



CHAMBER MUSIC

The Case for Chamber Music

by Tom Rosenberg

ATTENTION! Read on if you want to find a way to help your students develop more quickly in any or all of these areas:

- Rhythm
- Intonation
- Keeping a steady pulse
- Accompanying skills
- Soloistic playing
- Phrasing and Articulation
- Sophistication of the use of the bow
- Expansion of concept of tonal colors
- Reading skills
- Listening skills
- Orchestra and other ensemble skills
- Musical breathing and Cueing
- Interpretation and Score Reading
- Ability to recognize and play in different styles
- Interpersonal relationship and communication skills

What is this often-overlooked tool in the training of our young students????

The answer is: Chamber Music.

For many professional musicians, the art of being a chamber musician is the ultimate goal. Many seasoned professional orchestra players crave to play chamber music, and many of them do just that either for fun or on the side for both extra income and artistic satisfaction. Many players who could have high paying orchestra jobs forego those jobs to dedicate themselves to being chamber musicians, usually for considerably less money. Legions of highly skilled amateurs maintain a worldwide network of other amateurs interested to meet and play chamber music and even sometimes travel the world to play and study chamber music.

Why are these things true? What is it about chamber music that makes it so important for developing younger musicians and so appealing to both amateur and advanced professional musicians? I believe there are many reasons. To find the answers, one needs to really explore the medium of chamber music. I will start by looking at the reasons from a pedagogical perspective.

The first critical step is creating a compatible ensemble, which is not without its challenges. Each member of the ensemble needs to be close in ability and emotionally and socially compatible. (A group of friends who get along well but play at considerably different skill levels often is a disaster!) Issues of age and gender can be a factor in the success of this type of ensemble, especially with younger students. Next, all members and the coach/instructor need to be able to meet at the same time. This can in some ways prove to be the biggest obstacle to the success of the group, especially if all or some of the members are too young to drive themselves to rehearsals and coaching sessions. However, if these obstacles can be overcome, and an experienced coach can be found for the group, the rewards are great for all concerned.

In newly formed student groups, listening and communication skills are often the first areas that need to be worked on. Despite many years of private lessons and excellent youth orchestra training, chamber music playing reveals that most students still need much improvement in these two areas. Many students will occasionally play seemingly random rhythms and tempos when removed for an orchestral setting and the “safety-in-numbers” syndrome often found in string sections. Chamber music does not have room for these problems. Every player must know their part beautifully, but also the entire piece. A really good ensemble member’s hands are playing their instrument while their ears listen to not only themselves but to all the other members of the group. In many ways, it is if the group is playing a piece on the piano, but instead of one brain and two hands, there are four brains and eight hands and arms! Getting them all to be perfectly synchronized is quite a challenge. Learning how to move and breathe together musically, match bowings, articulations, note lengths, vibrato and timbre are just some of the skills required.

Each member must also learn how to maintain the pulse, feel rubato together where appropriate, sub-divide for rhythmic

accuracy, know when to play out, when to accompany and generally learn how to be responsible for the interpretation of the piece and artistic qualities of the group. And finally, attaining good intonation is far more challenging in a chamber ensemble than an orchestra. The degree of accuracy needed for great string quartet intonation is even higher than both solo and orchestral intonation where there is more room for variety. Good chamber music intonation requires not only beautiful individual intonation, but also the ability to adjust notes to fit into a “vertical” setting based on where a pitch fits into a chord.

For most students, a great coach is a huge help in achieving these goals, as is a weekly meeting with the coach and some rehearsal. Rehearsing on their own can be a big challenge for some student groups. But the process of recognizing and working out problems is yet another vital skill student chamber musicians learn. The communication skills learned by being part of a quartet will serve students well in many aspects of their lives, whether or not they continue in a music related field. Great friendships can be formed while successful student groups often take great pride in their personal identity and have a lot of fun working together.

Each semester, I have my students give a public recital. Both cellists and chamber ensembles are on those recitals, and the following text appears on the printed program:

About Chamber Music: All of the groups in today’s concert have achieved a great deal. The art of being a good chamber musician has many educational benefits that may not seem obvious. The repertoire is considered by many to include the greatest works by the greatest composers. In addition to learning the notes, each member of the group must know the other parts of the piece equally well. It is only when all members of the group move, breathe, and think as one that true excellence can be achieved. Being a good chamber musician also means you must learn to be a good leader and a good

follower; an excellent soloist and a great accompanist, a great team player who is a responsible and communicative colleague, willing to allow the whole to exceed the sum of its parts. Some of these skills can take years of work to develop. Yet, they are tools useful not only for music but nearly all facets of life. Good chamber music skills lead to greatly improved orchestral skills and stronger interpretive, rhythmic and technical abilities in private lessons. Best of all, it's fun!!

Besides all the pedagogical benefits of becoming a great chamber musician is the other side of the story. The repertoire is vast and glorious. The greatest masterpieces by many of the greatest composers fall into the

chamber music category. Symphonic music is by nature more public and less personal than chamber music. Perhaps this is why so many composers chose the chamber music idiom for their most profound, emotional, intimate, and structurally revolutionary works. As an example, Beethoven only wrote five pieces after the Ninth Symphony. They are all string quartets that many people believe contain some of the most complex and transcendently beautiful thoughts ever conceived by any person. Once exposed to the masterpieces in this idiom, many musicians cannot get enough. Fortunately, there is more great repertoire than most musicians can fully explore during their lifetime.

If for no other reason, encourage your

students to go to chamber music concerts for the music and exciting musical intimacy that chamber music offers. Then, hopefully they too will want to delve into the world of becoming a great chamber musician with all the musical and lifelong rewards it offers.

Tom Rosenberg teaches chamber music and cello from his home in Saint Paul. In addition to his performing career, he also is on the faculties of the University of Minnesota where he coaches and is Coordinator of the String Chamber Music Program and at Macalester and Carleton Colleges. Since 1981, he has been Artistic Director of the Fiscoff National Chamber Music Competition. †