



# CHAMBER MUSIC

## Don't Stop the Music!

### ...or How to Keep it Going (or not) When Trouble Hits

by Tom Rosenberg

When a chamber music group is hitting on all cylinders, it is a great thing. Everyone works together, thinks together, plays together, and enjoys working out the issues that help the group play well. But given enough time together, at some point, there will be bumps in the road. Sometimes the bumps can lead the group to better things once they are smoothed out. But things can also get to the point where the bumps turn into walls that just can't be scaled. When that happens, either the group ends, or there is a change in the personnel.

Just like in any relationship that involves people, communication is the key to success. Learning how to communicate, including how to give and take criticism is in some ways one of the most difficult skills for the members of a chamber music group to master. This is especially true in student groups where communication skills are even less developed than groups with personnel who have more experience in dealing with long-term relationships. As always, the "Golden Rule" is very useful: treat others as you want them to treat you...or...do *not* treat others in a way you do *not* want to be treated!

Perhaps a good way to approach this is to view a couple of possible scenarios from two angles.

#### Scenario #1. Player A thinks the group ensemble needs work in a particular passage.

*Wrong Way:* Player A tells the other players in the group that she is right and they are wrong. Something like this: "You guys are behind me in that passage. I practiced it with a metronome and I know that I am always correct there." That is really a good way to create bad feelings in a chamber music group! It sends a lot of bad messages. Player A comes off as superior to the others. How does Player A know that the others have not practiced in the same way? The "always correct" phrase sends a message of infallibility...a sure harbinger of doom in any relationship...musical or otherwise.

*Better Way:* Player A says something like:

"It feels to me that we are not really playing together there and that you are behind me. Could we try it again, maybe with the metronome, or in pairs?" There are a lot of things better this way. Most importantly, it is more humble and does not assume that the others are wrong. It also gives suggestions as to how to work on the problem that Player A feels is in need of attention.

#### Scenario #2. Player B wants to try taking more time at a ritardando marking.

*Wrong Way:* Player B says, "Could we take more time there?" Player C responds by sighing, rolling her eyes and stating, "I don't want to and besides, the Juilliard Quartet recording that I listened to does not take hardly any time there."

OK, let's start with the body language which basically says that Player B is stupid and wasting the time of Player C. *Not good!* Then the comment: It is OK to say you don't think you like someone else's idea. But it is *not* OK to avoid trying the ideas of the other members of the group. It is actually very important to really try to bring another group members ideas to life. It is fine, even good, to listen to famous recordings of works you may be learning. But it is not OK to use that as ammo or to belittle the ideas of another group member. Remember, it is entirely possible that the way the Juilliard Quartet played that passage was a compromise, or even disliked by some of its members. It is entirely possible that today's version of the Juilliard Quartet plays that same passage differently than the one on the recording!

*Right Way:* Player C responds by saying, "Sure, let's try it and see what we all think about that. Why don't you lead it so we can tell how much time you were thinking of taking." Or... "OK, but after that I want us to try to do it the way I heard on a recording I listened to. It was the Juilliard Quartet and I liked it." Both of these responses allow for the open flow of ideas within the group. In the end, most interpretations of chamber music works are made up of compromises

or ideas that were forged over time through brainstorming among the members of the ensemble. Everyone needs to be trusted and to trust one another. Allowing ideas to be presented and tried, then rejected, adopted or altered is critical to the process of making music. Final decisions do not have to be made immediately. Sometimes leaving issues unresolved can allow them to work themselves out.

Learning how to be easy to work with is a very important skill, especially in a newly formed ensemble, but also in a group that wants longevity. That means knowing when to sit back and let someone else take the lead. It also means knowing when to assert oneself. Many issues are just not that critical to argue over. If someone is more comfortable doing a bowing a certain direction, if it works fine for you "both ways," just go with it and mark it in your part. Listen to the ideas of others and try to do them. This includes both verbally stated ideas, and those that are expressed nonverbally with instrument and bow. Only when you really don't feel comfortable or really want to try something different is it necessary to bring up a different idea. When trying each other's ideas, try very hard to do them well... even if it feels uncomfortable or wrong to you. Do *not* intentionally do them poorly or sabotage them. Perhaps you can't do an idea or find it awkward because you don't really understand it. Remember the first time you tried bouncing the bow? It is likely that you couldn't do it well because you didn't really understand the concept...and not because the concept was a bad one.

Once trust is established among all members of a group, more blunt and direct commentary can sometimes work. Each group establishes their own group dynamics. Some groups remain very polite to each other. For them, that proves to be the best way to communicate and keep negative feelings in check. Other groups openly strongly disagree with each other. Some groups work by shouting! I have observed how numerous well-known professional quartets work. I was a member of one of those ensembles for

nearly twenty years. As such, sometimes my quartet would work with members of other groups in octets, sextets, quintets, etc. It was always fascinating and sometimes amazing to observe how some groups seemed to be so rude to each other. In reality, they all fully trusted and respected each other and had the same goals, and so it worked for them to shout. No one got their feelings hurt or actually got angry...it just seemed that way.

If trouble does occur, the worst thing that can be done is...nothing! It is really important that grievances be aired before there is too much damage done. If Player D is told by Player A that the way Player D makes comments seems nasty or condescending, Player D should respond by trying to communicate differently. On the flip side, perhaps everyone else in the group thinks that Player D's comments are fine and that Player A is being too sensitive. In this case, Player A needs to trust the other members and not let the comments have such a negative impact. And, at the same time, the rest of the group needs to be aware that Player A responds poorly to certain types of comments and should try to avoid making them.

Here is another key element to group longevity. When issues arise, if the group wants things to work out, everyone (*everyone!*) in the group needs to try to resolve the problem, make concessions, be aware

of behaviors that cause problems and have patience with each other.

Sometimes, the ensemble just cannot work through the problems they are having. Although it is a very hard decision to make and can be emotionally tough, it is then time for the group to either disband or change personnel. The process that defines who will leave can be a very difficult. But often, it is one person that ends up wanting to leave. If the rest of the group wants to continue, it is very important for them to recognize why someone wants to leave the group. If it is because of bad communication skills, the problems will only continue with whoever joins the group. Sometimes, someone is just ready to move in a different direction than the group is going. In another words, the group may be functional and artistically viable, but one member may just find it uncomfortable to work with the others. Or sometimes it is purely logistical. One member may be unable or unwilling to commit the necessary time or energy to the group, may have changes to their life that affect their ability to be in the group, or simply may have different goals. In that case, the reason might simply be that "it is time" from that person's perspective to move on.

Most people reading this article might have a strong sense of déjà vu. Perhaps it is because every relationship encounters many of the same problems that can be encountered in a chamber music group. These

include relationships with family members, spouses, co-workers, roommates, partners in school or college projects, etc. When students learn through chamber music how to problem solve, cooperate, compromise, and in general how to successfully work with and get along with diverse personalities, they learn important skills that will help them in many of life's endeavors.

*Tom Rosenberg teaches chamber music and cello from his home in Saint Paul and at several local colleges. His students are frequent prize-winners and many have performed on NPR's "From the Top" program. His performing career includes being a member of several different chamber ensembles and a substitute musician with the Minnesota Orchestra and Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra. He is Director of the Green Lake Chamber Music Camp in Wisconsin and since 1981, he has been Artistic Director of the Fischhoff National Chamber Music Competition for which he was a co-recipient of the 2007 Indiana Governor's Arts Award. A three-time Naumburg Chamber Music Award finalist, he also is a recipient of the McKnight Performing Artist fellowship, the Master Teacher: Studio award from MNSOTA in 2004, and the "Arts Educator of the Year" by the Michigan-Indiana Arts Council. [www.tomrosenbergmusic.com](http://www.tomrosenbergmusic.com) †*