

We Are the Music Makers

A Graded Guide to Chamber Music

Volume I: String Quartets

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Chamber Music Coaching

This book on chamber music pedagogy is the product of several years of collaboration between the authors at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts Intensive Chamber Music Workshop held each summer over a five-week span of time. It was at this festival that the two authors met each other and worked with Ms. Sarah Johnson, violinist. It was through numerous discussions with Ms. Johnson that the two authors formulated a vision that all of the faculty of this festival held- to create a comprehensive chamber music experience where the students mature through various stages in a short period of time. This method of teaching chamber music is very effective for promoting musicianship on all levels to students of all abilities.

The various ideas that will be explored in this section will include teaching the foundations of playing chamber music and addressing the various levels of musical progression that students will travel through during their study of chamber music. These levels can be accomplished regardless of the technical proficiency level of the student, and in encouraging this type of practice students will invariably grow as both musicians and individuals.

Foundations of Chamber Ensemble Playing

Many chamber music coaches and teachers are often surprised when working with a student for the first time how little students know about the art of playing in small ensembles. After all, so many of us that have chosen this field of musical study have innately understood how to play well within a chamber music ensemble with relatively little coaching, or that coaching was so long ago we have forgotten what it feels like the first time we played in a string quartet. In addition, teachers often think that because a student has had prior experience or they play so well as a soloist that they must understand the various communicative and listening skills required for chamber music. This is a fallacy. Playing well in chamber music settings can be somewhat intuitive, but without direct guidance from mentors, students may have many roadblocks that develop to keep them from realizing their goal- a fully conceptualized and realized musical performance. Most students will need this foundational training and should be guided through the processes to help them utilize their rehearsal time and be prepared and ready to receive instruction in their coaching sessions. Therefore, it is important, regardless of the level of the student, or their apparent ease with playing in a chamber ensemble to reinforce the various “nuts and bolts” of playing in such a group at the first meeting with the ensemble, and perhaps continue to reinforce these ideas throughout the entire learning process. The foundational principles of playing within a chamber music ensemble that will need to be addressed include conceptual ideas, such as equality, balance and unification of purpose, communicative ideas that include cueing, body language, eye contact and extra-sensory intention and ensemble etiquette. These topics of discussion may need to be brought up in coaching sessions very slowly, or very quickly depending upon the receptiveness, maturity and sensitivity of the ensemble.

The first areas that should be addressed to the ensemble are the large concepts of equality, balance and unification of purpose. In a string quartet, it must be stressed that the parts are equal, regardless of the difficulty and function of the individual parts. Each part has a specific function, and students need to understand the functions of melody, harmony and bass voice within the music they are creating and what their role is at any

particular time. But even though each member of the ensemble may have a particular role, each person, each voice should be heard. This is important from a musical standpoint, but also from the investment of personal energy. If a student believes that their part is "just the harmony", they may not be as fully invested as musicians in portraying the music with a clear intention. So, it is very important to illustrate to the students why the various roles are important and how that affects the ensemble as a whole. By creating this sense of democracy and unity from the beginning, a teacher will encourage students to invest their energy and musicianship effectively.

Balance then becomes the next area of concern. So, though the students need to feel the equality of their voice, a further explanation of musical roles and how to voice the parts so that the hierarchy of melody, bass and harmony is clearly defined is needed in creating a sound palate to serve as the basis of the group sound. By allowing and encouraging the students to experiment with balancing the voices, such as with the harmony too loud, for instance, is one example of how to illustrate this important point. Also, by allowing members to step outside the group and listen, and if the teacher/coach can take over that part and model the proper sound, this will aid students in understanding how to voice the section well. For more advanced students, it would be suggested that the parts be passed around the group, with each person playing (to the best of their ability) another part, so that they understand comprehensively what is important in the music. As coaching sessions continue, and the sound of the group emerges, more attention can be paid to this in a more finite way by working on balancing in detail very specific chords, sections and phrases. This area, though fundamental, will be returned to as the group continues to work together and progress towards their musical goal.

As the group meets for the first time, they come together as four individuals, but as teachers, we would like to see them develop into a group with a clear goal as their end result- a unified musical interpretation of the work they are studying. It is highly important to stress to the students that they need to work towards this common goal from the outset and to garner their input as to what they think their musical goals in working on this piece could be for them as individuals and as a group. The students will also need

to learn to trust each other and be “alright” with the idea of following one another, with everyone having a chance to take the lead. Have the students play various scales, with one person leading and changing which person is the leader. Playing various games where the students must play exactly how the other student plays will also help. Before you do these games, it is important in the first coaching session, to encourage students to share a little bit about themselves, and also to be open with them about you, as their coach. After all, it is not about how much you know; it is about how much you care. * Students need to feel connected with their coaches to help them feel comfortable enough to try new ideas and to learn to trust the members of their chamber group in the journey they are embarking upon.

The next large discussion that should be addressed with your ensemble is about communication. Communication is so very important to chamber music: communication between the members of the ensemble, both musically and verbally, between the ensemble and the coach and eventually between the ensemble and the audience. The end goal is to communicate musically between the members of the quartet to create a statement that can be transmitted to an audience. What proves more difficult in chamber music is that it is the communication of multiple individuals who have come together equally to portray an agreed upon musical idea. In large ensembles, the conductor makes the decision, so it is one person’s idea; when students play as soloists, it is their individual voice. This unification of purpose can be difficult for even the most advanced chamber music ensembles; however, these ideas of communication will enhance the maturity of any quartet, regardless of proficiency.

In developing this sense of communication, it is imperative that the previous ideas of equality, balance and coming together for a common purpose have been expressed and are beginning to be developed. Without the understanding of these concepts, students will not be receptive or able to listen well enough to be able to implement what is being asked of them. The first idea then that needs to be addressed, once the students feel somewhat comfortable, is breathing together. This will be the opening discussion about how to cue. Many students can cue effectively, but for all members of the group to come together in a

unified way, it is easiest to talk about breath and the relationship of breath to a cue. When one cues, they give the upbeat in tempo. Now, while all cues do not happen with a breath on an upbeat, some do happen after an exhale (mostly in slow movements), the idea of breathing together on the upbeat will give a cohesive understanding of how to come in at the same time. So, to practice this, have students audibly breathe together on the upbeat. Then, have the person who will be cuing the section give the cue, with all members of the ensemble audibly breathe together while the cue is being given.

Once the idea of breathing together is realized, the physical cue should be addressed. At this time a short discussion of how a conductor's preparation in an orchestra works would be helpful in talking about the process of giving a physical cue. Students need to realize that the cue contains not only the tempo, but also the mood, just like a conductor's preparation beat. The movement should be in the tempo of the section and should correspond with the breath. Finally, the students need to learn to respond simultaneously to the visual cue so that they all play together. In order to this, take an object that can be safely thrown into the air. Have the students watch you throw the object into the air and have them clap when they think you will catch it. Make sure to vary the speed of the throw to challenge the student's perception of the cue. Do this until the students are consistently clapping together correctly. Once this occurs, do the same thing, only have the students pizzicato on an open string. This may prove difficult and at times frustrating, but make sure it is done with humor and a light heart. The students will improve through time and enjoy themselves. Once the students have mastered this, take the idea to the music and have the various members of the group practice this idea of cuing.

After the ideas of cuing have been established, it is important to begin to develop further concepts of body language within the group. There are many instances of showing when someone's part is important or "catching" the melody from another voice. Students can have fun learning to respond physically to the music they are creating. It may also help voicing issues and rhythmic instability by encouraging students to toss their sound, or play into one another's sound physically. To create this, if the students are passing a part around the group, ask them to physically try to "catch" the sound. This would resemble a

sort of upward- downward motion of the body/instrument and then “throw” their sound to the next person. In order to encourage your students to play into one another’s sound, have the students physically lean towards the person they think they are supporting musically. Encourage the students to move appropriately to the music, not by adding any excessive stress, but by allowing the body to move naturally as they play. The sound will open up and many of the previous issues regarding sound projection as well as rhythmic instability may start to dissipate with this type of practice.

After students are comfortable with the ideas of breathing and moving together, it is time to encourage the students to make eye contact. Many people may ask, “why not before they have mastered breathing and moving?” Eye contact is very personal and very difficult for most of our species. The eyes are the windows to our souls, and for more sensitive students this can prove complicated. To ask students to make eye contact before they feel comfortable could be damaging to the trust you have built with your students. At some stage, however, if the students are going to build upon their communication skills, they will need to try to address this in their group. To encourage eye contact, have students stand in a square and ask them to look at another member of the quartet. When they get that person’s eye contact, the receiver of the eye contact will nod and then they can exchange places. This continues until all members of the group can make eye contact. Once the students are comfortable with this, encourage them to use eye contact in their cues, but do not insist upon it if a student is not able.

Once all of the other communication areas have been addressed, it is time to encourage your students to develop a sort of extra-sensory intention when they play. Also known as using your “musical antennae”, chamber musicians who have played together over long periods of time, just sort of “know” how to get their colleagues to respond. Their colleagues can feel their cues, draw from their musical intent and respond back to them without thinking. This is very difficult to get from young students, but sometimes, it can be fun to watch them discover that they too have an innate gift for communication and they can become very adept at it without much work. To get the students to do this, one must remove the visual cues they have worked so hard to build upon. Arrange the quartet

in such a way as the students play with their backs to each other. In doing this, they will learn to listen and feel the intent of the other players and respond to what they both hear and feel without any visual cues from the group. Encourage them to continue to experiment with this idea and over time, this type of sensitive receptive playing will become immediate and responsive.

In order to allow for a healthy environment for all of these communication skills to develop and exist peaceably for any ensemble, it is imperative that coaches, on their first meeting with a group, discuss the importance of ensemble etiquette. Students need to learn and understand that it is fine for them to offer constructive criticism and healthy and wise for them to listen and accept the criticism. They need to comprehend that they are not their instruments, that they are unique individuals who are all coming together for a common purpose and that regardless of any mistakes they make, that they will still be valued as individuals. This promotion of developing the students overall sense of self and well-being will encourage your students to assume a positive attitude. It is important to note that at times, there may be a student who does not have the best attitude at the outset. We as teachers cannot change the past, we can only affect the future, and so we need to consistently encourage those more pessimistic souls to be less critical of themselves, or others in the group, without further damaging their fragile psyche. By emphasizing their unique contribution to the group and asking them to work towards the end goal of a fully conceptualized realized piece of music, these individuals, as well as the rest of the members of the group, will have a sense of purpose and work to completing their goal in an equitable and kind manner. In addressing these fundamental ideas, string quartets and other chamber music ensembles will grow quickly from a group of four individuals to a cohesive collective. Their understanding and ability as a quartet to reach their goal is simply beginning from a human perspective.

Levels of Pedagogical Progression

As is true in all aspects of life, students of chamber music learn in various stages and levels. These levels do not necessarily happen independently of each other, nor do they necessarily happen consecutively. It is important that a teacher of any chamber music group, for that coaching to be successful, recognizes these various levels and helps students to achieve each of them to the very best of their abilities at any given time. There are four levels of pedagogical progression, which refer to the various stages in the learning process. Whether learning solo literature or chamber music, the same process is involved. These levels are:

- Level I: Technical Mechanics
- Level II: Musical Mechanics
- Level III: Emotional Connection
- Level IV: Projection

In Level I: Technical Mechanics, students are expected to understanding the rudiments of their individual parts. This includes learning the note names and their locations via fingerings and positions, understanding key and time signatures and understanding the overall rhythmic structure of the music. Ideally, this all would be accomplished prior to the first rehearsal. However, depending on the age and level of proficiency of the chamber ensemble, the coaching for the first level may exist as “guided rehearsals” until the ensemble understands how they are expected to practice and rehearse themselves. The chamber music that is assigned to the individuals should be of an appropriate level so that this is indeed possible for students to accomplish by themselves. It is also possible that there would be a reading session at the first coaching session and the student would address these various elements by the group’s first rehearsal for those students who need to hear how things fit together. Once the student generally knows and understands their individual part, the technical mechanics of intonation and rhythmic accuracy become a group issue and will continue to be something that members of the quartet will hone as time progresses.

Once Level I is fulfilled individually and much of the group technical issues have been addressed, even if they are not solved, it is time to move onto Level II: Musical Mechanics. This level involves turning the technical concepts from Level I into musical gestures. In order to do this, the students must have a “road map” of their piece. This “map” consists of understanding the form of the piece. Teachers will need to adjust their explanation of the form to the musical maturity and age of the students they are addressing. It also includes selecting and implementing a character or set of characters that will help define this work. Explaining to students how to technically achieve sound pictures or moods will also contribute to a clear vision of this character. Finally, deciding upon and understanding how to manipulate sounds, choosing appropriate phrasing and implementing dynamics within the larger sound palate of the group will move the ensemble to achieve the desired level of musicality for this particular group of students. These large ideas will need be nurtured, restated and developed as the members of the quartet gain a more thorough understanding of the music. To do this, students can be encouraged to develop pictures, words or textures to relate to the “story” of this particular work. They should try to visualize these concepts as they are playing and try to come up with some sort of storyline for the movement. In less mature ensembles, it does not hurt to guide students through this process, but do try to ask them what they think. After all, it is their musical vision we mentors are trying to create, not simply recreate our own. The students may need to do some research into the background of the composer and the piece to get a sense of where the composer is coming from to allow them to fully conceptualize a story. It seems to be best when the students take an active role in the research process, by allowing them to explore, they invest more of their own curiosity and interest into this type of informed music making.

Using both Levels I and II, the ensemble will move to the next progression in the hierarchy of musical wisdom- emotional connection. It is in this level that the ensemble seeks to find a group emotion for the music that allows them to invest personally with the music. This is not simply envisioning the characters of a story, but in essence becoming the characters or imparting an emotion that helps to connect with the vision of the ensemble. Playing musically does not necessarily mean that the ensemble/individual is

playing with a level of personal investment of emotional intent. In the case of older ensembles, it is important that the coach has helped to establish an environment that is conducive to the expressive experimentation that would be required in this level and it is imperative that this environment is established early in the life of the ensemble. To further develop this, encourage the students to continue to use colors, pictures, stories, emotions and words. Have them discuss at length what they are trying to achieve emotionally, and lead them in a discussion to help them feel the emotion they are going for. Make sure that all of the students in the ensemble agree on a basic mood. It does not have to be precisely the same, but the same message should be clear to the listener. You, as a mentor, must have established a sincere bond of trust with the ensemble before they are ready for this, but if they are comfortable opening up and exploring this, the rewards are endless. At times, with more technically minded students, one may need to use very explicit technical explanations to illicit the agreed upon emotion to achieve the sound that the group is striving for. It is always important to understand that this type of teaching will not be the same for every group or every student. All students are individuals and they do learn differently, just as each teacher is an individual and will guide their ensembles uniquely. At times, this individuality in teaching and learning style will require that the teacher look at approaching the idea from different standpoints because of the various learning styles present in one group. A quartet, after all, is a group of four individuals who all have a different way of processing information. By being flexible and using as many different approaches to inspire the group, each student will grow both musically and personally through this experience.

Finally, to reach Level IV: Projection, students need not master every component of Levels I, II and III, but instead can realize as many of these aspects as they are capable of at this time. Level IV is really the end result of the technical, musical and emotive qualities and communicating these qualities to an audience in a cohesive manner. The overall idea is to teach them how to communicate and now allow them to do so. As a group enters this level, it is important to realize that the students need to be able to adapt to changing ideas, either from within themselves or from outside sources, and still work toward achieving a final comprehensive end product. During performances, the

performers should also be made aware that the decisions they made in a practice room or in a teaching studio might be different in a new space with the added component of a live audience. They should remain receptive to this idea that the music lives, and by allowing the music to do as it needs at that time is fine and should be encouraged. By listening and adapting to the music as it is being created allows each of us to grow as artists, regardless of age or experience.