



CHAMBER MUSIC

Keeping it Together

by Tom Rosenberg

Keeping a chamber ensemble together is no easy task. Whether it be a student group relying on parents for transportation or a professional ensemble with high powered management and concert engagements around the world, the complexities of coordinating the schedules and lives of both a groups' members and their families have caused countless groups to either break up or at least experience personnel changes.

But, that kind of staying together is the easy part and a discussion for another time. This article is about techniques for *playing together*, and I don't mean sort of together but *really exactly together!*

Watching and listening are the two primary senses that good musicians really must develop to be good ensemble players. This is true whether that ensemble has two or eighty-two other musicians. But that is not all. Giving good cues, breathing together, and at times moving together are also key skills that must be developed. In the end, listening and knowing what to listen for is probably the most important skill, but without highly developed skills in all the other areas by all members of the group, technically outstanding group ensemble won't happen.

What does it mean to really listen in a chamber music group? One must learn to **listen to oneself**. This is the easiest listening skill to develop. But, it can also lead to poor ensemble playing. When coaching student groups, I have often observed a member of a group being off from the rest of the group by a part of a measure, or even a part of a beat for many measures. That is a sign that they are hearing only themselves. Imagine how difficult it would be to actually play a piece composed in such a way that one part was supposed to be a fraction of a beat apart from the rest of the group for an extended passage. Many hours of rehearsal and practice would need to be spent to get it right! Great listening to oneself actually involves several sophisticated types of listening. Students usually need help to learn to hear themselves not only as an individual,

but as part of the whole group. A chamber musician's ears must listen to everything (especially everyone else) while the hands play their own instrument. Another more complex way of hearing yourself is to imagine having two sets of ears. One set listens from where you are sitting. The other set are like remote microphones that are out in the concert hall with the audience. That "second set of ears" helps you evaluate your playing and answers important questions such as: "Am I playing the right volume?" "Is my timbre the right color?" "Am I projecting when I should and am I transparent enough when I need to let other voices out?" This type of listening is hardest to develop. A trusted coach should be of tremendous value towards developing this skill. It takes time and experience to get really good at this on your own.

It may seem obvious that one needs to **listen to the other members of the ensemble**. But great ensemble playing demands a special kind of listening. There is much more to listen to than simply the pitches and rhythms the other members of the group are playing. Here are some of the perhaps less obvious things to be listened for: vibrato; articulation at the beginning of the note; the end of the note (an area often badly neglected!) and where exactly does it end and with what type of bow speed; the timbre or tone color of a passage; harmonic balance of a chord (which notes need to be brought out more and which notes are less); the shape of the phrase and whether or not members of the group in supportive roles are making the same shape and phrasing as the member with the melody (although sometimes the melody should follow the harmony or react to sudden harmonic shifts occurring around it). As all members of the group learn to listen to all of these things and react to what they are hearing, a higher the degree of ensemble accuracy is achieved.

Each person in the group needs to **listen to the whole piece**. One of the challenging things about chamber music

playing is that unlike solo playing when one brain is controlling two hands that belong to the same person, there are three, four, five or more brains trying to coordinate together so that the six, eight, ten or more hands involved react perfectly to each other. When a pianist plays a sonata, with enough practice the hands instinctively work together to play the whole piece. By nature of the instrument they are playing, a pianist's brain coordinates the hands. It is simpler for the melody and harmony to stick together and for one hand to shape a phrase with the other. It is different in a chamber ensemble. Each member is playing a specific part of the piece, as if each were a specific finger of the pianist. Although they are not playing the whole piece, like a good orchestral conductor, each member needs to always be hearing the whole work in their head. Both while practicing their individual part and also while playing with the group, if a member of an ensemble is hearing the whole piece, they will come much closer to fitting in correctly with their colleagues both in rehearsal and in concert.

Many inexperienced groups seem like they are playing while under water. Why??...because they seem rarely to breathe! **Learning how to breathe as an ensemble** can take practice. Once learned, natural breathing with the music is a great tool for good ensemble players. A big misconception by many student musicians is that the person leading is the only one who needs to breathe. In fact, everyone needs to breathe together although the person leading is the catalyst. Just as the preparatory motions a conductor gives helps the members of an orchestra breathe together, the physical cues given by the catalyst person in a chamber music group must make sense with the music. Each member must learn how to give good cues. And, each member must also learn how to read good cues. Careful watching of the bow arm can be very helpful to good ensemble playing. Each member needs to develop a way of copying or mimicking the bow arm motions of the other

members of the group. The speed of the bow, part of the bow, direction of the bow, contact point of the bow for timbre and the way notes are released are just some of the things that need to be matched. Of course, development of these skills also leads to much better orchestra skills.

There is no doubt in my mind that *moving together musically* helps a group play together. Sometimes, the acoustics on stage can make listening a challenge or at least unreliable for great ensemble. But, the members of the group can really help each other out by moving musically. Eurhythmics—although best known as the name of a rock band—is actually a system of musical training in which the body moves rhythmically and gracefully in interpretation of a piece of music and is very important to good ensemble playing. Musicians who sit totally still except for the motions of their arms not only are difficult to play together with, but usually give the often untrue impression that they are not involved in the emotions of the music. I cannot think of any great chamber musicians who sit so still as to seem devoid of emotions. It must be remembered that there is an audience out there who are there not only to listen but also to watch the concert. I am not trying to imply that one should move for the sake of moving, but rather for the sake of the musical and emotional energy of the piece. However, too much motion can be distracting and take away from the music just as much as too little.

Eye contact, while also very helpful to playing together is often misunderstood and is only one element of *good watching*. It is most useful at the beginning of a piece, at important structural junctions in

the music and as a way of communicating with another member of the group during a piece. For precision, more important than watching the eyes of another group member is watching the fingers of the left hand or the subtle motions of the bow hand at bow changes. Also important is developing the skill to read signals with peripheral vision.

Here are some exercises that can help less experienced players work on some of the skills needed to play exactly together.

- **Listening:** play the same phrase of a piece with each member in turn being totally responsible for the leading, cueing, shape of the phrase, tempo, etc. Challenge that person to be quirky and creative, yet they must be clear enough for each member to follow their intentions. This exercise serves multiple purposes. It teaches leadership, creativity, good cueing and breathing for the person leading, and body language reading and imitation skills for the rest of the group.
- **Breathing:** Have each member of the group be the breathing catalyst to start a piece or phrase. Then, have them all do it together. For added fun, do this in the dark!
- **Moving:** While playing a passage together, have the group coordinate themselves so that each member shifts their weight in the chair back and forth from the left side to the right side at the same time.
- **Body language:** Have the group play an extended passage with their bows down. However, they must pantomime their bow motions and body language as if they were

performing the piece in concert. They will need to rely on body language and clear left hand articulation to stay together. It will become obvious when they are out of sync with each other. Then, when they can do this well, add the bows back in to the mix. The improvement is often dramatic.

There is one last thing that I should mention. Good individual work in the practice room can make a huge difference to good ensemble playing. Rhythmic stability, consistency of tempo, accurate counting and correct rhythms should be brought to the rehearsal, and not learned during it. The metronome is a great tool and time saver when used properly in the practice room. It can also help in rehearsal, but for best results should be amplified so that everyone can hear it without sacrificing the energy of a passage. By using a cable, the headphone jack on most metronomes can act as an output and be sent to the input of an amplifier or portable stereo.

Despite all of these ideas, it is still not necessarily true that the group that plays together stays together. As I mentioned at the start, that is an entirely different type of togetherness. But it is true that the group that plays together usually sounds great!

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