



CHAMBER MUSIC

Dos (and Don'ts) for Chamber Music Success

by Tom Rosenberg

When things are going right in a chamber music group, there is almost nothing that can top the experience from both a musical and personal point of view. The greatest composers often created their greatest and most personal works for the chamber music genre. Simply put, the repertoire is phenomenal. When a chamber music ensemble gives a great performance of a great piece, there can be a tremendous sense of both group and individual satisfaction. It is very special knowing that all musical decisions and responsibilities come from within the group and that all brains, hands, arms, ears (and countless other parts of the anatomy) are working in sync to produce something that is fantastic and as a whole is greater than the sum of its parts. It is why great solo artists are often not satisfied simply playing concertos...they want to play chamber music. It is why orchestral musicians are often not satisfied just playing in orchestra...they want to play chamber music.

Pedagogically, most excellent teachers and most top music schools urge or require their students to play chamber music. Orchestral training is very important. It offers students a sense of community and so many skills. Yet there is no way that every musician in an orchestra can be as linked together as closely as they are in a chamber music ensemble. Every skill needed to succeed in an orchestra can be developed at a much higher level in a chamber music group. The obvious things are rhythmic and tempo precision, really exact intonation, and phrasing. But other skills that are needed are decisions on voicing, cueing and leading, articulations, matching (or choosing when not to match) bowings, vibratos and bow strokes, choosing tempos, and basically everything else a conductor oversees in an orchestra.

Being able to work together autonomously, to involve each member in the process and to make decisions on all of these things in an agreeable way is a very difficult skill to learn and is wonderful when it all clicks.

But...when things go wrong, it can be a painful, and sometimes even a scarring

experience.

Therefore...not to be overlooked are the musical and personal communication skills required to have a successful ensemble. No matter how great a player and artist a person may be, if they have bad habits or weak interpersonal skills, they will be a drag on the group, and probably every other type of relationship they will be a part of!

Not everything works for all groups, and what follows below is in no way complete. But in general, these “dos” can really positively affect how things go.

Do's:

Be prepared for rehearsal.

Be alert, awake, energized and ready to accomplish a lot.

Be on time.

Being habitually late can be frustrating to the rest of the group...especially if scheduling is tight. In student groups, it also can make the parents who may be driving other members of the group really, really frustrated!

Know your part.

Rehearsal is not the place for you to be learning your part! Be as prepared as possible, but also be prepared to change some things...bowings, fingerings, etc.

Know the entire piece.

You need to know how the entire piece sounds...not just your own part.

Have opinions on the voicing.

Have an opinion on who has the primary voice at all times, and how the secondary voices enhance and support it. Remember that even if you all have the same dynamic in your parts, some voices need to project more than others.

Ask, “What was the composer trying to convey to us performers?”

When you see a dot, think about the context of that dot. Maybe sing the music to get a sense of what type of articulation is appropriate or how much the note might

be shortened. Play the correct note values. If Beethoven wrote a quarter note, he very likely did not want you to play an eighth note! Take note of dynamics and expression marks, and realize that the composer put them there for you to interpret, but not to ignore!

Be open to ideas and to trying them.

A good rehearsal often can include lively discussion. Be open to trying ideas, even those you think you disagree with. One idea can lead to another and to another. Often the best ideas are discovered while trying other ideas that the group ultimately rejects.

Avoid personal attacks on individual players.

Understand the difference between discussing musical ideas and issues of ensemble technique and insulting your colleagues. Saying things like, “You are stupid,” or “That’s a stupid idea,” or “You are out of tune,” usually will lead to conflict. Instead, after trying the idea, try saying things like, “I am not sure I like that idea,” or “I think we need to work on the intonation here.”

Avoid the words “should,” “must,” “can’t” and “won’t.”

Words like “might,” “could,” and “will try” can avoid all kinds of arguments. Try starting sentences with, “In my opinion...”

Be willing to compromise.

If you can do a bowing and it works, even if it is not the way you might think of doing it, be willing to do it anyway! When you can do it well the same way as a colleague, don't be stubborn about going with them!

Be courteous and respectful to others in the group.

Treat others the way you would want to be treated. This idea sounds simple, but often is ignored. If everybody would do this, things would rarely get out of control.

Be more critical of yourself than of anyone else in the group.

Try to hold yourself up to at least the standards you are asking of anyone else in your

group.

Be aware of the emotions of others in the group.

Sometimes, one person can become obviously frustrated with a situation. Before things get out of hand, everyone else needs to learn to back off and move on to something else, even if the problem is not solved.

Communicate your ideas through your playing as much as possible.

Sometimes words and discussion can get in the way of the musical process. Do your best to convey through your playing what you think the character and emotions are in the music. Show with your sound and body language where you feel each phrase leads and where you feel the highs and lows are in the music. Remember that ultimately your entire group needs to be doing that anyway in order to connect well with the audience.

Try to avoid your behaviors that you know annoy the group.

You may be a great ensemble player, but the way you blow your nose might drive everyone else crazy!

Turn off cell phones during rehearsal, and put them away!

Cell phones are a new and terrible distraction to most rehearsals. It seems that many people are unable to feel they can wait to respond to a phone call or text. This is *not* true! As recently as a decade ago,

almost no one would have a cell phone in a rehearsal. In just the last few years, texting has exploded as a way of communicating. Yet, only a few years ago, it would be rare to have a rehearsal interrupted by a text message. Now, some people are almost addicted to their phones and seem to need to text constantly...even in rehearsals and concerts. I suggest cell phones be *turned off* in rehearsals, coachings and most certainly in concerts. Or, if a phone is to be used as a metronome or tuner, put it in airplane mode. Responding to texts and calls can wait until the rehearsal is over, or there is a break. On the rare occasion that during a rehearsal or coaching someone might need to be able to make or respond to an important call or text, they should alert their colleagues, and make sure everyone in the room knows.

Don'ts:

It is easy to make a list of "don'ts", but I don't think I need to do that. Just do the opposite of all of the "dos."

Tom Rosenberg teaches chamber music and cello from the Opus 1911 Music Studio in his home in Saint Paul. In addition to his performing career, he also is on the faculties of the Carleton and Macalester and Colleges, the McNally-Smith College of Music and is Artistic Director of The Green Lake Chamber Music Camp in Central Wisconsin (www.greenlakechambermusiccamp.org). He received the "Master Teacher: Studio Award" from MNSOTA in 2004. †