Chamber Music

Balancing Act!

Voicing in a Chamber Ensemble

by Tom Rosenberg

There are many factors that go into a fine chamber music performance. In the end, it is the job of the performers to try to tap into the brain and emotions of the composer and bring the score to life. This takes much more than simply accurately playing the instructions left on the page by the composer in black ink symbols and words. These symbols include notes, rhythms, dynamics, articulations, tempo instructions and more. Successfully doing all those things can lead to pretty good results, but not a complete performance. As frightful an idea as this is, you could probably get robots to execute the printed instructions on the page. However, I am convinced this will never replace the energy of a great live concert. Even wonderfully done recordings and videos of live concerts can't replace the experience of really being in the concert hall with the performers. Not only is there an energy that comes off the stage that can't be synthetically reproduced, there is also an energy from the audience that is an undeniable force. Of course, this is not limited to classical music events. Crowds come to all sorts of venues to be a part of an audience. Whether it be for music, theatre, a sporting event or something else, feeling that one has some sort of live connection to the performers makes a difference to the experience. It also can greatly affect the energy of those on stage and consequently affect the quality of the performance.

Besides the printed instructions on the page, there are two other critically important issues that a composer may be able to suggest to the performers. Both of these things can help the individuals in the group feel they are communicating with each other and the audience in ways that are somehow often more meaningful and personal in a chamber ensemble than when giving orchestral or concerto performances. I believe these two parameters are ultimately why so many musicians and audience members enjoy the chamber music experience so much (not to forget mentioning that the repertoire is so rich and wonderful!). Of these two things, one is obvious to the audience and one much more subtle but equally important. The more obvious thing is the emotions the composer is trying to express in the music—how that affects the players in the group, how they meld their own experiences and feelings with those of the composer, and then project the character and emotions in the music in a personal way directly to members of the audience. The less obvious, yet equally important element in bringing a score to life is "voicing" or how the group and its individuals approach the issues of balance. Although more technical in nature than the emotions of the music, without a sophisticated understanding of how to do this well, all the emotions in the world can't make up for the muddled and incoherent performance that can result from bad voicing!

It is often easy for the performers to identify the primary voice. In simplest terms, if you have the melody, it must be heard. In early classical era music, this is most often the violin line. But, composers soon began to give all players in the ensemble important motivic and melodic elements. The late Beethoven quartets are in some ways the pinnacle achievement in equality of writing. The Bartok quartets are other great examples, and due to their density, present even more complex challenges. So, even though everyone may have the same printed dynamic, each player needs to make adjustments for the balance to work out. A basic understanding of how sound travels can help. Higher frequencies (higher notes) have many more sound waves per second than lower frequencies (low notes) and so are perceived with more focus or intensity to the listener. (An A440 has twice as many waves per second as an A220, which is one octave below, and four times as many waves per second as an A110, which is two octaves below.) That is why high notes almost always project better in a concert hall. This is also why what feels like an equal balance inside the group may be way out of balance in a concert hall. This also is why the second violin, viola and cello (whose material are usually in lower octaves than the first violin) may need to play what seems like too full or too big a dynamic to bring out their voice in certain passages. Often it is not so much an issue of volume, but of focus. For example, if the cello has an important line, often the cellist will need to play with more focus in the sound by playing relatively nearer the bridge, while the violinist may need to make their sound more transparent by playing closer to the finger board. Good voicing can require each player to bring out only a note or two. Helping the audience hear the special moments inside the score can be the difference between a good and great performance.

There are many techniques that can be used to help achieve good voicing. Here are some of them:

Study the score: One can often "see the voicing" just by looking at the score. A passage that may involve intricate voice passing may look more obvious in the score than by looking at the individual parts. You can actually see the motive as it is passed from instrument to instrument. It is then up to the players in the group to get this across to the audience through good voicing. A good and relatively simply example of this is the first movement of Haydn's *Quartet in D minor, Opus 76 #2*, known as "The Quinten." The main tune (not to mention nearly everything else in the piece) features the interval of a perfect fifth. When looking at a score, once shown what a fifth looks like, even people who do not read music can identify the motive as it occurs and is tossed from one voice to another. Although not my favorite type of score to own, the "arrow scores" can help less experienced players identify the motives and melodies that should probably be prominent. These scores show a heavy black arrow pointing to what the editor believes is the primary voice at any moment in the piece.

Use timbre: The amount of focus each player uses can greatly affect the effectiveness of the voicing. Good use of dynamics in a chamber ensemble is not merely an issue of matching volume, but of blend. Good voicing involves adjusting the blend

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so that certain notes in a chord, a short motivic element, or the melody can be heard. For the person with the melody, this can sometimes mean backing off of the sound during parts of the melody (typically during a long note within the melody) to allow other voices to interject and be heard correctly. For non-melodic but important notes, players with supporting lines may need to momentarily play louder or increase the focus in their sound to voice their line effectively. When coaching students, I often find that using the example of what a good pianist does with voicing can help them understand what they have to do. To bring out the details in a piano score, the pianist must voice different lines. All ten fingers do not necessarily play the same volume, even though there is one overall dynamic in the printed music. Although a complex activity, a pianist is dealing with just two hands, controlled by only one brain, one set of ears and one opinion. What can make voicing in a chamber ensemble so tricky is that you are trying to coordinate many hands, ears and brains!

Get help from a trusted set of outside ears: Having a trusted coach to help achieve balance can help enormously. Not only will a good coach help players recognize when their voice needs to be voiced up or down, they can help achieve results by giving technical suggestions. Sometimes it can help to have a member of the group step back from the group or go into the hall to check balance. More experienced players often listen to the group from within and also from an imaginary set of ears they have that are out in the concert hall. Although a strange concept to describe, this second set of imaginary ears then can send back signals as if by wireless technology to help the player hopefully know if the balance is working!

Pace crescendos and diminuendos: Sometimes, voicing is tricky if the composer writes a crescendo or diminuendo. The melodic voice can end up being covered up by the rest of the group. Although not always needed, it can often help to voice the melodic voice far above the rest of the group so that it is always heard. Then, the group makes a crescendo or diminuendo under the melody. The result can be that the melodic voice may end up doing very little of the printed crescendo or diminuendo, but the music does so effectively for the audience.

Rehearse by singing or playing pizzicato: The first step to good voicing is understanding what needs to be heard. By putting down the bows and playing a passage pizzicato, the voicing can almost immediately become clear. The moving notes will pop out of the texture very clearly, and the sustained notes recede into the texture. Playing pizzicato won't solve the technical issues of how to bring out a voice, but a voice won't be brought out until the players want to hear it! Singing can have a similar result, although depending on the varying singing abilities within the group (and sometimes the embarrassment level!) it can sometimes be harder to get a student group to do this. The advantage to singing the voicing is that the person with the voice that needs to come out will have to physically bring it out, much as they will need to do when using the bow while the others will need to be more transparent.

Know your role in the voicing scenario: There is one general rule of thumb in voicing: each member of the group needs to know that at any given moment in the piece their voice is either in "Projecting Mode" or "Supporting Mode." If everyone in the group understands that every note they play is important, and they then treat every note with care in terms of character, sound and proper voicing, the end result will likely be a wonderful performance.

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