Chamber Music

Chamber Music with Piano and Strings

by Tom Rosenberg

The chamber music repertoire for piano and strings has some of the greatest pieces ever written. Although there are some reasonably good pieces written by others, the masterpieces don't really start appearing until Haydn and Mozart started writing works specifically for keyboard and strings. Part of the reason for this is that they simply are phenomenal composers. But it also needs to be remembered that the piano as we know it today did not exist until well into the 19th century.

The piano was an instrument undergoing constant changes, evolving away from the harpsichord to an instrument with tremendous range of color and power. In 1709 Bartolomeo Cristofori invented a system of dampers and a method for felt covered hammers to strike the strings instead of quills plucking the strings in the harpsichord. This allowed it to be able to play both loud (forte) and soft (piano) which is why one often sees the term "fortepiano" or "pianoforte" used instead of "piano" in the titles of pieces through at least the 18th Century. Here is a title page from Beethoven's three Opus 1 Trios. Translated, it reads, "Three Trios for the Piano-Forte, Violin and Cello."


TROIS TRIOS
Pour le Piano Forte
Violon, et Violoncelle
Composés et Dédiés
à Son Altesse Monseigneur le Prince
CHARLES de LICHNOWSKY
par
LOUIS van BEETHOVEN
Oeuvre 1

As improvements were made, music written for the piano began to emerge. It wasn't until 1770 that piano keyboards had more than 5 octaves and not until 1794 that they had 6 octaves. (Remember that Mozart died in 1791.) Improvements continued that allowed Beethoven and others to expand what the piano was asked and able to do, but it wasn't until the mid 1850s that the piano as we know it today became fully developed.

When performing this repertoire, it is important to understand that today's pianos are truly different from the instrument many of the great works were conceived on. The dynamics that are printed and the textures in the piano can often seem 'way too big for the string players to match. So, string players need to learn how to play chamber music with a pianist, and pianists need to learn how to play with string players.

One of the first challenges is figuring out how to sit. One big difference is how the piano is situated on the stage. Sightlines among the players in the group can often be tricky. In my opinion, it is a big mistake to have the cellist sit "in the curve" of the piano. That pretty much guarantees both balance and communication problems. In general, the violinist or violinists need to be slightly behind the pianist and the cellist about where the stick that holds the lid up is located. Whereas for a solo piano recital, the center of the piano is in line with the center of the stage, for a chamber music recital, usually it is the pianist and the keyboard of the piano that lines up with the center of the stage. To get this really figured out, a good method is to first set the string players centered on the stage, and then move the piano into place. This way, the entire group is centered correctly on the stage. This usually means that from the audience's perspective, the keyboard of the piano will be at or just slightly left of center.

The other major technical issues that differ for string players when playing with a pianist are intonation and voicing. The intonation of the piano is not changeable. Pianos are tuned in a specific way that differs from stringed instruments that allow it to sound in tune in all keys. But, string players are often used to adjusting their pitch, either for expressive purposes or to make chords or unisons in tune. Assuming the piano has been tuned carefully by a professional, it is fairly easy to adjust pitch to go with the piano. But adjustments do have to be made that might be quite different from adjustments that would be made within the group with no piano. If the piano is out of tune at a concert, there is nothing much to be done except to put up with it!

Voicing is a much more complicated issue with no concrete rules or simple answers. With younger or less experienced pianists, learning how to control the power of today's concert pianos can be a huge challenge. Outstanding young pianists are often learning to listen to their sound as it would be for a solo recital or a concerto. They are used to having all of the notes in their own two hands and only one brain and one set of ears to listen and make decisions. They are often used to spending most or all of their music making by themselves.

The opposite is true for string players. Although most good teachers try to cultivate a soloistic sound from their students, string players are put into ensemble settings often from a young age where they are constantly implored by a conductor or chamber music coach to play less or more, or to match articulations, etc. Students who play chamber music learn these skills far more quickly than those that don't. It is clear that a printed dynamic can mean any number of things, depending on the setting and the role that voice is playing at that particular time in the piece. Teaching younger players how to voice a chamber music piece is almost always one of the more difficult things to achieve. Add to that the texture, sonority and tonal power of a piano and it changes the entire picture. I often encourage string ensemble players to imagine they are a pianist and the piece is a solo work for piano. How would they voice the passage they are working on? Which finger would be playing the primary voice,

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where is the bass line, what voices should be more transparent? Sometimes, I will ask a pianist to play a passage and deliberately play with bad voicing. They often wonder why would they ever deliberately play the accompaniment louder than the melody. Then I ask them to think of their part as only some of the layers of voicing. Are they covering up the primary voice, or, if they have the primary voice, is it balanced well with both the rest of their part and all the string parts? Much like learning to project one's sound over an orchestra, playing chamber music requires that each player at times really play big, as they might when playing a concerto. Chamber music with piano can require the entire group to do that, or conversely at times play like one might play in orchestra when accompanying a string player performing a concerto. At those times, sometimes a printed "forte" dynamic might actually need to be played "pianissimo"!

Many pianists use too much pedal when they join the texture of a string group, especially if the acoustic of the concert venue is boomy, muddy or "wet." Although the use of the pedal by the pianist might be the perfect sound when playing solo or in the practice room without the other players, over-pedaling really muddies the texture of the entire group, and makes the voicing difficult to hear from the audience. Very often, young or less experienced pianists have a hard time believing how much under the printed dynamic they have to play to let the main voice out when it is in one of the string parts. Conversely, string players have an equally hard time learning how strong they sometimes need to play. Pianists spend a great deal of time in their own studies learning how to voice a piece in their hands. Yet learning to listen to their sound in the context of a chamber music group can be very difficult. A trusted coach can be a vital tool. But the pianist must learn to hear the group from more than one place. Just as string players are trained to listen to their sound not only from within the group but as if they are sitting somewhere in the concert hall, pianists also need to imagine what the entire group sounds like in the hall. Chamber music players need to listen to the entire group as if they had a second set of ears situated remotely in the hall that send the sound directly back to them. In addition, pianists need to remember what early pianos sounded like. When Beethoven wrote "fortissimo," he was thinking of the power of his fortepiano, and not today's best Steinways. That is one reason his dynamics often seem to not work. Plus, other than the 3 early trios of Opus 1, he was pretty much stone cold deaf when he wrote them. Of course, that does not mean to refrain from the character he was going after. Beethoven's last public performance came in 1814 for the premiere of the great Piano Trio in B-flat, Opus 97, commonly known as the "Archduke." The violinist Louis Spohr wrote this first-hand report about that performance and the balance problems Beethoven had while trying to play his dynamics:

> "In forte passages the poor deaf man pounded on the keys until the strings jangled, and in piano he played so softly that whole groups of notes were omitted, so that the music was unintelligible unless one could look into the pianoforte part. I was deeply saddened at so hard a fate."

There is one more very significant challenge all pianists must face and learn to adjust to. The piano in the concert hall may vary drastically in many ways from the practice or rehearsal piano. These differences can be in tone, weight of the keys, unevenness of action from one area of the keyboard to the next, dead or extra lively sound areas, etc. etc. etc.!! Hopefully, the group can rehearse in the hall with the concert piano, or at least the pianist can get some time on the instrument to get to know it a little bit. The more experienced players can learn how to hear, feel, recognize and adjust quickly to these issues. But not all wonderful pianists are wonderful chamber musicians.

So, with all these challenges, why would anyone want to tackle the literature for piano and strings??

The answer is simple…it is fantastic music that is incredibly rewarding to rehearse and perform!

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