



CHAMBER MUSIC

Time Travelling in the Chamber Music Cosmos

by Tom Rosenberg

News flash! Time travelling is *not* science fiction. It is here, and it is easy to do... although it does have some limitations. For instance, so far it only works going backwards in time, and even then only back 75 years or so. Still, if you want your students to learn from performances given by many of the greatest artists of today or of the past, the technology is now here for them to do so using their very own time machines. All they have to do is turn the machine on, type in some info, click a few buttons and... whoosh...they are there! So, what is this amazing invention? The Internet, of course. With either a computer or cell phone, most people have access in their own homes or pockets to the vast and amazing legacy of audio and video archives that is becoming more and more accessible on the Internet.

In the not too distant past, there were only a few ways to explore recordings and videos. If you were lucky enough to be at or near an institution with a vast collection of recordings and/or videos, you could go to the library, check out an item or two and listen in special areas of the library set up for listening or viewing such items. Usually, your choices were pretty limited. For your students to have access to those items, they were usually put "on reserve" so that if the students made it to the library, they could listen and study that particular recording. Aside from purchasing a recording if you could find it in a store, there were only a few other options: interlibrary loan (which often caused a delay of two weeks or more), or a trip to the Library of Congress in Washington D.C. where a copy of virtually everything exists. You had to be pretty serious about searching out a particular artist or historic recording to need to visit the Library of Congress, and it is still the supreme source in this country for deep research. While everything mentioned above are still options, for most they are inconvenient at best, and nearly totally impractical at worst.

But now, all one needs is access to the Internet and with almost no effort they will

have more audio and video resources than they can handle. It really is like having a time machine. In addition to iTunes and other similar services where a vast collection of historic performances are available for purchase, there are also large music recording indexes available at some libraries. These include The Naxos Music Library www.naxosmusiclibrary.com and the Classical Music Source www.classical.net, both of which allow the user to choose individual tracks or entire albums to listen to through streaming audio. These sources may not include particularly historic recordings, but do provide the user with the equivalent of a classical music collection of over 40,000 albums at their fingertips!

There are so many things students (and others) can learn by listening to and/or watching great performers and performances from the past. Sometimes you can glean fingerings and bowings. You can listen to how vibrato was used and what types of articulations were chosen. You can compare tempos and pacing from one ensemble to another, or in the case of certain repertoire like the Beethoven String Quartets, how the same ensemble's interpretation changed over the decades as they re-recorded their performances.

When it comes to chamber music, there are several groups that especially come to mind. First and foremost are the great string quartets. These include the Flonzaley, Kolisch and Griller Quartets from the first half of the 20th century and the Juilliard, Guarneri, Italiano and Cleveland Quartets from the second half of the 20th Century. Perhaps the greatest of them all was the Budapest Quartet, whose career spanned 50 years in the 20th century, ending in the mid-1960s. The Budapest paved the way for most other quartets by being the first hugely successful touring string quartet with over 2 million record albums sold. Members of the quartet also mentored and developed generations of chamber musicians through festivals such as the Marlboro Festival in Vermont, the Casals Festival in Puerto Rico

and the Schneider Seminar in New York. Among the groups that were deeply influenced by the Budapest were the Cleveland and Guarneri Quartets. The Guarneri was founded at Marlboro and in many minds became the heirs to the Budapest's legacy. They only stopped playing together in 2008, after a career of more than forty years. There are also wonderful things to find from the piano trio repertoire, including numerous videos of the Beaux Arts Trio, Heifitz-Piatagorsky-Rubenstein, Cortot-Thibaud-Casals and many others.

On websites such as YouTube, there are always links to more videos. While it is true that many of them are not very interesting or feature performances from students, there is also an ever-growing list of fascinating historic performances. For instance, if you go to see Heifitz, Piatagorsky and Rubenstein playing the Mendelssohn D minor Piano Trio, you also will then see links to great performances by each of them as solo artists. This is awesome to say the least! You can actually study the playing of these great artists from the past. Students and teachers alike can gain tremendous insight as to what made these artists so famous as both instrumentalists and interpreters of the great masterpieces. If you coach chamber music, you can play these videos or listen to these recordings for the group, then discuss with them the characteristics that could most influence the students. This will also likely stimulate them to start exploring on their own. It can only help them become better players and more interesting musicians to hear performances by great artists of the past.

I believe that there is no substitute for a live performance by a great artist or ensemble, but there is also no better way for your students to be aware of their musical heritage than to hear and/or watch the great players of the past. Be warned...there is so much interesting historic stuff out there that you might get trapped in the past for much longer than you ever intended. It happened to me in writing this article!

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