



CHAMBER MUSIC

Maximizing Limited Rehearsal Time

by Tom Rosenberg

Learning a chamber music masterpiece is no easy task. Having spent more than twenty years in a professional touring quartet gives me an interesting perspective on how much is the right amount of rehearsal. The truth is, developing a good quartet with lots of potential into one that has a sustainable career and a distinct personality is a process that encompasses thousands of hours of playing together. Most of the chamber ensembles that are doing well professionally have already been together for many years. Even the quartets that seem to burst onto the scene have almost always spent several years together rehearsing and studying the repertoire with one or more mentors in music school. When my quartet first got started, we rehearsed twenty-five or thirty hours a week. Even after our career was established and we were touring on a regular basis, we rehearsed at least three hours a day on the days when we were “in town.”

Knowing that, I find it remarkable how well some pre-college ensembles can learn repertoire with less rehearsal all year than some professional level groups do in a week!! Most conservatory level student ensembles only rehearse between two and four hours weekly. While they usually do learn more quickly than pre-college groups, most of the issues are the same. Most students are really busy. Although I truly believe playing in a chamber ensemble is crucial to their development (easily at least as important as orchestra), most will only choose one musical activity beyond their instrumental lessons and orchestra is often that choice. However, the truth is that if a student becomes a good chamber musician, they will almost certainly be a skilled orchestral player but the opposite is often not true. I have frequently encountered advanced students who have had years of orchestral experience but little or no chamber music experience who still have trouble playing together without a conductor, being responsible for every note they play, knowing the entire score, playing really in tune, knowing how to communicate with colleagues about musical ideas, knowing how

to cue and lead, and more.

Pre-college students who do choose chamber music as an activity rarely have much rehearsal time. They are busy with school and sports, other non-musical activities, private practice and (usually) orchestra rehearsal. There are several key things to urge students to do that will help them maximize their limited rehearsal time. All of these things are certainly not unique to the chamber music experience. If they are also followed when working on both solo and orchestral repertoire, they will prove to speed up greatly the learning curve and help maximize what are sure to be limited time resources.

Using the metronome. Learning to use a metronome in a productive way is one of the most helpful things that can be done to maximize limited rehearsal time. Tempo goals should be clearly defined. Students should know what the target tempo is for the next rehearsal as well as what the final tempo will be. Not all music easily lends itself to the metronome. Nonetheless, if everyone builds rhythmic accuracy into their own part, things will come together more quickly. One of the biggest problems with using a metronome is that it does not allow breathing between phrases. Students need to be taught this fact and to know that the metronome is incredibly helpful to keep the ensemble tightly together within the phrase, but not necessarily a good tool to use in connecting phrases together. Some metronomes work for group rehearsals, but they need to be loud enough for all to hear while playing. If the metronome is not loud enough, by using an audio cable with a mini-plug on one end that is inserted into the headphone jack, it is possible to amplify the metronome through a boom box or stereo system. How to use a metronome in a productive matter is the subject of another article...or perhaps a multi-volume book set!

Using a tuner for pitch reference. Because so much ensemble intonation is “vertical” or “chordal,” practice away from rehearsal using a tuner that produces pitch can save

a lot of rehearsal time. Practicing one’s part against a reference pitch is much the same as having a colleague hold a pitch in rehearsal while one or more players play their part and work on intonation issues. Although certainly not a cure-all for intonation work, this at least gets everyone in the group listening in a similar way.

Learning the score. For a chamber music ensemble to really work well, each member of the group should know the entire score. Because there is no designated music director or conductor, each member should act as both. Some of the many elements that are involved in knowing the score include who is doing what and when, how tempo changes and mood changes need to occur, who has the primary voice and who has what supporting voice, what is the architecture of the movement and where phrases are going.

Listening to recordings of a piece can be very helpful. However, too much listening can cause someone to have trouble hearing a piece in a way other than what is done on the recording. Listening to multiple recordings can help a student understand the need for musical flexibility and gain different perspectives on style, tempo, articulation, voicing, etc. I am not a fan of listening on YouTube. Most of those are very mediocre self-posted videos with relatively bad sound quality.

Attitude in rehearsal. Rehearsal should be enjoyable and fun but serious. When rehearsal time is scarce, it is important for everyone to come ready to be productive. Things that demonstrate this are: being on time, having one’s part learned as best as is possible, numbering the measures so little time is lost when trying to find where to start, keeping an open mind to ideas others in the group present, critiquing the playing of other ensemble members in a respectful way so as to avoid causing insult and arguing, and generally being respectful towards one’s colleagues.

Taking responsibility and becoming both a leader and a follower. A good rehearsal involves many things. If only one person

in the group (or worse yet nobody in the group) has ideas on how to rehearse, sooner or later, rehearsals will stop being interesting or productive. Everyone needs to be involved. Each member of the group should be able to take charge of working on an idea. This includes learning how to get the group going, how to pick a good place to start, and giving good cues. It also is good to learn when to become a follower and to learn to read the body language of the rest of the members of the group.

A good coach can help a group with all

of these matters. Having regular coaching makes a big difference in the success of a student chamber music ensemble and should act as an excellent model for the group to follow when they do rehearse on their own.

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