larger pool of staff available, the number of classes and pupils could increase exponentially. A well-established string instruments' program, credited in no small part to the teachers' qualifications, reflects positively on the latter's status along with justification for improving their employment conditions.

There has been a gradual increase of group music programs in Israel from the end of the 20th century and in the 21st century. Guitar was the first instrument taught in group lessons, followed by the electric keyboard and the recorder (Babeuf, 1989), and later on the orchestral instruments. The year 1985 was a landmark for innovation in the history of group music teaching, when the advisory committee headed by musicologist Michal Zmora-Cohn recommended to the Ministry of Education that it is every child's basic right to study music within the public-school program (Israel Ministry of Education, 1985). That right was firmly established in 2002 when Yael Shai, the Ministry's music superintendent, instituted the “community musical model” (Ordo, 2007). This program enlisted public schools and local music conservatories to cooperate closely in offering a range of instrument lessons on the school premises during the regular school day. The conservatory provides teachers, and a nominal tuition fee is collected from the parents. The community music model included the perspective of the pupils as the school and conservatory shared visions and goals (Israel Ministry of Education, 2018).

Training teachers of group music lessons in Israel

The gradual increase in group music programs led to a significant rise in demand of group-lesson music teachers. The community musical model evolved over the years, and in 2017 a plan was formulated to strengthen the status of conservatories in Israel which included expanding the instrumental music teaching programs in public elementary schools and junior high schools (Ordo, 2017). As an incentive, these lessons received further support in the form of a subsidy from three financing sources: the school's municipality, the local conservatory, and the Ministry of Education (Israel Ministry of Education, 2018)

All the above trends have enhanced the development of group teaching of string instruments and the development of teacher training over the past 15 years. In 2003, the author was the instructor of the Ministry of Education’s first year-long training course in the Jerusalem Music Center at Mishkenot Shaananim, and in 2006 began teaching a year-long academic course on this topic in the Buchmann-Mehta School of Music at Tel Aviv University. In time, this course has become more established and was made mandatory for the latter’s Master’s degree students in string instrument teaching, although the degree program closed after a few years. Beginning in 2014, the Givat Washington Academic College of Education has offered studies for a teaching certificate in the instruction of groups and ensembles, recognized as a professional qualification by the Ministry of Education. This author was involved in writing the program’s curriculum and teaches several courses in this subject, using a combination of theory, classroom and practicum learning. Despite all the above, there is a serious gap between the high demand for teachers who specialize in the field and the inadequate supply, especially in the geographic periphery remote from Israel’s more populous and prosperous center.

Conclusion

The instrument teacher’s professionalism is expressed in delivering a holistic lesson combining musical and educational qualities. Learning to play the instrument is supported by solfeggio singing, gestures, active listening, and creativity, starting from the earliest stages. The presence of multiple pupils, whether in a homogeneous (same-instrument) or heterogeneous (strings-family instruments) group, provides each participant the opportunity for musical development in listening, aural music, sight-reading, harmonic hearing, intonation, rhythm, and playing a stringed instrument, as well as building social skills such as cooperation, teamwork, mutual support, consideration, patience and tolerance, delayed gratification and acceptance of differences. The group music lesson includes interactive games, exercises, and activities which foster the achievement of musical, instrumental and social objectives.

The teaching certificate program in string group instruction for students at the Givat Washington College of Education majoring in music teaching of groups and ensembles is versatile and rich. This program, designed to provide students with both theoretical foundations and applied tools, stresses the need to reduce the gap between the assessed situation and the optimal target by setting achievable goals, and focusing on trends and challenges. By integrating theory and practice through frequent observations and field teaching experiences, the program ultimately prepares music education students in finding and forming their professional identity in the field.

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