



CHAMBER MUSIC

Music Minus One...

Or, What To Do When Someone Can't Make It To Rehearsal

by Tom Rosenberg

It is no easy task to get a student chamber music group together for a rehearsal or coaching session. Not only do the schedules of the players and their coach need to match up, but also often in the case of pre-college groups, schedules of siblings, parent's work schedules, and even grandparent schedules need to be factored into the mix. A lot of things can happen to prevent all members of a group from meeting when they are actually supposed to meet. Some of the more common problems are illness of either the student or the parent, a broken car, a family event such as a wedding or funeral, family trips, college visits or auditions, concerts for school, youth orchestra, or other organizations, seriously bad weather, and on and on.

Sometimes, it is known well in advance that a member of a group will be absent for a scheduled rehearsal or coaching. If it is a coaching, that student should still expect to take an equal part in paying for the coaching, much as they would for missing a regularly scheduled lesson or a youth orchestra rehearsal. After all, being part of a group means sharing equally in the cost of coaching sessions. Over the course of the year, in a group with four members, if each member missed only 2 coachings the whole year, but each of those coachings were on different dates from any of the other member's conflicts, that would mean 8 lessons or rehearsals would be cancelled. It should be expected that if one member of the group is absent, there should still be a coaching or rehearsal. Otherwise, the potential is there for 'way too many missed weeks of work.

So, assuming that during the year there will be rehearsals or coachings with a member missing, what can be done to turn that situation into a positive one??

There are so many things that can get done in the short span of an hour or so that it is likely the missing person won't really be missed that much. In many professional ensembles, to save time and to work on spots that need extra time, some members

of the group might rehearse for all or part of a rehearsal separate from the rest of the group. For example, the string players in an ensemble that includes piano might work out bowings or intonation spots without the pianist. Working in pairs in a string quartet is always a great way of improving the group. Doing so can really help players learn to use their bows and vibratos in a similar fashion and to spend extra time on intonation issues. If only one member is missing, having all three remaining possible pairs work through certain passages of extra difficulty will pay huge benefits.

With student groups, there are almost always spots that cause rhythmic problems for one or more members. Sometimes these are issues of counting and subdividing. Sometimes, it is getting that player to play their part correctly not only by themselves, but also with the "distraction" of the other parts. In any case, the extra time needed to assimilate that player's part into the whole can be found when not all members of a group are there. Another great thing to do with a member missing is working out ritardandos and accelerandos that might be in the music. Many of the problems that student ensembles have stem from listening skills. Getting them to hear how their part fits within the context of all the voices is crucial. Just removing one voice sometimes can vastly uncomplicate the texture. Once everyone in the group hears all of the voices, and not just their own voice coming from their instrument, many problems get fixed.

If the missing person is the first violin, sometimes that can be especially beneficial to the group. Student groups often rely too heavily on the first violin to be the leader, when, in fact, all members of the group need to be equally good at leading and cuing. When that person is missing, it requires the other members to have more responsibility for cuing. Also, when the tune is missing (which incidentally is not always in the first violin part), it is an opportunity to get the rest of the group to

take responsibility for shaping the phrases in the accompanying voices...a needed and difficult skill that is often overlooked.

The situation is in many ways like "sectionals" in youth orchestra rehearsals. Sometimes sectionals might be broken down into just a few groups: winds, brass and percussion, and strings. In those large group sectionals, problems related to the strings or winds as a whole will be addressed. However, often there will be individual sections rehearsing together such as cellos, or violins, or violas, etc. In the case of specific sections being separated out (cello sectionals, viola sectionals, etc), usually fingerings, bowings, or articulations of specific trouble spots are addressed. In the context of an orchestra, the wisdom and efficiency of doing this seems obvious to both parents and students. However, in the context of a chamber ensemble, it is somehow less accepted. In most cases, it is not the students who have a problem with this, but in fact, it is most often the parents. They often do not understand why they should still have to pay for their share of the coaching when their child is absent, or why the coaching should still take place if everyone is not there. Although they would not expect a refund for a missed youth orchestra rehearsal, they might expect one for a coaching. This is unfair both to the coach and to the other members of the group. Paying for missed coachings can also act as somewhat of an incentive to not miss coachings!

Occasionally, one member of a group will be absent too often. If it is or seems that it is always the same member who is missing, that is when the integrity of the group does become threatened. If the members of a group, or some of the parents, or both feel that one member is less committed to the group than the rest, real trouble can ensue. In those cases, it is important that the coach step in and help defray any tensions that have arisen over this. Sometimes, there is nothing to be done and sadly, the group

will disband. But usually these issues can be talked about and resolved in a positive way.

Although it is still best that all members of the group are present for all coachings and rehearsals, it is just simply realistic to expect that this won't always be possible. "Music Minus One" is not a reason to cancel

rehearsals and coachings. It is instead a time for the group to make extra progress. Don't waste those opportunities!

Tom Rosenberg teaches chamber music and cello from his home in Saint Paul. He received the "Master Studio Teacher Award"

from MNSOTA in 2004 and has been named "Arts Educator of the Year" by the Michigan-Indiana Arts Council. He is a member of The Isles Ensemble, The Schubert Piano Trio and has performed with the Minnesota Orchestra and SPCO. †