



# CHAMBER MUSIC

## The World's *Greatest* Chamber Music Coach: Sir Isaac Newton??

by Tom Rosenberg

I don't really know if Sir Isaac Newton played a musical instrument although I do know he studied the physics of sound and how a string vibrates. But just the same, paying attention to some of the things he said or wrote qualifies him to be nominated for the title, "The Greatest Chamber Music Coach of all Time!"

Whether they are beginning or advanced students, or in a professional group, imagine how every member of a chamber ensemble could benefit by following Newton's words of wisdom. Have a look at some of the things he said.

### **"If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants."**

This is basically saying to listen to and learn from others who have experiences and knowledge that you do not have. Listen to recordings, watch videos of great artists performing, go to live concerts, masterclasses, music camps, and listen to the guidance and suggestions you are getting every week from your instrumental teacher, chamber music coach, orchestra conductor, parents and even your ensemble colleagues! It is also saying to reach for greatness or excellence.

### **"Tact is the knack of making a point without making an enemy."**

Wow! It almost sounds as if Sir Isaac played in a professional string quartet...though that would be unlikely as there weren't really any while he was alive. Nonetheless, it sure sounds like he was experienced in having discussions with others who might not exactly agree with or understand his point of view. Lack of tact from one or more of its members is one of the worst enemies that a chamber music ensemble can have. One of the great things about being in a chamber music group is the opportunity to explore and discuss the complexities of the composer's thoughts and how to approach articulating them in a performance. However, being tactless, insulting or insensitive in how one expresses their opinions can destroy a group. Once members start being mad at each other, discussions turn

into fights and things can decay pretty fast. Learning the art of effective communication is so important!

### **"Men build too many walls and not enough bridges."**

Yet another brilliant thought, (although it applies to women too). Unwillingness to try the ideas of a teacher, coach, conductor or ensemble colleague stifles learning, creates frustration, and can lead to a group falling apart. Not all ideas in a rehearsal or coaching end up working, but by trying them, an air of cooperation and teamwork is established. Besides, trying all ideas may eventually lead to the group finding what works for them.

An ensemble member's unwillingness to try ideas shows disrespect towards others and gives that person an aura of arrogance that is sure to create problems for the group. Another aspect of this quote applies to being sensitive to the feelings of others. Reach out and be helpful to your fellow ensemble members if they need it or ask for it. Don't close yourself off from discussions or expressing your feelings. A great chamber music group involves interpersonal communication that requires openness, trust, sensitivity and cooperation.

### **"What we know is a drop, what we don't know is an ocean."**

Take note! One of the greatest geniuses of all time is saying to be humble, because whether you think so or not, you don't know it all! There is an endless amount of knowledge, and always more can be learned. On top of that, any member of a chamber music group who behaves like a "know-it-all" will likely find out soon something they didn't know...that the rest of the group thinks they are intolerable and will not want to be in the room with them, let alone rehearse and perform with them! Be a sponge! Soak up as much of that ocean as you possibly can and as often as you can, but be aware that there is always more to soak up.

### **"To every action there is always an equal and opposite, or contrary, reaction."**

This one applies to a chamber music group in so many ways, but most obviously in how one breathes, cues, bows, vibrates, plucks, etc., etc. For example, the way one breathes in preparation for an entrance completely affects the type of energy that will come out of the instrument and out to the audience. A crisp energetic breath or cue will yield a crisp energetic entrance. A slow and relaxed breath or cue will yield a slow and relaxed entrance. Getting students to breathe in a musical way that yields musical results is no easy task. Conductors practice different types of cues too, because they know (or quickly find out!) that the cue they give needs to be of the right energy and character for the music they are in charge of leading. Chamber musicians need to do the same thing until it is second nature.

### **"No great discovery was ever made without a bold guess."**

As in science, great music making takes experimentation. Most experiments actually do not succeed. But a failed experiment may lead to the next great idea, or at least start the process that leads to it. Being creative with tone color, bow planning and bow direction, vibrato, fingerings, timing, voicing, rubato (the list goes on and on) may mean taking the daring, non-safe route. Maybe the idea won't work...but that is OK. Maybe it won't work because the player trying the idea does not understand it or is not technically skilled enough to pull it off. Or maybe it just doesn't work. Still, trial and error will lead to great discoveries.

### **"What goes up must come down."**

Although basically true, I feel the need to differ with Sir Isaac when it comes to using the bow. Too often, inexperienced players have a hard time using the bow in a creative and artistic way. Every up-bow seemingly is always followed by a down-bow. All up-bows seem to have to start at the tip and all down-bows seem to have to start at the frog. This is simply not true. In string playing at

least, what goes up might go up again and again! In a coaching, I might suggest that a certain note be played up-bow. I cannot begin to count the times I have been told that “that can’t work” because that up-bow is either preceded by or followed by another up-bow. That type of comment shows a lack of experience or creativity in the use of the bow. It is quite possible to have the end of a phrase be a short up-bow at the tip. The new phrase could easily start up-bow near the tip, and lead to a short up-bow at the frog that is part of the next phrase or gesture. That is three up-bows in a row, each of which start in a different part of the bow and serve to articulate different musical

elements. Because it is unconventional, it is surprising how often young players have a hard time getting an understanding how that might be a wonderful bowing.

**“Live your life as an Exclamation rather than an Explanation.”**

Hopefully, this one needs no explanation! True words of wisdom!

*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) †*