



CHAMBER MUSIC

Keep It Moving!...Breathing, Cueing and Moving in a Chamber Music Group.

By Tom Rosenberg

It is January 10th, 1976, 11:30 P.M. on the east coast of the United States of America. The local NBC affiliate late night news has just ended. Suddenly, there is this announcement: "Ladies and gentlemen, the Dead String Quartet," and the screen shows a string quartet seated in the middle of the stage, seemingly asleep.

The Dead String Quartet remains perfectly still for what seems forever (but is really only a number of seconds), until first violinist (John Belushi) slowly leans over to his left, the sound of his bow screeching across the violin strings as his body keels over. He bumps into the second violinist (Jane Curtin), causing a similar screech from her. She falls into the violist (Garrett Morris) who keels over onto the cellist (Chevy Chase) causing his body to precariously lean over the edge of the stage. He balances between his cello and the floor for a few seconds, before finally toppling over and landing in the middle of the audience.

*Suddenly alive, he looks into the camera with glee and speaks those famous words:
"LIVE, FROM NEW YORK, IT'S SATURDAY NIGHT!"*

This classic sketch is still hilarious today... but it does sting a little bit too. On the one hand, it is silly, visually great, and joyously weird. On the other hand, it sort of implies that classical musicians, *especially chamber musicians*, are stiff bores! Although I beg to differ, I do feel that student musicians often too closely resemble "The Dead String Quartet." Take those same students, put them at a dance or party, and they have no trouble moving to the music.

One of the great benefits for students in studying the art of chamber music playing is that (if properly coached) they will learn how to move expressively with the music. They also will learn how to breathe with the music, give their colleagues effective physical cues and to read the body language of the other players in the group. These skills will not only help their solo and orchestral playing, but also help them to better communicate the music to the audience. In essence, this is the goal of eurhythmics as developed by Emile Jaques-Dalcroze.

For violinists and violists, one of the big physical differences between ensemble and solo playing is that they are sitting down. A student who may move musically and shift their weight from foot to foot while standing may have a tough time figuring out how to be comfortable while sitting. Basically, it is very important that whatever motions are made, they do not affect the player's setup or adversely impact the way the hands make contact with the instrument. Generally speaking, much of the motion should come from the hip area, so that the entire

upper torso will move, and the instrument with it. Motions that involve moving up and down generally require that violinists and violists move both arms up or down together from the shoulders. Otherwise, their relationship to the instrument will be adversely affected. Things are a little different for cellists because their instrument is always in contact with the floor. But they too need to move generally from the torso, and in ways in which the arms move with the instrument.

One sign of an inexperienced group is when some members seem to move musically, and others not. Here is one good exercise to work on this. Find a passage that is fairly straight forward, or even have everyone play a scale together. On the down bows have everyone lean on their left butt cheek (sorry...but there is no delicate way to say that!) and on the up bows, lean to the right. It is OK to exaggerate the motion. Then do it again, reversing which side they all lean on. Next, have them all lean forward on down bows and back on up bows, and again do the opposite. Besides freeing up their bodies and helping everyone in the group move together, this often causes a lot of laughter!

Getting everyone to actually breathe together with the music is another skill that often needs developing. Each member of the group needs to be equally adept at leading and following. Where to breathe during a phrase may strongly influence the shape of that phrase, how the bow is planned, how vibrato might be used, etc.

It also helps the rest of the group and the audience sense where that player is going with the music. If you use the example of orchestra and its one conductor, most of them begin to understand that how they breathe, when they breathe and how their body shows the music can have a huge impact on their performance and ability to communicate the music. It is important to remind the group that there is no one conductor, but they all equally share the responsibility of communicating the music to both the audience and the other musicians on stage. A good conductor can do both of these things by just moving expressively with the music. Finding creative ways to help each member of a student ensemble do these things is a big part of the chamber music experience. Invoking the images of or imitating the movements of an interesting and musical conductor can help the students move appropriately. Similarly, doing the opposite (showing little enthusiasm or feeling) can help them see why they need to start moving naturally with the music. They know that when the conductor is boring, they usually are less inspired. Once students become aware that the audience and the rest of the group treat them as both conductor and instrumentalist, their attitude towards the need for movement may forever be changed.

Many students have a difficult time giving effective and communicative cues. Responding appropriately can also be difficult. I suggest to them that cues are "Newtonian" in nature. In other words...

“for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.” For example: a crisp breath with a small sharp motion should cause others to react with faster bow speeds while a slow expressive breath and motion will cause a reaction with slower bow speeds. As with conducting, giving good cues that help everyone play together and with similar character can take practice. For some students, doing this in front of a mirror or using video can be very helpful. Another way students can learn to move well is to closely imitate each other’s body language.

Are the bow preparations the same, utilizing the same amount of bow, part of the bow, right arm energy, etc? Going around the group and having each member lead the same entrance will often help unify the group. Then, be sure they do the same spot again, but with all of them leading and breathing together.

Learning these skills can take months or even years. Ultimately, each member of the ensemble will develop their own style and body language. But, the process can be shortened dramatically by playing

chamber music on a regular basis. So, keep it moving...no more dead string quartets!!

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