

Rehearsal Philosophy and Techniques for Aspiring Chamber Music Groups

Effective Chamber Music rehearsal is a uniquely democratic group effort requiring a delicate balance of shared values. In a high functioning chamber music group the individual behaviors of members of the ensemble are informed by mutual personal and artistic respect from all members of a group, born of a shared commitment to the success of the group. Striking an effective working balance in any group setting requires collective psycho-emotional sentience and well-honed interpersonal skills. A philosophical consensus and a specific, collective strategy on rehearsing are essential to the optimization of the rehearsal effort and the ultimate artistic success of the group.

The Environment and Organizational Effort in an Ensemble

Many ensembles overlook the importance of collective planning and accountability to behaviors that reflect a collective commitment to the work at hand. Essential environmental requisites for optimized chamber music rehearsal include:

1. Timely, and thorough communication in planning rehearsals. All members of the group must be fully responsive to communication, and committed to facilitating the organizational effort in a group.
2. Having materials such as scores, parts, and recordings available to members of the group in enough time to reasonably allow for serious preparation for each member of the ensemble.
3. Planning for space and time that will be conducive to timely and serious work. For example, planning to begin rehearsal at 4:00 when the space is only due to be available exactly at 4:00 sets in motion a failed plan before the group has even begin. The potential psychological impact on an ensemble of each failure in planning cannot be overstated. The space must be clearly ready at the appointed time with all equipment such as stands and lighting available well enough in advance to be assured of an on-time start to rehearsal.
4. Reliability with the schedule by all members of the ensemble.
5. A collectively shared rehearsal plan for the allotted time and commitment to sticking to the plan.

Success with the organizational effort is best achieved when member(s) of the group are clearly identified as the ones who will lead the organizational effort in various categories. Once the group has a list of pre-rehearsal tasks those tasks can be shared around the group. Look for the most effective distribution of tasks, not the most equitable. The point is to accomplish what needs to be accomplished at as high a level as possible, not with the “fairest” distribution of tasks possible. Ideally a group organizes and plays to its strengths. For example, a violinist that is particularly secure in the high positions is suited to covering first violin charts. Similarly, a member of the ensemble that is particularly

strong organizationally is suited to leading the organizational effort. Ensembles that play to their individual strengths function more highly.

Unity is the First Priority

Ensembles survive with unity and fail without it. This is the prime directive of ensemble playing: **it is always better to be unified than not, even if not all of the members of a group agree on a specific phrasing idea.** Members of an ensemble should strive for ensemble unity first, interpretive nuance second. This is not to say that unity should come at the expense of phrasing. Unity should include adherence to a phrasing concept, and the absence of a phrasing concept is not a viable path to creating unity.

The Art of Criticism

The key to the art of criticism is the absence of defensiveness. Freedom for each member of a group to criticize one another is critical to efficient rehearsal. A shared commitment to non-defensiveness from everyone in the ensemble is essential to the highest functioning rehearsal. Nearly as important is a commitment to strategic care in framing criticism so as to maintain the focus on the interpretive ideas and specific technical problems, and away from the personalities of the musicians involved. All members of an ensemble should be committed to both the absence of defensiveness, and a well-honed skill in strategic delivering critical commentary. Everyone in a chamber music group should take a personal pride in a serious commitment to both of these principles.

When criticized in a group each member of the group should accept and fully master the correction BEFORE suggesting an alternative to the correction. The process of learning how to execute the suggested correction is infinitely more valuable than a discussion around the merits of the suggestion.

To the maximum extent possible, criticism should:

1. **Set up clear exit competencies** - be as specific as possible about the immediate problem and the goal(s).
2. **Offer a means by which to fix the problem** and/or achieve goal(s).
3. Set in motion **work on transferable skills** and concepts. For instance, work on pitch and matching of strokes can be transferred effectively with a piece and across the repertoire so effective work on a section for these things make a group better at the same time as making the section under scrutiny better. In a group the specific demands on one member can create a transferred learning opportunity for all of the members of the ensemble. For instance, adjusting the second oboist's 3rd of a major triad to a specific temperament can create a standard for the group to replicate in all major triads. This needs to be balanced against the need to distribute specific individual work around the whole group to maintain engagement from all members of the ensemble.

Expressiveness through Imagery and Adjectives

In promoting expressive and emotive playing it is useful to relate the feelings in the music to clear images, stories, and adjectives to unify the interpretive objectives. Such language clearly pertaining to subjective values should never be employed to subvert work on an objective value

Subjective versus Objective Values

One dominant attraction of chamber music as a medium is the relative freedom for ensemble members to explore and develop their own artistic sensibilities both alone, and in relation to each other. Ensemble members' individual artistic expression can most effectively be given voice alongside positive habit strength within a group if the distinction between subjective and objective matters is stressed, and sensible ground rules for dealing with subjective matters are established.

In an ensemble setting, the need for highly unified ensemble is the most essential component of success. Ensemble members must learn how the specifics of how to rehearse and play music with one another to create a viable ensemble. The craft of ensemble requires ongoing vigilance on many levels. The demand for an ever-higher degree of ensemble excellence should be one of a number of clear, ongoing expectations in a serious chamber music setting. Just as important is the concept that the process of unifying ensemble decisions begins with the crafting of collective technical means of achieving unity, and phrasing decisions rather than with the focus on one's own subjective interpretation of the music. A clear distinction between subjective and objective values will promote efficiency in the rehearsal process. The only possible debate about objective values is how high a priority the specified value is at a given moment. The discussion about subjective values is more nuanced and should be strictly limited in the early stages of a group's effort to learn a piece.

Examples of Objective Values:

- 1.Ensemble
- 2.Pitch
- 3.Rhythm
- 4.Matched Strokes
- 5.Matched Articulation
- 6.Matched Sound Quality
- 7.Matched Beginnings and Endings of notes
- 8.Dynamics
- 9.Balance/Relative Dynamics

Examples of Subjective Values:

1. Phrasing
2. Rubato
3. Sound Quality
4. Stroke Choice
5. Articulation
6. Note lengths

The interpretation of music is a subjective matter, so it is not surprising that most of these values reach across the subjective/objective value categories at times. Pitch and balance can be subjective and phrasing can be objective where it is clearly marked by the composer. The context, in terms of the material and the ability level of the members of an ensemble, and their stage of development with the work on the piece, is of critical importance in evaluating the amount of interpretive latitude that a group should incorporate into their work. **Too much interpretive latitude, too soon in the rehearsal process can make a group inefficient and low functioning. Too much stress on the technical aspects of performance, after a group is up and running with a piece can yield a sterile performance.**

Specifics of Chamber Ensemble Rehearsal

1. Stress skillful listening as a value above all others for effective ensemble playing.
2. It is relatively simple to articulate problems in terms of listening rather than in specific technical terms. For example if we try to tell a colleague exactly what speed the bow must move at, exactly how much pressure must be applied, exactly which contact point to use, the task of drawing a good sound is far more complicated than simply asking the colleague to match a specific sound that we model for one another. The former example is over-specific and the latter is too simplistic and non-specific to work for less experienced players, but a balance between these two is integral to high-level ensemble rehearsal. It is important to keep the tasks simple, when possible, and to continually return to the reference point of sound. **Modeling and copying are essential tools in serious chamber music rehearsal.** Modeling can be singing as well as playing on the instrument. **Listening comes first!**
3. String-Specific Rehearsal Techniques:
 - a. Tuning the instruments in a quartet - it is useful to unify the temperament of the actual tuning of the instruments in a quartet before starting to play. One procedure for creating a unified temperament for the instruments is to:
 - have the cello tune first pulling the fifths as tight as they comfortably can
 - have each instrument in turn tune from the cello A and then adjust their fifths to match the cello.

- have the players correct fifths between the instruments: the violins check their G strings with the cello C, The viola checks the C string with the cello's G and the G string with the cello's C.
- b. Set-up of bow arm versus physics of the bow- it is important to focus the discussion on the results with the bow rather than the means of execution so as to avoid slowing the progress of the group when an ensemble member's focus is drawn to themselves and away from the group effort. There are different physical means by which the bow can be manipulated to produce the necessary repertoire of bow strokes. For instance, in the context of a chamber music coaching it would make little sense to take a player with a Russian-style bow arm and try to convert them to an overt "Galaminian" bow arm simply to give them more control over their spiccato stroke.
- c. Three types of articulation-Generally speaking, there are three ways to make consonant sounds on string instruments:
 - Prepared: pressure is applied to the string before the stroke begins.
 - Thrown: The bow is thrown at the string and "catches" the string as it bounces.
 - Ancillary: Constant bow speed and pressure is maintained across the change of bow producing a consonant sound as a by-product.

Illuminating the possible means of articulation and instructing students to unify articulation is one component in creating unified ensemble within a string group.

4. The tone ratio - the effort to make appropriate, quality sounds can be expressed as a ratio between bow speed, bow pressure and the contact point. One can add in the bias (or angle) of the hair as a fourth component of the ratio. Ensemble members should work to unify their concept of the tone ratio and use the shared understanding to unify sounds within the group. Once the "tone ratio" concept is clear to the all members of a group, they can collectively push to optimize and unify the tone ratio for passages they are playing together.

5. Vibrato-It is important for members of a group to collectively dissect and unify the concept of vibrato for the group.

Several specific concepts should be stressed:

- a. Vibrato is an oscillation below pitch and back to pitch.
- b. The key to a satisfying vibrato is the consistency with which the oscillation returns to pitch. (Vibrato that is inconsistent sounds, "wobbly." Vibrato that oscillates above the pitch sounds out of tune.)
- c. The goal is to have vibrato for the passagework, as opposed to vibrato, just for each note. In other words, vibrato should connect the music and aid in legato playing, not disrupt legato playing by intruding into the passagework with note-by-note intermittence.

6. Fingerings-Fingering choices are highly subjective but some relatively consistent rules can be agreed on:

- a. Avoid open strings when playing the third of the chord.
- b. For violins, unless specifically instructed otherwise avoid the open "E"

string.

- c. Avoid fingerings that leave a single note on a new string.
- d. Look for fingerings that put string crossings in logical points for phrasing, and match shifts and bow changes.

4. Basic Concepts of Phrasing:

- a. Agogic Templates-With Classical and especially Baroque music, it is effective to phrase in terraces from the strong beats. Leading students through the process of identifying the larger beat patterns that are the pillars of the music, and teaching them to “hang” the phrases on those pillars is highly effective.
- b. Strong bars/weak bars-Another parameter that helps ensembles organize phrasing.
- c. Harmonic structure-Generally, the underlying harmony in a piece should drive the decoding process around phrasing. Ensemble members should work together to steer clear of the common pitfall of over-reliance on the melodic shapes in the music in arriving at phrasing decisions.
- d. Tabuteau method: The great oboist and pedagogue Marcel Tabuteau devised a phrasing method wherein one would assign a value to each strong beat from 1-9 to delineate the intensity in long phrases in a “terraced” way. With this method a few guidelines are essential:
 - No two strong beats in a row should be the same.
 - No weak beat should be stronger than an adjacent weak beat.
 - The decisions work best by starting with the few strongest points in a piece and organizing the phrasing around those points.
 - The harmony is the guide in the decision process
 - Selfless “group listening” should be stressed at all times. A frequent mistake of inexperienced chamber musicians is to fail to hear the group, and instead remain focused on their own line. **In an artistically successful chamber group all of the members of the group constantly listen for the composite effect of the score and together make ongoing adjustments to one another to create a quality rendering of that composite effect.** This advanced concept should be instilled in all members of a group from the outset of their effort to play together “Group Listening,” relates to a number of specific areas of focus:
 1. Tuning Chords-**The sequence for tuning chords is to first tune the root of the chord, followed by the octave, fifth and third, in that order.** A procedure by which a group can become self-regulating with the tuning of chords is to first have the lowest presentation of the root of the chord play. The person with the next note in sequence (octave or fifth if no octave is present) should be instructed not to start playing with the root of the chord until they are completely convinced by what they are hearing. The next player in sequence should not start playing until they are completely convinced by the interval produced by the first two. This process can be continued until all of the members of the group playing in the chord are finally playing together.
 2. Balance-Satisfying balance should be stressed at all times. When

tuning chords it is critical to have proper balance or acceptable intonation can sound out of tune. Satisfying balance requires selfless group listening and strategic planning. A procedure for working on balance in a group might be:

- a. Stress that all notes in the chord should be audible and in balance with one another.
- b. Create a hierarchical analysis of the desired balance in each situation. The analysis must identify the prominent voice, and the relative importance of whatever voices are supporting the prominent voice.
- c. Proper balance takes into account both the harmonic implications for each voice in each chord, and the voicing in the piece. For instance, where the octave in the chord is doubled and the third is alone in a weak register of the viola one can anticipate needing more from the violist to balance the chord.

3. Rhythm-A group must find its rhythmic “groove” in order to play well together. Less experienced chamber musicians frequently attempt to learn notes first and rhythm second, an approach that is clearly antithetical to ensemble playing. **The concept of rhythm as underlying “pillars” on which the performance depends is to be stressed.** One exercise is to have members of a group vocalize their rhythm as an ensemble free of their instruments without pitch, alone, then in pairs, and finally all together. This eliminates some of the most problematic multi-tasking and focuses the group on the single task of finding a collective rhythm together. Another key skill in ensemble playing is subdividing. When a group is having difficulty playing passages of varying rhythm together, one technique is to have half of the members of the group render the passage in a subdivision as the other half of the group plays as written. Once the desired level of unanimity has been achieved, the two roles should be switched. A lot is learned from either side of the exercise so it is critical that the roles be reversed and the exercise perfected before moving on.

4. Unified phrasing - a group that is listening, as a group will identify flat sections and “phrasing conflicts” between individuals within the group. Members of a group need to be pushed to look for such phrasing problems and eliminate them using the methodologies delineated above.