



CHAMBER MUSIC

Summer is for Chamber Music

by Tom Rosenberg

As I sit here at my computer writing this article, many students are just returning from summer music experiences. It seems too soon to be writing about what to encourage students to do next summer. However, when this is going to be seen and read, it will be autumn and that really is the time to start helping students plan for the summer.

Too often, summer plans begin too late and great opportunities are missed. Many top-flight programs require auditions (or at least applications) to occur in February or March. While that may seem a long time before the summer, if one waits until after the winter holidays to begin the process, it may be too late to get the audition materials prepared. In addition, planning for the expense of a summer program or applying for financial aid can be a major hurdle that needs to be addressed by the student and his/her family in time to plan.

A great summer experience can be of monumental importance to the development of a student. Tremendous instrumental and musical growth can occur during the summer where the focus is not distracted by schoolwork and family routines. In a good six-week program, a student can progress as much in that short time as they might in an entire school year.

Summers are great opportunities to focus on chamber music skills. Just a few of the things that may be greatly advanced through a summer chamber music experience include:

- listening skills
- oral communication and ability to articulate ideas to others
- sense of intonation, rhythm and pulse
- overall instrumental technique
- rehearsal techniques
- general ensemble skills that lead to better orchestra playing
- score reading, musical interpretation and creativity
- breathing and cueing
- knowing when to lead and when to be a supportive player

- a knowledge of the repertoire

Some pre-college students do play chamber music during the school year, but it can be a big challenge to find a well-matched group that can also coordinate their schedules. Some families simply have “too many things on their plate” and so a student simply might not be able to play chamber music during the school year. Depending on the level of commitment a collegiate music program has made to their chamber music program, degree candidate students may have trouble finding colleagues to form a serious and high quality group or a knowledgeable coach during the academic year. During the summer, I have seen chamber ensembles learn a work in a few weeks that could take half or an entire school year at home. During the school year with everything else that is going on, a pre-college group can have great difficulty finding rehearsal time outside of their weekly coaching. At summer programs, some groups will rehearse as much in one or two days as they are able to do in an entire semester at home. This can lead to tremendous technical and artistic growth. From an instrumental standpoint, I believe it is good for students to have some time studying with someone other than their regular instrumental teacher. A fresh perspective can benefit a student tremendously. They may hear many of the same things they hear during the year, but from a somewhat different angle. They also may be introduced to completely new ideas. All of these things can be very stimulating and often very important to their development as players and artists.

Many of the strongest summer programs begin with chamber music at their core. Groups are formed well in advance of the program’s start date, repertoire is chosen and either sent to the student or in time for music to be ordered. This allows students to begin learning the piece in advance of the first rehearsals. Solo performance opportunities in recitals and masterclasses are also very important. Students can meet

and work with artist/faculty that may profoundly influence their lives. Both pre-college and collegiate music majors can have the opportunity to study and coach with people who do not live in their geographic region, but may be people they hope to study with in the future. They can find out first hand if the teaching style is stimulating to them. Concerning artist/faculty who teach at major conservatories and are in high demand, having your student work successfully with them in the summer can mean a real edge when it comes to both undergraduate and graduate music school auditions.

I believe a good program’s primary goal should be to serve the needs of the students. Camps and festivals that use the students to serve the needs of the organization should be avoided! In my opinion, students benefit most from programs that emphasize chamber music and solo practice and provide good performance opportunities. Programs that over-emphasize orchestra tend to be more self-serving. In other words, although students are kept busy, hopefully having fun and playing great repertoire, the orchestra representing the program can overshadow their individual growth. In addition, students spend an inordinate amount of their practice time working on their orchestra music instead of pedagogically relevant repertoire. Other programs go too far in the other direction, emphasizing solo practice but offering haphazardly organized or almost no meaningful ensemble experience. While this can mean real instrumental growth, the lack of significant daily musical interaction with student colleagues and faculty artist/coaches can lead to an atmosphere that discourages peer interaction. Little is done that helps students learn the art of being a good ensemble player, learning the art of communicating in rehearsals with one’s colleagues and making musical decisions without the help of a conductor or teacher.

The length of a program is also important. In my opinion, summer programs lasting two weeks or less will probably only

offer limited growth and benefits to the students. It takes time for a new routine to become assimilated. Musical and technique-related ideas need time to be worked on and developed in ensemble rehearsals and in the practice room. Ensembles that stay together and rehearse intensively also need time to develop their rehearsal style and group dynamic as well as technical ensemble issues such as playing really together and in tune. Important life-long musical and social relationships can also be forged. (I wonder if anyone who is reading this has not had such a relationship with both student colleagues and faculty at a summer camp or festival.) The connections one can make during the summer can have a profound impact on your career later. My experience has been that it is after the first two weeks when things really begin to come together and great growth can occur. In a program that is two weeks or less, it will seem over nearly

as soon as it starts and the great benefits that can come from a good summer program will likely not really happen.

So, what is my ideal model??

- a program with a great artist/faculty who love to teach, coach chamber music and mentor.
- a program that has a strongly organized chamber music program, preferably with groups formed in advance of the program and pre-selected repertoire.
- a program that requires and sets aside several hours for ensemble rehearsals every day and that requires each ensemble to perform, preferably on pre-specified dates.
- a program that requires and sets aside several hours for private practice every day and offers masterclasses and recitals for solo performances.

- a program at least three weeks in length.
- opportunities for the students to hear the faculty perform.
- a beautiful location with excellent practice, rehearsal and performance spaces.
- opportunities for the students to kick back, socialize and have fun.

Sounds like heaven on earth!

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