



EDITOR

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## Fighting the Toxic Inferiority Complex of the Second Violinist

January 30, 2019, 1:34 PM · A reader wrote me to express her feelings of confusion - and even distress - over being placed in the second violins in her community orchestra.

She was told by the director that she was a "good strong second violinist." But that made her suspicious. Was that just sugar-coating, because they think she isn't good enough to play in the first violins? Looks like they put some teenagers in the first violinists, but they were not necessarily more advanced than her. Would they ever let her play in the firsts? What was really going on here?

I certainly recognized her feelings. They are complicated by a deeply ingrained mentality that many of us acquire, whether we want to or not, through years of a schooling system that emphasizes competition and hierarchy.



It goes something like this: the first violins are superior to the second violins. The seating is built on a competitive ranking system, and everyone is placed in order of ability, as the instructor or conductor views it. The best player is in the front, the worst player is in the back. The instructor may get this right, maybe not. People spend a lot of time looking around, assessing: is the person next to me better, or worse, and by how much? People challenge each other for

chairs - to be promoted in this system. People question, "Does he or she deserve to be sitting there?" "Do I deserve to be sitting here?"

She grew up with this mentality. I grew up with this mentality. A lot of us grew up with this mentality, and I'd argue that it's downright toxic to our music-making, our relationships and our ability to build a healthy orchestra community.

"Is this the way it works in a professional orchestra?" she asked me in her e-mail. She had read a few forums and had begun to think about the idea that every instrument is equally important, and that the second violins actually have an important role in the orchestra.

Let me tell you about my own experience. Growing up, I saw this from a lot of angles. I had the opportunity to be concertmaster of my school orchestra, and several youth orchestras, and I played in both sections in my city's more advanced youth orchestra. And then, during my senior year of high school, when I should have been "best," I got placed in the second violin section for All-State Orchestra. What? I was so embarrassed that I almost didn't want to go. On the plus side, we were playing Stravinsky's "Firebird" (I'd never played this piece at the time, and I adored it) and I'd have a weekend away with all my friends. Yet -- I'd have to tell everyone I was in the second violins. What could be more humiliating? It wasn't even that I didn't want to *play* the second violin part, it was the humiliation of it all!

No worries, I went. But what about that attitude? It was completely ridiculous! What an honor, to be among all those talented young people, playing great works of music. Every person invited to be in that orchestra was an excellent player, first chair to last. And the second violin part for Firebird -- plenty of challenge right there. Why on earth was I so ashamed? It's actually not surprising, considering how steeped I was in this environment that held "ranking" in such high regard.

As an adult, I've played in many professional orchestras, and mostly in the second violin section. I realized very quickly that there is an art to being a "good, strong second violinist," and my attitude really changed. That's because in my first job, in the Omaha Symphony, I identified a number of second violinists around me who clearly took pride and professionalism in their approach to playing second violin. I grew very interested in all those things involved in being a strong second violinist: knowing my part well, being reliable for counting, knowing and adjusting to the changing roles as a support section then a soli section, attending to every marking on the page, and then just tuning in to everyone around me. By now, I absolutely love playing second violin, and I still look for ways to be better at it.

Is it different in professional orchestras? Certainly the residue of that toxic upbringing can rear its ugly head on occasion in professional orchestras. But in the best orchestras, everyone takes personal responsibility and pride in doing their best, in the role they are playing. In the best orchestras, in the best performances, we are all one. Everyone is important. One perfectly placed "ding" on the triangle is every bit as important as the violins nailing down that entire first page of Don Juan.

It's also less often the case that people are seated according to "ability level" in a professional orchestra section, mostly because of the way auditions fill certain chairs when a tenured musician leaves. Subs very often sit in the back, and I've certainly seen occasions where the person sitting "last chair" is a sub who is a hotshot straight out of Juilliard and can play rings around everyone! Some orchestras also rotate the seating, which in my view is a healthy idea.

Of course, in any orchestra, and especially in student and community orchestras, there were be a variety of playing levels. But I would encourage "playing level" to be something to work with, rather than something to rank. To put this in perspective: My students are of varying playing levels, yet I would never say that the most advanced player is "best" and the beginner is "worst." That kind of thinking is absurd, and frankly, sometimes the beginner gives the better performance. The goal is to play your best, whatever your level. And the goal in the orchestra is to create a balanced, supportive environment where every person can play his or her best, and every section can function at maximum capacity.

Are we going to play music, or are we going to play ego games? If we are going to play music, we violinists do need to change our attitudes. We need to play in the section and the role where we are needed, to practice our parts, to count every beat and every rest, and to play our hearts out. We can draw inspiration from strong players and encourage the players who need more help. I would love to banish the idea of "second violin" as something inferior and see an environment that puts an emphasis on excellence and camaraderie in every section.