



A VETERAN'S RUMINATIONS ABOUT CHAMBER MUSIC

by Abram Loft

amateur ensembles of such technical proficiency and musicality that, though they play for pleasure and not income, might well be termed professional.

Conversely there are ensembles of professional musicians who do not truly qualify as chamber-music-makers. Though I tread on thin ice by saying this, chamber groups spawned by orchestras from the 19th century to the present, important though they may be in the orchestra's community 'outreach' effort, rarely achieve true ensemble level. The orchestral schedule and the habits formed by playing within a large group under the musical direction of a conductor militate against this. As for soloists gathering together to play chamber music in concert "because they love it" (and because star status 'sells' to the adoring public), it is rare for the dominant individualities of the participants to merge into one truly *ensemble* musical personality.

It's not all that easy even for the members of a dedicated, full-time chamber ensemble of professionals to blend their musical outlooks. One-on-a-part music requires that each player be of solo caliber, for any technical or tonal flaw will be glaringly revealed. And with solo level comes solo perspective and conviction. This leads only too often to the rehearsal-room "I'm **right**; you're **wrong**" syndrome. This can produce the situation pictured in that old *New Yorker* cartoon showing the string quartet onstage: the first violinist is seated, with his head protruding through the cello, which has just been used as a bludgeon by its irate performer. The second violin is telling the violist that, "As far as **I'm** concerned, this is the end of the Harnischfeger Quartet."

Many a conservatory teacher has been confronted by an ensemble of able young students already suffering from the quirks of their elders, as evidenced by remarks such as, "I can't play with **him** [or **her**]!" How sad to see junior talents behave like older players who should already have learned to know better. Due care and discernment is needed when forming or joining an ensemble in the first place. Let everyone gauge each other's skill and musicality before throwing in their lot

ABRAM LOFT, violinist and violist, has a Ph.D. in musicology from Columbia University where he also served on the faculty for eight years. He left in 1954 to join The Fine Arts Quartet as 2nd violin, performing with that ensemble in 270 cities in 28 countries. Along the way came the recording of 60 LPs, numerous broadcasts and telecasts, 20 hours of TV videotapes about the quartet repertoire, and 19 years of concert series in Chicago. From 1963, the quartet members were resident professors at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. Loft moved in 1979 to the Eastman School of Music at the University of Rochester as chair of the string department and professor of chamber music. He won the university's teaching award in 1984 and retired in 1986. He's written three books: *Violin and Keyboard: The Duo Repertoire* (1973, 1991); *Ensemble!—A Rehearsal Guide to Thirty Great Works of Chamber Music* (1992); and *How to Succeed in an Ensemble* (2003), in addition to articles and reviews in *The Musical Quarterly*, *MLA Notes*, *CMA Chamber Music*, and *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*. He was a member of the editorial boards of the *Journal of the American Musicological Society* and the *College Music Society's* Symposium. Recently he has been coach and judge, as in the *Fischhoff Chamber Music Competition*, the *Singapore Violin Competition*, *International Workshops*, the *Heidelberg Castle Festival*, and *Kneisel Hall*. *ASTA* gave him its *Distinguished Service award* in 1993.

Stringendo has honored me with its invitation to contribute an article to its pages. I feel this distinction especially in light of the pleasure I had in performing in Australia as member of the old Fine Arts Quartet—first in 1961 as guest of *Musica Viva*, then in 1967 in the course of a U. S. State Department tour by our ensemble. For me, a highlight of the 1961 visit was the opportunity of offering Sydney's (and perhaps Australia's) first concert performances of the complete cycle of Bartók quartets. That *Musica Viva* requested that presentation on the spur of the moment, after we had given our initial concerts in Australia, testified to the dedication of Australia's musical public.

I have been told that the tone of my article could be humorous if I so chose; however, I must resort to the old saw, "It only hurts when I laugh." It's not that chamber music is devoid of humor. Far from it! Flashes of joviality can mark the most profound pages of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and their great successors. But from any point of view, chamber music is essentially a serious matter. After a lifetime of discussing and teaching the repertoire, and 25 years of membership in a touring, recording, broadcasting and telecasting ensemble, I ought to know.

Chamber music is serious, first and foremost by the very nature of the repertoire. The seminal work of Haydn (especially from the 1770s on), the supernal contributions of the mature Mozart - old already in his 20s! - and the demands of Beethoven's output, already with the Opus 18s at the dawn of the 19th century, bespeak a dedicated, professional ensemble. There are indeed

together. And then let's hope they display the skills of a group psychologist in their daily dealings with each other. They'll need this for the long haul.

Many a young ensemble (and there are many out there) disbands even after winning prominent competitions and entering the concert arena. Even more disheartening was the recent spectacle of an older, long-experienced foursome reduced to the trench warfare of litigation in consequence of unseating one of the group. (No names needed; there has already been enough spotlighting in the public prints.) You can recruit an ensemble of saints, but saints don't necessarily play well.

Why is it of concern that a chamber music ensemble survives and prospers in the first place? First, there is the parochial reason that chamber music offers a career avenue for the many talented students who leave our conservatories each year to enter the artistic work-force. All the world's significant symphony orchestras, lumped together, cannot absorb the continuing supply of able young performers. Nor can all players who show aptitude for teaching find a livelihood in *that* branch of employment. Arts management, important as it is to the health of the music trade, accommodates only a limited number of musicians, who are relegated to desk-jobs that do not use the musical skills the workers have acquired.

Many talented and well-trained music professionals are forced into entirely non-musical pursuits in order to earn a living. All music-training institutions, let alone the families of young musical aspirants, must ask themselves whether the cost of musical training and the fine instruments that are the working tools of the profession, plus the years of effort, are worth the sacrifices involved. If such worries dry up the supply of musicians, the loss will turn a dire cultural problem into a social catastrophe.

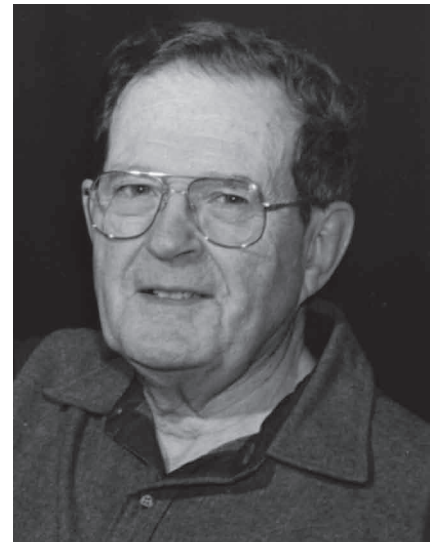
A well capitalised entertainment industry, using modern technology (radio, television, CD recordings, the iPod, etc.), has accustomed a great segment of the people of the Western world to music that is little more than slightly organised noise. This applies even to song, where the lyrics

- whether insipid love-notes, strongly sexual ditties, or social protests - are often so well masked by overwhelming, electronically hyped instrumentals that a libretto is needed to follow the text. The result is a succession of sounds that requires minimal mental effort on the part of the listener or the song-smith. Piped through ear-buds from the belt-pack larder, the acoustic haze surrounds the victim in a cocoon of vibration, all but cut off from contact with the real world. Couple this kind of pseudo-musical narcotic with visual media - whether television or print - that offer little useful information and even less mental stimulation. Add as well a decline in reading ability or interest, and you have a populace whose mental and cultural perceptions are constantly being diminished and debased. The destructive impact on serious thought is not only deplorable but dangerous, producing a large segment of the inhabitants of the industrialised world (and beyond) that is susceptible to the harangues and incitements of demagogues, exploiters of religious fervor and would-be tyrants.

So what can chamber music possibly offer by way of antidote to the debilitating elements just described? To begin with, it holds the power to stimulate the growth of attention span, memory and logical thinking. None can accuse the mature Mozart of writing a truly simple composition. But one of his late quartet minuets, profound though it may be, is still quite clear in its layout. With some practice, the listener's ear can trace the repetitions of the movement's sections, the relationship between those sections, the contrast between the minuet and trio portions, the return to the minuet after the playing of the trio, and the fact that the return is heard without the repeat of its two sections.

More significantly, even though there is no voice, and no text to specify the sense of the sounds heard, the listener can be affected in a very personal way by the assumed meaning of the music. Those responses are all the more important because they are unique to each hearer.

Whether the music at hand is by Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Bartók, or Babbitt, attentive hearing and comprehension



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does not come without practice; and not everyone is initially disposed to do the work involved. Back in the days when the courts of the nobility had musical retinues, some titled listeners gave ear to the performances, while others tried to keep the sound from interfering with their card-playing. With the rise of the public concert industry in the 19th century (manned in part by erstwhile court- and town-musicians who had become the freelance players of the new era), there were presentations of less demanding music for less initiated audiences, and others for upper-crust and middle-class gentry who wanted to hear sterner stuff. And even here, as the composer Berlioz notes in one of his reports on music in Paris, he found that some in the audience were following the work in the scores they had brought with them - but reading the wrong page!

Most listeners, even if they have had a bit of study of one instrument or another, will need guidance as they come to grips with music of substance. The help in question is far from the kind that conductor Walter Damrosch offered, back in the earlier decades of the 20th century, by mouthing the words, "**This** is the **sym**-pho-ny that **Schubert wrote** and never **fin**-ished," in sing-song fashion to the familiar theme from that composer's 'Unfinished' Symphony. Nor will it be found in the kind of superficial exposure to forgettable compositions that typified the music programs in the New York public school experience of this writer's youth.

Rather, what is needed is a focus on the hearing of music that emanated from the mind of a highly trained and inspired composer, supplemented by a clear, jargon-free description of the work in question, along with information about its place in the calendar of the composer's output and in the context of analogous music of its time. The melodic and harmonic anatomy of the music should be discussed, with ample use of illustrative excerpts from the composition and with any needed analytic terminology immediately explained.

Ideally, the performers themselves should be able to offer this guidance, especially within the frame of a chamber ensemble, where some or all of the small group can collaborate in a free and easy manner with each other in the presentation. If the auditorium is of modest size (as befits the intimacy of the chamber music repertoire), there can be interchange with members of the audience, with questions answered and areas of discussion explored.

So-called "open" rehearsals by chamber groups can seldom be truly enlightening to the audience. The ensemble members are on public display; so also is the give-and-take that ordinarily takes place within the privacy of the studio. The sometimes heated arguments between the players that can (though not always!) lead to fruitful musical decisions are muted or avoided, giving way to over-polite conversational exchanges. Good public relations, perhaps, but offering a false picture of ensemble life that can make any professionals in the audience cringe with disbelief and embarrassment.

By the same token, an open discussion about the workings of a composition must allow for the airing of differences of opinion about structural and intellectual aspects of the music. Knockdown/drag-out conflict, no; but cookie-cutter, obviously scripted-and-memorised dialogue is equally inappropriate. There has to be some sense of lively interchange between musicians who know what they think about the music under discussion and are able to express their views comfortably in verbal discourse.

It is of course possible to delegate the speaking assignment to one member of the

ensemble, but the presentation then tends to become a mere supplement to a well-written and informative, printed program-note. The live, conversational approach more aptly reflects the collaboration between enlightened performers that is the essence of the chamber repertoire.

"Enlightened" and "comfortably" are the operative words. And for these elements to prevail in the musician when speaking about a composition, there must have been more than study of an instrument in his or her training. Surely, acquiring mastery of performance should be enough, what with the years of instruction and arduous practice involved. For the rare few who achieve star soloist status, on the one hand, or the greater number of those who inhabit the orchestral world (let us hope, in an organisation staffed by very skilled players and led by an inspiring conductor), this might be true. In the case of the soloist, there is no need to speak. The audience has flocked to the concert in order to be dazzled by the expected technical display. (The musical artistry of the performance, indeed, may be little recognised by the less initiated members of the assembly.) As for the orchestral presentation, no member from the ranks could address the audience without short-circuiting the conductor, even though it is the rare director who can speak effectively other than via the baton. For the chamber musician, the situation is different. The ensemble is small, the auditorium and the audience in attendance are (properly so) sized in proportion, and there is automatically a feeling of closer contact with the performers. In this more intimate setting, there is both opportunity and obligation. Whether about the music in a formal concert program or in an informative series of talks on the broader chamber literature, the player must have practised much more than an elegant C-major scale. Whether through diligent reading and observation as an individual, or through formal course-work study, the player would have gained some familiarity with general history, literature, the dramatic and visual arts, along with the more expected training in theory, harmony, formal analysis, and music history. And

along with this, training in clear writing and speaking.

Can I truly be realistic in placing this burden on the shoulders of the would-be professional? I hope that instrumental professors and schools of music will agree with my emphatic, "Yes!" Let's recognise a salient point: very few of our students will have a solo career on the stages of Carnegie, Royal Festival, Sydney Opera House, the Concertgebouw, and other famous concert halls of the world, or in the ranking symphonies performing on such stages. Many more, however, can find meaningful musical pursuit in performing the chamber repertoire.

I trust that the decades-long work of Musica Viva and other like-minded organisations in Australia has created an environment in which properly trained young professionals can contribute to the social good by perpetuating the place of chamber music there. The task will be significantly greater in America, even though we have a chamber-music tradition tracing back into the second half of the 19th century, and a still vigorous market for touring groups today. My hope - and I fervently hope I am not alone in this - is to see chamber-music complexes (string, wind, piano, mixed, voice) resident in smaller cities throughout the land, with able performers making imaginative programs available and understandable to significant portions of the community, young and old.

At present, this sort of vision must seem like the dream of a writer in his dotage. For this and similar cultural advances to come to pass will depend on help from government leaders and legislators in countries great and small. Such heads of state will know that life on this earth cannot continue on the paths of consumerism, violence and aggression, self-aggrandisement and international one-up manship. People of the requisite outlook are more likely to appear and rise to prominence, however, amid populations thirsty for truly enlightened guidance. And for such a climate to exist and prevail will need dedicated efforts from experts in many disciplines, musicians among them. It is late in the day, but there is still time.