

The Counterpoint Club

A Chamber Music Podcast



Teacher Guide

Opus 3, Episodes 1-5

Teacher Guide: Opus 3

This Teacher Guide is designed as a companion resource for Opus 3 of The Counterpoint Club (TCC) podcast. The 5 episodes of Opus 1 of TCC were originally designed as a screen-free virtual replacement for Tuned In! 2020, the week-long summer chamber music camp the Skyros Quartet normally leads each July. Opus 2 was the virtual offering for the fall semester of ECCHO (the Emerald City Chamber Music Organization), the in-school chamber music program led by Skyros, and Opus 3 represents the spring semester of ECCHO. Tuned In! and ECCHO are both programs of the Chamber Music Guild (formerly Chamber Music Madness), a non-profit organization based in Seattle, WA. However, while we are only able to offer ECCHO to schools in the Puget Sound region, TCC is freely available to anyone around the world.

Each of the 5 episodes of Opus 3 is centered around a concept in chamber music performance. They are 45 to 60 minutes in length and follow a similar format: a history segment, a technique lesson, a chat amongst members of the Skyros Quartet, and a guest interview, with some fun extra content along the way. There's also a companion blog post for each episode, available from www.thecounterpointclub.org. The blog features additional music examples, unabridged versions of the guest interviews, and downloadable worksheets with step-by-step guides for the exercises from each technique lesson. While consecutive episodes follow a logical order, any episode can be used as a stand-alone module for teaching purposes.

The Teacher Guide provides ideas for how middle and high school music teachers (band, orchestra, or choir) can use The Counterpoint Club as part of online learning and distance coursework. Please note that these materials are intended for students approximately in 8th grade and older. While Skyros, the creators of The Counterpoint Club, is a string quartet and the content and guests largely center on string instruments and repertoire, the content is easily adaptable to any music discipline. The Teacher Guide features three brief lesson plans for each episode that can be completed by students after listening to that episode. The first lesson plan is a group activity that an entire large ensemble class can participate in together. The second is designed for small breakout groups of about 3 to 6 students to work on together. The third activity is designed for a student to complete individually.

At the end of this document, you'll also find a few lesson ideas for assignments that are not specific to any of the episodes.

These activities are suggestions. Please feel free to use them as written, adjust as needed, or create your own activities based on our content! And if you do, please share them with us. We are eager to hear about how you are using TCC in your classes! This content is completely free to use and share with your colleagues. We do ask for a simple favor: let us know what you think! Please fill out our brief **Teacher Feedback Questionnaire**. We would be delighted to have your feedback on The Counterpoint Club, and hear how you are using it in your classroom. Teacher feedback and testimonials are really important to us, and help us in creating more episodes of the podcast in the future!



Episode 1: The Plan

Summary:

The Skyros Quartet kicks off another series of The Counterpoint Club with an episode about improving your ensemble's rehearsal efficiency through organized planning. Featuring special guest: cellist Gregory Beaver

Description:

The Skyros Quartet begins the third season of The Counterpoint Club with an episode about organization. In the history segment, Justin explores how famous string quartets got started. Next in technique, Brandon discusses a great organizational method called Scrum that creates maximum efficiency in team settings. Our special guest is cellist Gregory Beaver, who joins Sarah and Willie for a fantastic conversation about planning. Finally, we begin a new segment called Skyros Chats, a short discussion between members of the Skyros Quartet.

- **Full class activity** - Talk to the class about the planning process involved in creating a concert program as well as how a director would plan out a rehearsal process in order to prepare adequately for a concert. Give the students a fixed hypothetical (or real) concert date, as well as a set amount of repertoire (again, hypothetical or real). Ask the students to establish the following parameters: 1) How difficult is each piece? Rank them in order of difficulty. 2) How many rehearsals will there be between now and the concert date? 3) How many dress rehearsals (run-throughs) will there be (there should be at least two or three)? 4) How would you divide up the rehearsal time between the various pieces in order to make sure the ensemble is adequately prepared for the concert? 5) Who will be in charge of managing the tasks (making sure that the group is staying on track), so that the repertoire is ready for run-through at the first dress rehearsal? Is this one person, or are several people sharing this responsibility? 6) Who checks in to make sure everyone has completed their tasks (e.g. section leaders need to manage their own sectional schedules, but the music director needs to make sure they complete their sectional rehearsals)?
- **Small group activity** - If possible, use pre-formed small ensembles, who are preparing for a school concert with a fixed number of rehearsals. Have them elect a "Scrum Master." This person is simply in charge of managing their rehearsal "to-do lists," making sure that the group is on track for their goal. Have them follow the same process as in the Full Class Activity, ranking both their repertoire and individual sections of their pieces in order of difficulty, then prioritizing what things to focus on first. Using this information, have them plan a rehearsal schedule, for both individual rehearsals, and the overall rehearsal process leading up to the concert, making sure to include at least 2-3 full dress rehearsals before the big day! *Modified activity:* If there are not enough pre-formed ensembles to include everyone, or if the class is meeting remotely, you can create a hypothetical scenario for the class, then divide the class into small groups. Each group will come up with their own rehearsal plan. For example, give them the following hypothetical parameters: They have 4 weeks to prepare 3 pieces of music (pick specific ones that they know). They will have a total of 12 rehearsals. Have them come up with a rehearsal plan, using the questions in the Full Class Activity as their guide.
- **Individual assignment** - Each student uses the guidelines presented in the worksheet to prepare a solo piece or pieces for a performance. This does not have to be a major recital. It could be playing in front of parents at home. If playing from memory, change the number of dress rehearsals (run-throughs) to at least 7.

Episode 2: R-E-S-P-E-C-T

Summary:

In this episode of the Counterpoint Club, the Skyros Quartet takes a look at how to create a respectful work environment between colleagues. Featuring special guests: Ann Elliot-Goldschmid, Sharon Stanis, Joanna Hood, and Pamela Highbaugh Aloni of the Lafayette String Quartet

Description:

In the second episode of Opus 3 of the The Counterpoint Club, R-E-S-P-E-C-T, the Skyros Quartet explores how to work with your colleagues in a respectful and constructive manner. Sarah explores how Haydn wrote parts that were more equal in interest across all four voices in his Opus 20 string quartets. In the technique segment, Willie outlines strategies that will allow all members of an ensemble to feel respected and their ideas heard. This episode kicks off a three-part series of interviews with the members of the world-renowned Lafayette String Quartet, who are based in Canada and are in residence at the University of Victoria in British Columbia. Our Skyros Chat in this episode features a conversation between Brandon and Willie.

- **Full class activity** - Have the class memorize a short melody, perhaps something such as *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* or another short and simple piece. As the class plays the piece together, lead them through a series of sudden, unexpected tempo and dynamic changes. As they have the music memorized, they should have their eyes glued on you, their conductor. Although the music will sound quite odd, encourage them to make it sound as fantastic, unified, and convincing as possible. This can be done in-person, or on a digital platform such as Zoom with all students on mute and self-reporting on their accuracy.
- **Small group activity** - Assign a short piece or musical phrase to each small group, of approximately 4-5 students. This could be a piece with multiple parts/instruments and harmonies or just a simple unison melody). As they rehearse together, have them rotate through playing coach. Each student gets a few minutes to lead the group, almost like a dictator. The other students do everything they can to make the leader's ideas come to life. The leader can choose things like tempo, style, character. To practice making quick changes and being flexible, encourage students to try very contrasting ideas from what the leader before them suggested. As with the above activity, this can be done on a digital platform with all students (except for the leader) on mute.
- **Individual assignment** - Each student selects a short solo piece for their instrument. On a copy of the music, have the student cross out all the dynamics and write in their own dynamics (can be intentionally thought out or even completely randomized) that are quite different from the composer's original. Learn and perform both versions, the composer's original dynamics and the rewrites, doing one's best to make both versions equally convincing musical representations.

Episode 3: Transfigured Night

Summary:

In this episode of The Counterpoint Club, Skyros focuses on transitions in music. Featuring a second appearance from special guests, members of the Lafayette String Quartet.

Description:

In the third episode of Opus 3, “Transfigured Night,” the Skyros Quartet dives into the ever-mutable subject of transitions. Sarah and Willie begin with a conversation about the complex emotional transformation depicted in Schoenberg’s famous “Transfigured Night” for string sextet. Next, Justin talks about some of the practical techniques Skyros uses to really iron out those transitions. This episode includes the second installment of our roundtable interview with the Lafayette String Quartet. The New “Skyros Chats” segment features a conversation with Sarah and Justin.

- Full class activity - In Opus 1, Episode 2 of the Counterpoint Club, we discussed the idea of expressive counting as a means to establish communal pulse. When dealing with transitions, especially ones involving a change of pulse and character, expressive counting is a great tool to help the group come to a consensus. For the full class activity, have each student take turns leading the group through a particularly difficult transition using expressive counting (refer to the accompanying worksheet for details on expressive counting). Have them do the expressive counting by themselves first, and help each of them come up with a clear idea of what character/tempo they want, if they’re struggling. Make sure the class knows this is to be a non-judgment zone, and that there is no wrong interpretation. Simply encourage everyone to try to match each “leader” as closely as possible, and choose students from the back of the section to begin.
- Small group activity - Assign a tricky transitional passage to smaller groups, and have them rotate through the group, making sure each student gets a chance to be the expressive counting leader. The passage chosen can be from a piece the students are already working on, if desired.
- Individual assignment - Each student selects a few difficult transitional passages from their solo repertoire, and tries out at least 3 different ways to interpret the transitions, using expressive counting.

Episode 4: Let Them Eat Cake

Summary:

The Skyros Quartet explores balancing individual voices within a chamber ensemble, using everyone's favorite analogy: a layer cake! Featuring the third and final installment with special guests, the Lafayette Quartet.

Description:

Finding the right balance between each individual voice in a chamber ensemble isn't easy. In the history segment, Willie discusses the hierarchy of voices in an ensemble and how these roles changed and evolved across different eras. Justin explores a method to balance voices in rehearsal and performance, using the tasty analogy of a layer cake. Our guest interview features the third and final installment of our roundtable discussion with the Lafayette Quartet. In the Skyros Chat, Willie and Sarah discuss their favorite books about classical music.

- Full class activity - Listening is the most important aspect to having a good balance of sound in a large ensemble. The second most important is having every member of each section fully engaged in the sound role that they are to be creating at any given moment. To practice this in a large ensemble, have the last seat in every section lead the section with their sound, while maintaining ears for the overall balance of the large ensemble. For the string section players, if you are in front you will listen to the players behind you. If you are at the back of the section, this will mean more engagement and projection of your sound to the front of the section. If you are a wind or brass player, blend your sound with the lowest instrument in range for any particular section, and have them lead the connection with the rest of the orchestra. Just like in our small group activity where we have a member of the ensemble step out to listen to balance, our conductor plays this role and can direct adjustments in balance. Just as in a small ensemble, you cannot close your ears just because you have someone directing. The conductor is there to make adjustments, but the work has to be done by every member actively listening, and the most energetic engagement coming from players furthest away from the front. Alternate group activity: Using a projector (or screen-share), go through an excerpt of a piece together with the group, having the students identify their various ranges and roles (i.e. soprano, alto, tenor, bass as well as melody vs. harmony/accompaniment). Using a simple color-coded system, mark these roles in the score for everyone to see.
- Small group activity - Using a chorale appropriate to the group's configuration, each member of the ensemble identifies the role of the layer cake they have in their parts and then plays through together balancing their parts accordingly. Each member of the group can take a turn sitting outside the ensemble to make comments and hear how the balance is working from outside the group. A harmonic or chordal analysis can be helpful if you are having trouble aurally identifying what roles members have in the sound blend.
- Individual assignment - Work through your individual part of an ensemble piece you are going to rehearse to discover what role of the sound layer you are fulfilling (bass, inner, soprano) for every measure of the piece. You can use color as an easier way of quickly identifying which role you are, or another personal identifying marker. There should be no measure left out! If you are finding it difficult to discern the roles in your part, a chordal/harmonic analysis can be helpful.

Episode 5: “Play It Like Chamber Music!”

Summary:

In our concluding Opus 3 episode of The Counterpoint Club, the Skyros Quartet investigates the intersection between chamber music and orchestra. Featuring special guest: educator and violinist/violist Dennis Bourret.

Description:

In the fifth episode of Opus 3 “Play It Like Chamber Music,” the Skyros Quartet looks at how the chamber music and orchestra genres are intertwined. Brandon examines the historical links of the two traditions, starting with composers such as Lully. Next, Sarah explains how chamber music techniques are also effective orchestral techniques, including leading from every seat and purposeful listening to other sections. Our interview for this episode features Mr. Dennis Bourret, a wonderful and experienced educator, violinist and violist from Tucson Arizona. Our Skyros Chat to wrap up Opus 3 is between Sarah and Brandon.

- Full class activity - As a class, make a list of the attributes of an ideal orchestra colleague. Include both individual qualities, and also musical qualities this person would strive for. How would this person interact with a stand partner or the people right next to them? What is their responsibility to the conductor? How would they engage members across the orchestra? When not playing in orchestra, how do/should colleagues like this behave around others, and what are this person’s choices and actions like in their lived experience? If students come up with any conflicting ideas about what is and is not an acceptable characteristic or two ideas are in conflict (i.e. a leader shows strength and never any doubt vs. a leader asks others what they think when they don’t know the answer) this is a wonderful opportunity to have classmates elaborate or discuss these points.
- Small group activity - In smaller breakout groups, come up with a “stand partner manifesto” together. This is a short one-page document that includes the best practices for how to treat and support one another, according to this small group, between stand partners. This can include practicalities like where a shared stand is placed (if applicable) and how to ask if stand placement isn’t working, who is responsible for things like page turns, penciling in directions, passing up questions to the front, and where individuals should mark things like different fingerings. It can also include what kind of language is on or off limits, or when talking will be inappropriate or uncomfortable.
- Individual assignment - This one may be a challenge, but also very eye-opening! Time students (or ask them to time themselves) for a certain amount of minutes chosen by the teacher to reflect on past experiences in group projects or orchestra and then individually write on a piece of scrap paper three memories of when they feel they were a great colleague and why, and three times they feel they could have done something differently. This part is not to be shared (unless someone would like to!). At the end, use a timer again to come up with three words the student would love for others to say about them if they were being described by a colleague. For a more in depth discussion later, this could be expanded to ask would these three words change if it were a friend as opposed to a colleague and what is the difference? A family member? A teacher? A romantic partner?

General Assignments

These assignments are unrelated to any specific episode. Some are smaller and will take just a few minutes from students, while others are more large-scale projects.

- As a class, create your own episode of *The Counterpoint Club*. Choose a theme for your episode and divide your class into small groups, of about 4-6. Each group is responsible for a different segment of the episode: history lesson, technique lesson, quiztime, guest interview, Q and A, all based on the theme or topic. Each group is responsible for recording and editing their content, which is then compiled together to create an episode. You can even assign one group to write and record a simple musical theme. In addition to the knowledge gained from researching and recording each segment, students will learn a bit about audio production, sound editing, and layering musical tracks (if one group is making theme music). These are all skills that Skyros had to learn and develop to create the podcast as well! (If you do this, let us know and share the result with us!)
- Begin a discussion in the comments section of a TCC blog post about the content in that episode, including things student reactions to musical examples in the post/episode, or related content to the topic. Skyros will do our best to chime in to these conversations as well!
- Submit a question to Skyros for the Q and A section of the podcast. We'll try to feature answers to as many questions as we can in future episodes. Please note that if we do feature a student's question in an episode, we'll supply a release form giving us permission from the student (if age 18 or older) or their parents/guardians permission (if under age 18) to use their voice in a TCC podcast.