



# CHAMBER MUSIC

## Beyond the Lemonade Stand: Creating a Successful Business Partnership through Chamber Music

by Tom Rosenberg

In my last article, I discussed some of the skills required for playing *really* together. But there is another kind of *staying together* that has nothing to do with how one plays their instrument. A good chamber musician must learn other non-musical skills that are important to many aspects of daily life. It may sound un-artistic to talk about, but treating your chamber music group like a small business is a great idea. All professional chamber music ensembles must have business skills as well as great artistry. For professionals, it is a mistake to think that once you have a New York manager, you will no longer need to worry about the business aspects of your group. Student ensembles, both at the collegiate and pre-college levels must also learn basic skills if they are going to successfully stay together for a school year or longer. So, in this article, I will discuss the business aspects of chamber music from a student perspective, although most of these ideas hold true for professional ensembles too.

### Staying in contact

One of the first things you should do as a group is to sit down together and exchange contact information. For students, this should include home and cell phone numbers, how to contact parents of the group members, and email addresses for both the student and at least one parent. It should also have contact information for your chamber music coach. All of this information should be kept on a single, neatly organized sheet of paper and stored in an obvious place, such as a pocket of an instrument case. A second copy should be kept in an equally obvious place at home. That way, if you are unable to make a rehearsal or coaching, are stuck in traffic, or simply need to be in touch with one or more group members, the info is always where you or someone else can find it. Other good idea is to set up a group email contact for your chamber music group and to use the “reply all” option when answering emails to each other. That way, everyone is in the loop with

a single email.

### Being responsible to one another

This is one of the most important and often neglected areas of both student and professional ensembles. Perhaps most obvious, every member of the group needs to be responsible for learning their own part. But learning the piece goes far beyond that. To do well, each member needs to know what the other parts are doing and how the entire piece goes. This is similar to a good conductor knowing the score for a piece with an orchestra, or a pianist knowing what all ten fingers are doing in a solo work. After all, each member of the group is also the conductor, musical director and performer. Unlike in orchestra, if you don't play your part and lead where you should, *nobody will do it for you!* Learning the score is vitally important. Obtain a copy of the score, or at least use your own part and listen to one or more recordings to quickly get the piece in your ear. However, once you know the piece, be wary of getting too used to one recording. It is OK to be inspired by and influenced by your favorite performance, but remember that your likes and dislikes are only a part of the interpretation your group will ultimately bring to a work.

Being responsible also means staying in touch with each other, knowing when rehearsals and coachings are scheduled, and trying always to be on time and prepared. If you must be absent, or will be late to a rehearsal or coaching, try to reach everyone, including your coach if appropriate. At least get in touch with someone who can inform the rest of the group. Email can be OK if there is plenty of lead time. But on the day of a problem, use the phone to let the rest of the group know what is going on. Group members should always be sure parents are aware of the plans a group has for coachings and rehearsals.

### Communicating within the group

If everyone treats each other with respect, the chances of a group staying together

are greatly increased. In rehearsal, it is the job of each member to listen critically to the whole. It is fine, in fact it is beneficial, for members to critique each other, offer ideas and opinions to one another, and to earnestly try ideas presented in rehearsals or coachings. These ideas and opinions can include ideas on articulation, what part of the bow to use and matching bow speeds and bow strokes, pacing, dynamics, voicing and so on. Not all ideas will prove to be the right solution to a problem. However, trying the wrong idea can often lead to the discovery of the right idea for a group to employ in solving a problem or overcoming a technical hurdle. Learning to respectfully present ideas, disagree, break stalemates, etc, etc is a skill needed in many aspects of life in both work situations and in personal relationships. A chamber ensemble is an excellent place to work on those skills. The bottom line is the famous “Golden Rule,” only somewhat modified: *Try to always speak to, listen to and do to others as you would have them speak to, listen to or do to you!*

### Running a rehearsal

In an orchestra, one of the primary functions of the conductor is to efficiently run the rehearsals. It is simply impractical to let everyone contribute their opinion. Not so in a chamber music group. In many ways, a good rehearsal is like a brain storming session where all members present ideas; they are tried (or at least discussed) leading to the final result. Many student groups have a hard time figuring out how to rehearse, especially early on when they may not have a good concept of the piece they are playing. Sometimes, it can help to require each member of the group to “run the rehearsal” for a specified length of time. After doing this for a couple of rehearsals, a more organic rehearsal technique will often develop. Rehearsing well is really not that different from good private practice. Employ all the same ideas including:

- Start very slowly. Not until it is

good below tempo should the speed gradually be increased.

- Practice together with a metronome. When possible, feed the signal through a speaker so that it can be loud enough to be heard by all, even in loud and energetic passages. Remember that the metronome is only a tool, and will often not permit you to breathe naturally between the phrases.
- Slow and careful intonation work.
- Shaping the phrasing and dynamics.
- Matching bow contact points, timbre, vibrato, etc.

### **Sharing responsibilities**

Even in student ensembles, there are responsibilities to be shared. It is good for a student's overall development to contribute to the whole. I encourage the students (and *not* their parents) to split up tasks and try to utilize the strengths of the individuals in the group. It is not unusual for groups that are together for a school year or longer to develop an identity. Creating a name, preparing concert programs, writing or

calling concert venues, making a simple flyer or group logo, choosing concert clothes, setting up rehearsals and sending out email about the group's activities to friends, families and teachers are all things each member of the group can be involved in. Delegating tasks can be a great exercise in group dynamics too. One member can take ultimate responsibility for a task, but it is usually good to get input from the rest of the group before completion of tasks.

### **Getting performance opportunities**

Many student groups become good enough to actually make money doing weddings, receptions, etc. There are lots of ways to get these jobs. Putting up signs on bulletin boards at places of worship is one good way. Letting friends and families know you are interested in this type of thing can also lead to opportunities through people they may know. It is very important that you learn to act professionally in these opportunities. Be sure that everyone knows in advance what will be played and in what order. Be prepared!

### **Marketing your group**

There are many ways you can begin to learn about marketing with your chamber music group. Using the tools offered by the internet can save time and money. Some groups develop a name and logo, and even make a simple brochure on their home computer. Even if it as simple as letting friends, family and teachers know where and when your group will be playing in a recital can offer valuable lessons on basic marketing.

### **Don't lose sight of the goals**

Remember that the main reason you are playing chamber music is to become a better musician, develop your skills as an ensemble player, learn and perform some of the greatest music ever written, and...to have fun!!

*Tom Rosenberg teaches chamber music and cello from his home in Saint Paul. He also is on the faculties at the University of Minnesota where he coaches and is Coordinator of the String Chamber Music Program and at Macalester College. †*