



# CHAMBER MUSIC

## Chamber Music: The Video Game

by Tom Rosenberg

How is a great chamber music performance the same as a good video game? Like a good video game, once the surface gets scratched, one discovers that there are many levels. Each level must be successfully navigated before the next level can be accessed. To reach the end, perseverance, skill and some luck are all involved. A good performance by a chamber music ensemble is the result of a lot of pieces coming together. Here is what a version of Chamber Music: The Video Game might be like.

### **Level I: Assembling a group of players of similar abilities and personalities.**

To complete this level, students who study with different teachers around the region have to be aware that a chamber music program exists. They can learn this from their teachers, other students, and recruitment by the coach and/or organizations that offer chamber music programs. Then, they must be individually evaluated by a coach or chamber music coordinator for playing abilities and personalities. If poor decisions are made at this level, failure is eventually likely, even if several of the levels that follow Level I can be successfully navigated! Once Level I is completed, one moves on to...

### **Level II: Scheduling.**

To complete this level, a schedule that allows everyone to be in the same place at the same time must be achieved. Don't forget that this includes the often very busy schedule of the coach. Students have to tackle doing homework, sports, and often a myriad of other activities. Throw in the fact that most are also reliant on parental support for transportation to rehearsals and coachings, so the schedules of the parents are also usually involved. Even though Level I may have been easily navigated, failure at scheduling will doom the group! However, if this level is mastered, continue on to...

### **Level III: Learning the Music.**

This level is where the fun really begins. Each player has to take responsibility to learn their individual part and also the entire piece. This involves much more than

individual practice! This is also where there are "wildcards" that can throw a monkey wrench into the entire process. Remember, if this were to be a video game, there would be several players involved, and each must successfully learn to negotiate their own part. If any of them are given music beyond their current ability, get sick or injured, or otherwise have something happen, the entire thing will break down. Listening to the piece is also very important. In addition to recordings, there are now many wonderful videos of professional ensembles on websites such as YouTube. There is so much to be learned from this that can help the group do well. Not only can they get a sense of how more than one group approaches the piece, but they can observe bowings, bow strokes, body language and cueing. Each player must also know the entire piece in their head, much like an orchestra conductor does. This is the best way for the group to be able to have precise ensemble, good voicing, and excellent intonation. So for the sake of argument, let's say that everyone in the group succeeds at this level. There is still more ahead. Move on to...

### **Level IV: Good Coaching.**

For real excellence to be possible, an experienced musician, preferably with professional chamber music experience, is needed to guide the group, to teach the various styles of playing required when playing music of different composers, and to help the players learn how to rehearse on their own. In some ways, the great chamber music masterpieces have an aural tradition. Knowledge and musical ideas are passed from one musical generation to the next, but those ideas and insights are not specifically written into the music in obvious ways. Some of these include knowing what is "between the lines," where extra time should be taken, where different editions disagree with each other, how tricky page turns can be solved, how a piece by the composer may be different or similar to other works by that same composer, how articulation marks and other expression instructions in the music should be played, and interesting historical

tidbits that relate to the piece.

Good coaching also involves working on many other elements besides bowings, tempo, articulations and dynamics. Very often, especially in pre-college groups, the players need to learn how to communicate both to the other members of the group, and to the audience. Some players move naturally with the music. Others are very rigid and stiff physically. Some student musicians are naturals at leading and cueing, while others are not. A good chamber music group has everyone leading and communicating equally. Each member must also learn how to express their ideas verbally and how to offer and receive constructive criticism. Surprisingly, learning how to really listen to everything going on can be a huge challenge for some. All members of the group must listen from the perspective of being inside the ensemble. But, they also need to imagine that they are listening to the group from the perspective of the audience. Both types of listening are critical to success. Another skill that often needs to be taught is how to count and subdivide. Not surprisingly, all of these skills are also vital to creating great orchestra players. Unfortunately there is really only time in student-level orchestra rehearsals to barely touch on actually teaching these skills to the individuals. A good analogy is this: orchestra is like the large lectures that are part of an advanced class. Chamber music is like meeting with the instructor of that class for in-depth, one-on-one learning.

Sometimes, long periods of coachings need to be used working on all of the skills mentioned above, using specific passages within the piece as small etudes. Learning that chamber music dynamics are often different from orchestral dynamics is another skill that needs mastering. The players need to understand that they are the only player on their part. For example, a "piano" dynamic has to be soft to the audience—not soft to the person playing it. In certain passages, it might be necessary for the person playing the most important line to actually play "forte" in a passage marked "piano" while the others play actually "pia-

nissimo.” Executing this type of voicing is a skill that needs to be learned, and a set of trusted outside ears (such as a good coach) can greatly speed up the learning process.

OK...it is time to move to the next level where all the skills developed as a result of getting through Levels I–IV are put to great use.

### **Level V: Performing.**

Congratulations! You have reached the final level. The goal of a great performance experience is within reach. Learning to perform well is also a great skill. The more one performs, the easier it gets to play your best during a concert. Sure, mistakes might happen, or there might be dissatisfaction

about the execution of a particular spot in the music. Learning that perfection is an unattainable goal, and that it is OK to be imperfect is a freeing and empowering element in the development of an artist. It is also important to realize that most performances one hears by professional touring chamber ensembles are not the first and only time those players will be playing the piece. Student ensembles don’t have the opportunity to play their piece fifteen times or more in public. Yet, performing is a vital part of the process. Not only does a concert provide motivation for a group, but it also can be a great learning experience, equivalent to many hours of coaching and rehearsing. Groups that perform show dramatic

improvement the more they do it. Now go get to the end of the game—it is time to let it all out and to enjoy the opportunity to play a concert!

OK, that’s how the game might go. But it is not a game—it is art! And when chamber music is the art form, it is often really great art. I confess that I do occasionally play video games. Although they can be fun and challenging, video games pale when compared to the satisfaction and benefits one can get from exploring, rehearsing and performing chamber music masterpieces.

*Tom Rosenberg teaches chamber music and cello from his home in St. Paul and at several local colleges. [www.tomrosenbergmusic.com](http://www.tomrosenbergmusic.com) ♪*