

# PLAYS WE OTHERS

**Chamber music may be a model for the collaboration of equals, but rehearsals offer plenty of opportunities for friction and inefficiency. Here's a toolkit of rehearsal methods, also useful for coaching students and amateurs.**

**BY John Steinmetz**

**N**obody can say how to rehearse chamber music. Groups have different priorities; pieces require different approaches. Still, some strategies seem to help across many different situations. Since music training focuses more on how to play music than how to rehearse it, many of us have to discover those strategies for ourselves.

**Even the most exalted music-making comes from an accumulation of everyday labor, inseparable from human relationships.**

**—ALEX ROSS,**  
*Listen to This*

Full-time groups, of course, will work out their own methods. This collection is aimed at musicians who assemble for a limited time, for a specific performance, and who therefore need to adapt quickly to the music and personnel. That situation describes most of my chamber music experiences: freelance ensembles that spring up quickly and then evaporate, festival performances thrown together in a few days, and groups like XTET and Camerata Pacifica that perform together for years but keep shifting size and instrumentation to fit a diverse repertoire.

Over the years I've noticed that some problems keep cropping up. Most of the trouble is nobody's fault; it happens because rehearsing is complicated. In chamber music, each musician has to juggle multiple tasks: execute a musical part correctly, fit into a changing texture, adjust to other people's approaches, adapt to the acoustics, and contribute

to the unfolding expression—all in real time. This is more than enough to overload a person's brain, but in rehearsal there's even more to do. Musicians need to decide what needs work, choose how to work, and do that work effectively. Since they are individual human beings, group members have musical tastes that may not match, their priorities may conflict, their ways of working may differ, and their communication styles may clash. Emotional baggage may erupt. It's a wonder that any music ever reaches an audience.

Larger groups—sextets, octets, Pierrot-type new-music ensembles, and bigger bands—are especially difficult to rehearse, with more personalities, opinions, and musical parts to keep track of, and thus more potential trouble. One colleague says, only half-joking, that each person added to an ensemble doubles the trouble.

In my experience, that estimate is not far off. Once during a difficult period of rehearsals with a wind octet, members of the group met to rehearse a quintet. Quintets sometimes get overwhelmed by an overabundance of attitudes and opinions, but our work felt shockingly easy; in contrast with the octet, a group of five seemed tiny and intimate.

Each style of music brings its own hassles. Old chestnuts have performance histories to guide interpretation, but often those histories bristle with controversy and conflicting evidence, making it all too easy to stir up quasi-religious disagreements. The opening rhythms of Beethoven's Quintet, Op. 16 for piano and winds—which also exists as Op. 16b for piano quartet—are ripe for controversy. How strictly should those dotted rhythms be played? Some urge a literal interpretation of Beethoven's scripture, with

Opposite page: Visible in the title graphic are, from left, Felix Galimir, Isidore Cohen, David Soyer, and Samuel Rhodes, rehearsing at the Marlboro Festival, 1991

sharply contrasted 16th-notes and 32nds, while others, citing other authorities, make the different dotted rhythms sound similar. I've been lucky to perform this with undogmatic players willing to try out various approaches and decide by listening. New pieces carry less accumulated baggage, but they bring their own challenges, like unfamiliar notations and effects, tricky rhythms, or slippery passages that elude one's grasp.

No matter how old or new the piece, rehearsing involves getting to know the music, developing an interpretation, and coordinating everyone's efforts. Some of the same strategies may work for Machaut, Mozart, Messiaen, and Musgrave.

Here are some ideas to help with rehearsing. These are not about how the music should go; they are about how to collaborate on

figuring out how the music should go. This collection doesn't address personality conflicts, but some of the ideas can reduce tension by making the work more effective. I hope that colleagues will come across one or two new ideas here, that student groups find useful tools as they learn how to rehearse, and that coaches discover ways to expand their arsenals.

Thank you to the colleagues and teachers from whom I learned these strategies, and special thanks to friends who made crucial suggestions. I road-tested many of these as a coach at Apple Hill and Bennington summer sessions (it's easier to think about strategy without having to play at the same time). There's probably too much here, so pick and choose; use whatever's useful, discard the rest, and add your own discoveries.

## 2 GOLDEN RULES

**1 THERE'S NO ONE RIGHT WAY.** Don't waste time arguing about the "right" way to shape a phrase or searching for the one "right" interpretation. Look for what works, what moves you, what releases the music's power. There's no one right way to rehearse, either.

**2 THERE IS NO DISCUSS, THERE IS ONLY TRY.** When somebody makes a suggestion, don't discuss whether it will work; find out by trying. If necessary, try it more than once—sometimes it takes a few tries to play in an unfamiliar way. Try every idea.

## 4 BASIC PRACTICES

**1 CONSULT THE SCORE.** Many musical questions are answered there. I have participated more than once in passionate, lengthy discussion about some detail, then eventually opening the

score to discover that the whole conversation was unnecessary—either the answer became obvious on seeing all the parts, or the situation cleared up when I could see a marking in another part, or the problem turned out to be a typo.

**2 SUPPORT THE TEAM.** If you have a choice between being right and being together, choose togetherness. Create togetherness even if it means that you don't get to shape a phrase the way you want to. Go with the group's tempo even if it's not your choice. (You can discuss it later.) In my experience, this is one of the hardest practices; I do so like to be right. But the person playing differently from the rest of the group, no matter

how right, usually ends up sounding wrong, and that makes the whole group sound wrong. During a first reading, one musician—a wonderful player—suddenly started playing faster than everybody else. It wasn't clear whether this leap into hyperspace was intentional or some kind of musical seizure. I couldn't play my part, the group sounded terrible, and after we ground to a halt, he explained that the tempo had been too slow. His attempt at course correction had only managed to make us sound bad and fall apart.

**3 WORK ON ONE THING AT A TIME.** Quite often working on one issue helps to clear up others. I played in a large group that

broke into multiple simultaneous conversations just about every time we stopped playing. Sometimes this was okay—the low strings worked out a bowing while the violin and clarinet discussed articulation—but often it was bad, with somebody suggesting a phrasing while others who needed to hear were discussing something else. It took extra time to sort out what had been suggested.

**4 DON'T BE A BIG FAT STUPIDHEAD.** This is a friend's fabulous way of acknowledging basic human shortcomings. It's human to be stubborn, to be inattentive, to be bossy or clueless or passive-aggressive. Despite all this, do your best to serve the group and the music.

# BEFORE YOU > START

**POSITION THE GROUP CAREFULLY.** Set up so that members can hear and see each other. Try setting up in a circle facing each other. Some groups perform this way, too, with the audience surrounding the musicians. (At a first rehearsal for the Schubert Octet, we had a hard time staying together. I thought people were distracted by their own parts, but after the first violinist suggested moving the high and low strings closer together, suddenly our ensemble improved. We just hadn't been able to hear one another.)

**USE THE SAME EDITION.** I've been in too many rehearsals that spent way too much time figuring out what bar we were talking about. ("Maybe that's bar 24 in your part, but in mine that's bar 27." "Letter L? I don't have letter L." Even worse, sometimes editions have different markings for the same passage. "Your part says staccato? I don't have anything there except crescendo. You don't have the crescendo?")

**HAVE RELIABLE MEASURE NUMBERS.** Write them in if you have to; make sure everybody has the same numbers. (At Bennington summer sessions, every player and coach brings a score and a part with measures numbered; the website offers assistance for numbering. There's no rule about using the same edition, but having scores to consult and matched bar numbers allows the groups to work much more effectively.)

**HAVE A SCORE FOR EACH MEMBER.** This is an amazing time saver; it's odd that not every group does this.

**CONSIDER YOUR GOALS.** Whether you set goals individually or as a group, clarifying goals will help you to focus your rehearsals. Here are some possible goals:

**Expressiveness.** The music has vivid expressive character.

**Clarity.** It's easy to hear what's important, easy to grasp the flow of musical ideas, and easy to feel changes of mood and emotion.

**Pleasure.** The music is enjoyable for performers and listeners. The music and the process are fun.

**Personality.** The group performs with personality—not because the group imposed a personality on the notes, but because the musicians attend to the character of the music in their unique ways. (In the wise words of one coach, play so others can hear what you love about the music.)

**Comfort.** The musicians know the music well enough to put their hearts into it.

**Trust.** Ensemble members can rely on each other in performance.

**Growth.** Members develop their listening, empathy, awareness, skills of collaboration, and capacity to be present in the moment.

An extra-challenging set of rehearsals with a longstanding group led us to heart-to-heart talks about how to improve working relations. A colleague confided, "Maybe the real reason we're doing this music is to learn how to get along better."

**PLAN YOUR ATTACK.** Before rehearsing, decide what to work on and accomplish. Will you read the whole piece? Rehearse one movement and then play it through? Go over all the tempo transitions? Estimate how much time you need for each task. As you rehearse, periodically check your progress; modify the plan as needed. (It may help to choose one member to be in charge of making sure the group sticks to its plan. Sometimes it really helps to have somebody say, "We'd better move on if we want to finish the movement" or "We seem to have a lot to say about this movement; do we want to change our plan so we can spend more time on it?")

## REHEARSAL PROCEDURES

**START WITH A RUN-THROUGH.** This lets members get used to each other and the composition while gauging the effort that will (or won't) be needed.

**REHEARSE BACKWARD.** First rehearse the final section of a movement. Next rehearse the previous section, and play forward into the final section. Then back up one more section and rehearse, then play into the music you already rehearsed.

## Strategies

**OBSERVE THE MARKINGS.** Composers take care with articulations, dynamics, tempos, and other effects, and so should performers. Executing those markings clearly makes the music more vivid and expressive. If you want to change a marking, first rehearse it as written; this may reveal a specific effect. If you're going to deviate from the score, do so consciously and purposefully, not through inattention. As a composer, I can easily get into a rant about this: writing all those little marks takes a lot of time! And as a coach, I notice over and over again how much more alive the music sounds when a group follows all the markings. I spend a lot of coaching time simply pointing out what the score says to do; it doesn't require any brilliance on my part, but the groups sound much better.

**GO TO EXTREMES.** Exaggerate effects. Play pianissimos nearly inaudibly; make accents very clear. Rehearsal is the time to experiment, find the boundaries, and stretch the group's expressive capacity. (Chamber music is not always polite

Keep working backward. This approach builds confidence: at the end of each section you will transition to something familiar.

**TAKE REQUESTS.** Each member may request a spot to rehearse. This allows musicians to deal with issues that are personally important. It's also a great way to make sure that everybody has a say, even the quiet types who don't say much during the hurly-burly of rehearsing.

**PRACTICE TRANSITIONS.** At tempo changes and other transitions, get clear about which part leads musically and whether somebody will lead physically. At what points does leadership change hands?

**OMIT SOME PARTS.** This makes it easier to hear each other and coordinate. Play just the background to clarify the texture. Play just the inner parts to match articulations. Play just the outer parts to hear each other. Play just the rhythmic parts, or just the melody.

**DISTORT THE BALANCE.** To improve ensemble, have certain parts play loudly while the rest play softly. For example, all instruments playing the bass line play loudly while everyone else plays softly. Then switch—bass line plays soft and everyone else plays loud. This tactic works well for coordinating cross-rhythms and multiple lines, and for helping people to hear each other.

**REPEAT AS NEEDED.** Sometimes one successful pass is not sufficient. Repeat a passage or transition enough to make it comfortable and familiar. To break a group habit, like slowing at phrase ends, rehearse the desired behavior and repeat to reinforce it. One good way to repeat a passage is to loop it.

**REHEARSE SLOWLY.** This helps musicians to absorb details and improve coordination.

**ADMIT IT IF YOU'RE STUCK.** If you've done what you can on a passage, or if you're not getting anywhere, move on. Sometimes things need a rest. Come back to it later.

## for ENLIVENING the Music

and refined; sometimes it's supposed to sound crazy or intense. To my ears, Nielsen's wind quintet sounds more compelling when his sudden huge dynamic shifts are really audible. Beethoven marks a lot of abrupt changes, too, and executing them carefully makes his music sound more spontaneous.

**EXPAND YOUR COMFORT ZONE.** Some of the best effects feel physically uncomfortable. Making a convincing *fp* is not easy; it takes extra effort. Rehearse an effect enough to make it really happen. Later, if the vividness diminishes, you may need to rehearse it again.

**CULTIVATE SURPRISE.** The most arresting performances often have an element of unpredictability or spontaneity. If listeners know what's going to happen, they don't have to pay attention. Hold a fermata longer than people expect. Keep quiet all the way to the *subito forte*. Set up surprises so they're really surprising. I got my first inkling of this many years ago from a performance of Schubert's "The Shepherd on the Rock." Just before a tempo change the clarinet has a fermata. Clarinetist Richard Stoltzman *really* held that note. About the time I expected him

to cut off, he held it some more. Then he held it longer, and longer still. He kept holding, and that note drew me in. I had to listen to find out what would happen next. Finally he released the note. And then he quietly began the next, brighter, section, and as the phrase got louder it seemed extra happy, almost giddy with joy after the stillness.

**WORK WITH MOOD, ATMOSPHERE, AND EXPRESSIVE CHARACTER.** These aspects of music give it feeling. There are many ways to address them, but often it works better to listen for character than to try to impose it. Sometimes a good descriptive word like "joyous," "melancholy," or "timid" can help. Clarinetist Alan Solomon once told me about working at Marlboro with Marcel Moyse, rehearsing Mozart's *Gran Partita* for thirteen winds. The players were fabulous, they knew the piece well, and the opening of the slow movement sounded terrific. But Moyse stopped the group. "No, no." By then he was a tiny, wispy, fragile-looking man. He gazed upward, and in his ancient, raspy voice he said something like, "You see before you a great cathedral. It has huge, beautifully carved doors. Very, very slowly, the doors begin to

open. Now, again." The group began again and, according to Alan, the music sounded completely different—mysterious and profound.

**WORK WITH COLOR.** Look for opportunities to create vivid, varied, and striking colors.

**WORK WITH GESTURE.** Much of the repertoire uses recurring motives or gestures of a few notes. Make gestures distinct and meaningful—try making them speechlike or dancelike; explore the expressive potential of their intervals and rhythms. Listen for the speech-rhythms of the composer's language.

**SING.** Clarify group intention by singing a passage together. (You don't need to sing well for this to work.) To clarify more, gesticulate to show the phrase's shape. Then execute the passage—is your intent audible?

**UNIFY.** Listen for unanimity. When things don't sound unanimous, consider what's in the way.

**MAKE GOOD MOMENTS EVEN BETTER.** Rehearse not only to fix problems, but also to expand and enhance the good things.

# TEMPO RHYTHM & ENSEMBLE

**GIVE THE MARKED TEMPO A CHANCE.** If there is a metronome mark, try it! (In my Quintet for winds, groups frequently play a particular section faster than the marked tempo. Those performances have spirit, but when played at the marked tempo, slightly slower, the music has a different character, more ironic, more unusual.)

**TRY DIFFERENT TEMPOS.** In music without metronome markings, look for a tempo that releases the music's character.

**MOVE.** As you play, help each other visually by moving to show the pulse.

**DON'T MOVE.** Sometimes coordination becomes easier when everybody stops moving around. That forces the group to listen. (Try rehearsing with your backs to each other.)

**SPEAK THE RHYTHM.** Speak your parts. Don't worry about the pitches; concentrate on ensemble. (You can also use speaking to improve rhythm, dynamics, articulation, etc.)

**DESIGNATE A TAPPER.** Designate one player to conduct by tapping a foot during a passage. Other players position themselves to see that foot. I learned this from the Danzi Quintet of the Netherlands, which may have been the first group to play Schoenberg's wind quintet without a conductor. They played lots of complicated new music. The flutist, Franz Vester, had a shoe with a foam sole, so that when necessary he could tap his foot soundlessly to lead the group. I have used this approach many times since, as player or coach, and it works just fine with non-flutists and undoctored footwear.

**CHECK THE SETUP.** If there's trouble with ensemble (rhythmic togetherness), check whether members can hear each other. If necessary, adjust the setup.

**TIME PLAYERS & GESTURE PLAYERS.** It appears that some musicians orient themselves to the pulse while others orient by gestures. If the group has trouble coordinating, try the passage each way:

- (1) Everyone aligns to the pulse.
- (2) Everyone aligns with the leading voice or bass line.

## LISTEN FOR:

**Impulses.** Make the music's impulses (emphases) audible. If a Mozart phrase ends with two successive quarter notes an octave apart, it might sound better to make an impulse on the first beat and not on the second. Some phrases sound better if you don't make an impulse on every downbeat. Another phrase might need differently placed impulses.

**Groove.** Consider how many impulses there are in a bar. A 4/4 can be played mostly in 2, in 4, or in 8. Those different grooves will alter the feeling and atmosphere. Explore which beats are strong and weak.

Dance movements come alive when the group clarifies strong and weak beats (ONE, two, three, ONE, two three). Notice when the composer changes the strong/weak pattern.

**Subdivisions.** Decide when to subdivide, and when not to. In slow and *andante* movements, musical flow can be greatly affected by whether or not the group subdivides. During ritards and accelerandos, choose the beat on which subdividing will begin or end.

**Larger units.** Make longer phrases by sustaining energy through the phrase and reducing the number of impulses. Try one impulse per bar, or one every two bars. (In the slow movement of the Schubert Octet, the inner pulsing parts drew our group into making an impulse on every 8th note. When we switched to making impulses only on the big beats, or even once per bar, Schubert's long lines flowed more easily.)

**Downbeats/Upbeats.** Note which notes or phrases act like upbeats and which act like downbeats.

**Flow.** Pay attention to how time flows in a passage. Does it flow evenly or not? When and how does the flow shift?

## INTONATION

### FOCUS ON BLEND.

Sometimes intonation improves when the group works on blend. Aim your sounds toward each other to mix them. Play in pairs, then in larger subgroups.

### FOCUS ON BALANCE.

Sometimes intonation problems are really balance problems.

### TUNE FROM THE BOTTOM.

Listen to the lowest note and tune to that. Upper parts play like overtones of the lower part.

## CUEING & LEADING

**LESS IS MORE.** Leading a passage—conducting while playing—doesn't require much extra movement. Move just enough.

**BE YOURSELF.** When cueing the start of a movement or a new tempo, first play it by yourself as you would in your practice room. Your natural movements may communicate enough, if your colleagues watch closely.

### CUE TOGETHER.

Sometimes it's better to have two musicians lead an entrance together. Breathing together helps.

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