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The conductor as part of a creative process

Case: Students composing for a student orchestra

Skriftlig reflektion inom självständigt arbete

Det självständiga, konstnärliga arbetet finns dokumenterat på inspelning: xxx
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Background

The aim of this project was to test and develop working models: how to integrate the teaching of composition and orchestral conducting?

The idea of this project – "Composing for an Orchestra", was to work with a student orchestra in a more student-centered and creative way than is usually the case. The project took place in the Kaustinen College of Music, where I am working as music teacher. My composition students were given a task to write music for the chamber orchestra at the college. The music was performed in the Kaustinen Chamber Music Week in January 2016. My role was a combination of composition teacher and conductor.

In this study, I am going to describe the idea of shared leadership in working with a student orchestra, some aspects of creativity and its significance in this context.

I will describe the whole process I went through with some of the composition students, colleagues and the orchestra. Finally, I will give my own reflections on the project, the results and my thoughts on how a similar project could be developed further.

Examination concert

My examination concert with KMH Instrumental Ensemble took place 13/5/2016 at KMH and had nothing to do with this project in the Kaustinen College of Music. The program for my examination concert was:

Jean Sibelius (1865-1957): Pelléas and Mélisande op. 46

- At the castle-gate
- Mélisande
- A spring in the park
• Pastorale
• Mélisande at the spinning wheel
• Entr’acte
• The death of Mélisande


• Tempo giusto
• Allegretto
• Con moto
Introduction

Work with student orchestras

I conduct a student orchestra which consists of the students in the Kaustinen College of Music between the ages of 15 and 19 years. Some of them are on a rather basic level and are planning to continue their studies in other fields than music, e.g. medicine, education, engineering or marketing. On the other hand, many of them have a dream of becoming a professional musician and/or music teacher. This places great demands on the conductor whose duty is to attend to all the players with their different needs and goals. There is a big difference between working with amateurs or students and working with professionals. The conductor’s role is to bring out the best in everyone and to push the orchestra to surpass itself in order to make the music sound as good as possible. From this point of view, the role of the conductor is not very different when conducting amateurs compared to professionals.

The beating technique of the conductor should be the same with students and professionals according to Jorma Panula and Atso Almila (Vartiainen 2009, p.156). I agree in general but, in my experience, students quite often need more help and clearer beats with perhaps more subdivisions. Prof. Almila says: "Don’t change the beating, if the problem really is that the musicians don’t look at you.” Olli Vartiainen develops Almila’s idea more specifically for student orchestras: "Don’t change the beating, if the problem is that the students do not understand or cannot as yet read the signs of the conductor.” (Vartiainen 2009, p.156). From this point of view the conductor of a student orchestra has a big responsibility to teach the musicians to read the body language and beating patterns of the conductor. Very often the conductor has to return to basic things, explaining them verbally and showing how it should be done. "This is the down beat” or "Don’t play
before my beat” or “I will show you when you should play, you don’t need to guess”.

This demands a good deal of self-confidence from the conductor and good craftsmanship in the beating in order to be sure that the problem is in the orchestra and not in the conductor’s poor conducting skills.

The conductor also needs both psychological instinct and compromising skills if the musicians start debating about the conductor’s way of beating clearly in some places.

Erik Cronwall, a former legendary concert master is also known as a conductor. After debating with one orchestra the issue of beating in two but thinking in four or vice versa Cronwall came up with his typical compromise: ”You just think in four, I beat in two, but let’s play as one.” (Almila & Panula 2010, p.175)

The conductor of a student orchestra has different obligations and aims than with professional musicians. He/she must also be an educator, a pedagogue. The conductor’s duty, in addition to teaching orchestral playing is to increase awareness and interest in classical orchestral music. The focus must be, above all, to create well-being in this stressful world and to educate new generations of policy-makers and musicians to understand the importance of classical music. Thinking even more widely, his/her job concerns the importance of music and music education and awakening the possibility of enjoying music in all of its forms in the future.

**Shared leadership**

The chamber orchestra in our college is basically a string orchestra that occasionally has some woodwind, brass and percussion instruments. The conductor of a student orchestra usually prepares all the bowings and fingerings in most music schools in Finland. It is necessary to be aware of the technically challenging passages in all instrumental parts and to have the knowledge to help students solve these problems. However, very few
conductors are skilled enough to know all the different instruments well enough to be able to write fingerings for instance. This is why it is most advantageous to co-operate with colleagues, especially with instrumental teachers. (Vartiainen, 2009, p.291).

In my orchestra, planning the program and the concerts and leading rehearsals is pretty much group work. We have a professional violin teacher helping strings with their technical problems. Often another professional violinist and a cello teacher takes part as well as section leaders. These teachers are also responsible for leading sectional rehearsals. They all also participate in artistic and musical decisions although as the conductor I must assume the main responsibility for the final result. It’s not always the most pleasant way of working when opinions differ widely. However, I wouldn’t change the way of working at present as I feel strongly that it is the right path. Good co-operation and group work is a prerequisite to make a student orchestra work well.

According to Vartiainen (2009, p.157), there are many benefits in using an "educator group" – a "team" consisting of the conductor, instrumental teachers and additional professional musicians. Among them are:

- **Effectiveness of observation**: Many eyes and ears detect more than one.
- **Collectivity**: working together for a common goal
- **Professional development**: Constructive criticism within the group can help the conductor to develop better rehearsal and beating technique.
- **Student musicians’ legal rights**: Another teacher is able to defend students from the mistakes and faults of the conductor.
Creativity

According to Kari Uusikylä (1999, p.56-77) there are four basic elements of creativity: the creative person, the process, the product and the environment. Creativity is usually seen as a feature of the individual or the manifestation of a guiding attitude. Creativity can also be seen as a process which produces a kind of product. This is done in an environment where a number of processes and outputs are defined as creative.

The musical product can be e.g. a composition, a recording or a single concert (Vartiainen 2009, p.64). In my project, I wanted to combine these three aspects and involve in this kind of creative process not only a chamber orchestra but also some composers. I also wanted our woodwind and brass players – who usually don’t take part in these activities – to become actively involved in the orchestra. How did I plan this to happen? I decided to ask some of the students to write music for the string orchestra with some woodwind and brass instruments – specifically for the players which are available at our school.

Uusikylä (2012, p.199-122) writes about Graham Wallas’ way of describing the four stages of creative thinking from 1926:

- preparation, finding a problem
- incubation
- illumination
- verification

In a composing situation preparation can be seen – as I understand it – as some kind of starting point for creative work, incubation as a process that happens more subconsciously. Often, during this process, it is good to do something else or concentrate on other tasks. Illumination is a more difficult concept to analyse. It cannot be achieved at will (Uusikylä 2012,
p.120). For me, it may e.g. appear all of a sudden while jogging outside. Verification can be, for example, a finished composition or a performance.

From the conductor’s point of view studying a score could be seen as a creative process where these four stages exist. Preparation is a starting point for starting to read the score. Jorma Panula’s instruction to start studying a score is to read the score through first in a chosen tempo and then leave it to incubate and come back to it for example after one week. While your subconscious is working, do the same thing with another score. (Almila & Panula 2010, p.240-241). It’s obvious that this technique has a connection to Wallas’ theory of creative thinking presented earlier. The conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen also discusses the importance of incubation. It’s a question of conscience, how deeply you dig in to the score and how much you can incubate thoughts evoked from the score (Salonen 1987, p.39-41). Uusikylä (2012, p.99) also mentions that creative artists and scientists usually incubate their thoughts for a long time. Illumination follows from in depth study. A concert performance or recording with an orchestra can be seen as a verification of the creative process.

Uusikylä (1999, p.56) refers to Csikszentmihalyi who writes that a creative person is able to use all aspects of the human personality and that the creative individual has the courage to use the extremes of his/her personality without the anxiety which less creative persons easily have. For the student the courage required for creativity grows from the sense of security that is usually built upon the influence of a one supporting and appreciative adult (Uusikylä 1999, p.63). A safe growing environment helps the child to remain in good mental health, promotes trust in his/her own abilities and creativity. ”Can an educator or a pedagogue perform any greater service than to help a child remain psychologically alive?” (Uusikylä 1999, p.63). This is, I believe, a very important aspect to remember when working as a conductor of a student orchestra or an amateur orchestra.
The Project

In this chapter I will describe the project which I led between August 2015 and January 2016, – ”Composing for an Orchestra”.

1 Working with the composition students

Besides being a conductor my role at the music college is to teach composing and arranging, as well as various other things. My situation is near to ideal in allowing me to integrate different musical subjects. During my third year as a teacher at the music college, I decided to put more effort into the students’ own creativity and musical ideas. I decided to challenge some of my students to compose a piece for an orchestra of their fellow students.

As I had already led a similar project before, I already had some experience and knowledge about managing and organizing this kind of project. My earlier experience was that the work with the composers should start in good time and I should have more resources to help the students. Rehearsals with the orchestra should also start early enough to leave plenty of time for preparation.

The project started right at the beginning of the Autumn semester in August, 2015. I informed the composers of the opportunity to compose a piece for an orchestra, to be performed during the Kaustinen Chamber Music Week at the concert of the Kaustinen College of Music at the end of the January, 2016. The artistic director for the week was Veli-Matti Puumala, a composer and professor at The Sibelius Academy. He would also be present at the concert and visit our school to meet the composers as he had done the year before. There was also a possibility to compose for other ensembles as well: chamber music groups, the choir, a folk music group etc. I really wanted to make this concert feel like a night dedicated to our own composers.
A couple of my students as well as one of the other composition teacher’s students were interested in composing for the orchestra. One of the students decided to compose a piece for a chamber music ensemble (flute, clarinet, piano), one decided to write a song for a girls’ choir. Another composed a work for solo piano, and the fourth a new piece for three baroque violins. In this study, I am going to describe only the work with the students composing for the orchestra. I have gained permission to do this study from the principal of the Kaustinen College of Music. I also have permission to publish the scores from two of the student composers. Because of the need of privacy, I am not going to use the real names of the students.

The schedule for the composers

I planned the schedule for the composers so that the music had to be ready and every part and score had to be printed by the end of November, 2015. The students knew that I would be involved in the composing process and could help the students with their practical questions. There would also be the possibility of involving some instrumental teachers and possibly some musicians from the orchestra to help the composers with their practical questions concerning e.g. instrumental playing technique and the level of advancement of the players. One of the reasons for working this way is to increase the motivation both inside the orchestra and among the instrumental teachers. In the end this means that involving more people in this creative process develops an even more favorable environment for the creative process. As presented in the chapter above, the environment is one of the four basic elements of creativity according to Uusikylä (1999, p.56-57) and that’s why I think an educator should pay particular attention to it.

Student A

Student A, in her third year, had one experience from the year before of writing for an orchestra. I should mention that this student could hardly read music when she started. Her progress during these three years is enormous.
Previously she had mostly composed pop music for piano and voice or for a basic pop band. I encouraged her to take a step beyond her comfort zone. She started to work with the piano and the Garage Band computer program.

With this student I had to work mostly with the register and the ambitus of string instruments. She also got to know different bowing and articulation techniques like detache, pizzicato, staccato, legato etc.

She was also eager to use some woodwind and brass instruments. At the time we were limited to using flute, clarinet, soprano saxophone and trombone. The first thing was to study the same kind of things as with the strings, plus transposings. It was important to find out the technical level of the musicians, very important when working with student musicians. The conductor and the composition teacher, in this case the same person, has to know the instruments well, and co-operate with the students and their instrumental teachers to ensure that everything which is written is possible to play.

This student did everything with the help of the Garage Band – computer program. She decided to play every instrument in the program and with my help, made some important changes to instrumental parts. When she was happy and satisfied with the music I helped her to write everything down with the Sibelius 7 – program. The music was completed almost too late, so the score still looked quite rough and there were a lot of things to be developed and even mistakes to be fixed. This happened, because I gave a clear deadline that everything must be ready before Christmas holiday so that the orchestra would have enough time to learn the music. Compositions finished too late were not going to be performed at the concert.
Student B

Student B wanted to compose a solo work for trombone with string orchestra accompaniment. He had never composed for strings. We practiced writing for the strings and finally we had a bossanova-stylish accompaniment ready, but the trombone part was never completed. Hopefully, it will be completed in the future.

Student C

Student C started to compose for a mixed choir and orchestra. A year before he had written a piece for orchestra so this was meant to be step two. The composition lessons concentrated on the possibilities and limitations of the student choir. I was very pleased with this student’s work but after a few weeks he announced that he had finished this composition and will never compose tonal music again. Instead of this large work, he decided to compose an atonal chamber music piece, which was later premiered at the concert during the Kaustinen Chamber Music Week.

Student D

This student had never composed for orchestra before. She needed help with basic string technique and voice leading. This student studied mainly with another teacher, but she also wanted to hear my opinions related to orchestration. She wrote the music for the piano and needed help concerning how to orchestrate the music for strings and winds. She demonstrated very sophisticated thoughts about her piece and had very clear thoughts about articulation, phrasing and orchestration. She just needed to find the technique to solve these problems and learn some of the practical aspects of writing music.

Finally this student decided to orchestrate her music only for the strings, because of lack of time. The deadline came sooner than she thought.
Co-operation with the composition teacher

An important part of the project was the co-operation not only with the instrumental teachers but also with a fellow composition teacher. There wouldn’t have been a sufficient number of students in my group for this kind of project. Only one of my students (Student A) finally got his/her piece finished and performed by the orchestra. But we co-operated and the students could ask for help from either of us or from both.

2 Working with an orchestra

Planning an orchestral rehearsal

My orchestra rehearses for two hours weekly. Additional rehearsals are held quite often especially before a concert. The orchestra has plenty of performances during the study year. This means the conductor should have a very clear picture of the programme for the whole year before the semester starts.

Scheduling

As conductor, my plan was to make a rehearsal schedule for the TUTTI-rehearsals and give freedom for instrumental teachers to arrange sectional rehearsals with their own instrumental groups when possible. It means that the violin teacher leads sectional rehearsals for violins and violas and the cello teacher for cellos and double bass. The teacher in charge of the woodwind and brass instruments rehearses with all the winds separately. Organizing rehearsals this way, I implement the principle of shared leadership to increase motivation inside the orchestra when every instrumental group has to be responsible for its own rehearsals. Giving responsibility to other teachers increases their commitment to the orchestra and raises the appreciation for orchestral activities. I hoped that working this way would also develop creativity in the school environment as this gives the signal that creative processes are respected and supported. This is one way of building an environment more supportive to creativity. In my
opinion, this is important because environmental circumstances are one of
the four basic elements of creativity according to Uusikylä (1999, 56-57).

**Rehearsals for the concert during the Kaustinen Chamber Music Week:**

Monday 7/12/2015 from 4 p.m to 6 p.m (strings)
Monday 14/12/2015 from 4 p.m to 6 p.m (strings)
Monday 11/1/2016 from 4 p.m to 6 p.m (strings & woodwinds/brass)
Monday 18/1/2016 from 4 p.m to 6 p.m (strings & woodwinds/brass)

**Dress rehearsal**

Sunday 24/1/2016 from 1 p.m to 2 p.m (strings & woodwinds/brass with a
professional double bass player)

**Concert**

Sunday 24/1/2016 at 5 p.m (strings & woodwinds/brass with the
professional double bass player)

3 My experience as a conductor in different working
stages

**Sectional rehearsals**

Violins, cellos and double bass rehearsed a couple of times with their
instrumental teachers. These teachers wrote the bowings and fingerings and
their work was invaluable. Sectional rehearsals took place after the first
TUTTI-rehearsals. I felt this method worked well because everyone had
some kind of sense of the music after the first TUTTI-rehearsal. I also
experienced that students might not always dare to ask questions about their
problems while rehearsing with the full orchestra. On the other hand, this is
quite obvious because of the natural hierarchy in the orchestra. This is why working with one’s own teacher in a smaller group might feel more secure. I felt this myself in the next TUTTI-rehearsal where the atmosphere was more relaxed. I’m definitely planning to use this method again because the players knew their parts better.

The only problem occurred with woodwinds and brass. They were scheduled to attend the two last rehearsals but to rehearse together before them to really know their parts. Unfortunately their teacher wasn’t able to organize these rehearsals or forgot. This caused some problems for the players as well as frustration for myself as conductor. Unfortunately, it was stressful and frustrating also for the Student Composer A who might have misunderstood the situation and thought that the teachers didn’t care about her music.

I found this was a problem of shared leadership. I wanted to delegate sectional rehearsals to other teachers so that also the group of woodwind & brass – players would feel more involved and empowered. I noticed that delegating was not as easy as I had expected. I asked a few times if they had already rehearsed the music but the answer was ”not yet”. I also said that I could lead a sectional rehearsal with them, if the teacher doesn’t have time for it, but the answer was ”I will fix that”. Finally, the result of this was that some winds couldn’t play their parts at the dress rehearsal. They had an extra rehearsal one hour before the concert, where the teacher after a short conversation with me, decided luckily to play one of the solo parts himself to save the performance.

**Orchestra rehearsals**

The first rehearsal was quite chaotic, because there were two completely new pieces and another one which was more or less unfinished. This music, which Student A had composed, *Matkalla – The Journey*, didn’t have viola or cello parts at all, so I made a decision that the cellos would double the
double bass part. I had just heard that the only flute player good enough at the school was unable to take part in this orchestra project because of other plans. She was very stressed. I had to tread carefully. She was also playing in the chamber music trio written by student C and I wanted to make sure that she wouldn’t retreat from that performance. I talked with the teacher who was responsible for woodwinds and brass and he suggested that we replace the flute with the soprano saxophone and get an alto saxophone player to play the soprano saxophone part. I was a little bit skeptical, because I saw that it would be a little bit too high for the alto saxophonist (especially for a student) but I didn’t want to argue.

*In Memoriam*, written by student D, sounded actually quite good right away. The composer had made a decision to leave woodwinds out and concentrate just on the strings. This obviously was a clever choice. The score looked good and many musical things were well-considered, like articulation dynamics, tempo and character. Many things in the score were clearly marked with Italian musical terms. I couldn’t believe this was the first thing she had ever written for strings and even the first piece she had ever notated.

Orchestra rehearsal number two was much better, because by this time the strings had had sectional rehearsals. It was finally possible to work with rhythmical issues, phrasing, dynamics and articulation. *In Memoriam* went especially well, we could spend more time with musical issues. I’m fortunate to have the professional violin teacher helping with technical problems and also helping me in inspiring the players. Co-operation at orchestra rehearsals is particularly rewarding when the conductor both inspires the orchestra and is sensitive to ideas coming from the orchestra even if these ideas are in opposition to those that the conductor planned first.

Woodwinds and brass joined in the orchestra rehearsal number three but they didn’t know their parts because they hadn’t had any sectional
rehearsals. I was very disappointed because the strings already had started sounding quite good and the concert was fast approaching. The alto sax player couldn’t play her part but she told me that she would be able to manage next week. We should also have performed Edvard Grieg’s *Hjärtesår* and *Våren* in the concert but at this point I gave up this idea, knowing that we would not have enough time to rehearse them. The two premiers would require all our time.

*In Memoriam* started to sound better and better in rehearsal number four. We had more time to concentrate on details like phrasing, finding the right speed and the right part of the bow for the string players to use. We also worked with breathing together and learning how section leaders should use their body and lead their group. The players started to know their parts so we worked consciously on how to follow the conductor’s beat and what kind of things could happen in the concert if the conductor decided to do something differently. In my opinion, this is an important part of the conductor’s role working with a student orchestra. This is also a reason why a student orchestra conductor should also be a professional conductor or at least have a good level in conducting technique. A bad conductor might unconsciously train the students to read the conductor in a way which would make their lives more difficult later in other orchestras.

*In Matkalla - Journey* – the string parts were very rhythmical. It’s obvious that these classical players are not used to phrasing in a way to create a ”groove” in the accompaniment. We had to work a great deal to achieve this. Luckily we were going to have a professional bass player used to playing pop and folk music. The soprano saxophone, the trumpet and the trombone started to sound better, but our problem was that the alto sax player didn’t attend the rehearsals at all, creating a situation where everything would be a little bit too exiting in the concert.
Dress rehearsals

This rehearsal took place in the Kaustinen-sali, the concert hall in the Kaustinen Folk Art’s Center. It’s a beautiful hall for 450 people, built inside a mountain and with good acoustics for unamplified music. It was inspiring to play there. I could sense this from the orchestra as well as they realized how much better everything sounded in the hall. We also had the professional bass player with us now. In Memoriam was going to be quite touching in the concert, I was sure of that. I could only guess how exiting it must be to hear one’s own music played for the first time in the most important concert the school could offer. I could just encourage the orchestra to enjoy.

The Journey started to sound better, even though the alto sax player really couldn’t play her part. The composer was visibly frustrated. Especially the woodwinds and brass had a lot of intonation problems but now their leader attempted to fix them. In my opinion, this wasn’t the best idea in a situation where everyone felt so insecure and the concert would start in one hour. I was in a very difficult position, but I decided with the wind and brass teacher (who also played the trumpet in this piece) that he would play the alto sax solo on the trumpet. One hour before the concert, this teacher transposed the alto sax part (a high solo) and led a sectional rehearsal. We didn’t have a chance to try these changes together with the orchestra. There was nothing to be done anymore, I just needed to hope for the best, seem calm and not show how worried I was.

Concert

I was satisfied with the performance. In Memoriam was a success and The Journey as good as it was possible in these circumstances. The players exceeded all my expectations. I told this to the orchestra afterwards and expressed gratitude to them. The musicians in the concert situation improved their level of playing higher than ever before.
Reflection

I am happy that the project succeeded though I sensed my frustration when I saw that some of the compositions would not be ready by the deadline. Next time, I will start preparing this kind of project even earlier. Maybe the best time could be right after the concert in the Chamber Music Week in January. This actually happened automatically. Student C, who had decided to concentrate on composing for a trio, had succeeded with the piece and had a first performance of it in the same concert. He asked me, if it would be possible to write a piece for orchestra for the next year’s concert. I said yes and he started right away. The process has already begun.

A difficult thing to manage is improving the work of the woodwinds and the brass. One possibility would be to settle all the dates already in the beginning of the semester. This might not work because, at that point, we don’t yet know which kind of orchestration composers are going to use in the end. The only chance might be to improve communication with the woodwind/brass teacher and set the dead line for the compositions even earlier.

Shared leadership is also something which I want to develop more; maybe giving more responsibility to students themselves: choosing a few reliable players to lead sectional rehearsals perhaps every second time would empower the orchestra and increase the inner motivation among the players.

I must start developing the cooperative approach with different colleagues especially with the instrumental teachers. Of course, this is a question of resources and that is why it is an administrative question as well: how much are orchestral activities respected and resourced?

Before the concert I had to leave Grieg’s *Våren* and *Hjärtesår* out of the concert program. At first I was a little bit disappointed but in the end I was happy that the orchestral program (just two pieces) consisted entirely of the students’ compositions. I hope it gave a signal that we as educators respect and support their ideas and creativity.
I am surprised almost every time at the concert. This time, as usual, the orchestra raised its level of playing dramatically. It’s quite magical how this can happen.

For myself, as a conductor, the project was a challenge even if the music was not the most complex to work with. I had to use my knowledge of instruments and orchestration to help these students to realize their musical ideas in the notation. It was a learning process also for myself.

The next level would be assigning a conducting task to some of the students. In that case, I could use my professional skills as a conductor to help a student to conduct. That was also my plan in the beginning but there was no one who wanted to try. Hopefully that will happen in the next project.
Concluding thoughts

As I look back, I can see many benefits from the project. Music is a way of living and being in the world. If we accept the idea that creativity belongs to everyone (Uusikylä 2012) and believe that it’s important, I think it is our obligation as conductors and educators to consider this and think how we can take this into account in the orchestral activities. This will not only apply to student orchestras but also to professional orchestras. There is already some research concerning children composing for symphony orchestra with the help of professional composers. One such project is *Kuule, minä sävellän!* (“Listen, I’m a composer”). The project is a co-operation between the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra, Helsinki Music Center, Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra, Sibelius Academy, Finnish National Opera and The New York Philharmonic. The Project started in 2011 (http://www.uniarts.fi/uutishuone/kuule-minä-sävellän-projekti-vierailee-hampurin-elbphilharmoniessa-huhtikuussa 26.3.2016).

We as conductors should also try to find new ways of reaching new audiences, to help them discover orchestral music. I can envision a conductor assuming a much larger role in public education. Unquestionably, it is a long-term co-operation with different professionals and partners. Various kinds of composing projects could absolutely be one rewarding part of it.
References


For inspiration:


Appendix

1. Matkalla ("The Journey") – score (Student A)

2. In Memoriam – score (Student D)