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STRING QUARTET CHAMBER MUSIC

The personal way of music development



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The subject of this thesis is about chamber music and more specifically string quartet. How and why chamber music should be a real part of a musician's life. In the introduction, it is explained why it is important to play chamber music and what qualities a musician needs to be good at it. Then a description of what is chamber music literally is exposed.

The history recounts what was chamber music from its early beginnings until our days and why it has so much evolves. About interpretation, there are several steps. First of all, the training and practicing; there are keys to know about to have a good result of playing string quartet chamber music such as who is the leader; how to receive and give back the music which is being played; how to be a good aware accompanist and the question of the interpretation point of view. Then about how to play together and have a common sound; some techniques can help like bowings, fingerings and vibrato and finally how to find a proper balance in a chamber music group. Then arrives the problem of expressive intonation and its relation with knowledge of harmony and how to practice it. At the last, the very important role of the rhythm when it comes to play together.

In the last part, it will be showed why chamber music is vital to a musician because there is only few options for a string player such as soloist, orchestra player or chamber music player and that last option combines all advantages of a leader and an accompanist.

The conclusion explains why chamber music string quartet is a unique experience of its kind.

KEYWORDS:

Chamber music, common sound, interpretation, intonation, rhythm, harmony, history of chamber music.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Playing in chamber music allows to share musical experience with other musicians and to learn to cope with their musical ideas.

A lot of chamber music players say that playing in a group brings an inimitable feeling of happiness but that it is also one of the hardest challenge for a musician. “In quartet playing there won’t be as many gymnastics per minute, but the amount of technical control and variety of nuance that’s needed is greater than what one normally finds in the solo repertoire” (Blum 1987, 9).

Chamber music string quartet demands a great effort to players such as specialized instrumental techniques (quick adaptation to others’ bowings, fingerings, sounds, way of playing); listening as many player voices there is; knowing exactly what they play and when; great understanding and patience towards others. “Each of us has to be strong enough to exert his leadership, strong enough to endure the constant criticism of his colleagues, and strong enough to let go of cherished ideas when they don’t coincide with the majority opinion” (Blum 1987, 7).

Chamber music in general, requests a certain spirit of playing, musicians must find how to play in peace together; that means that everyone must collaborate to the group practicing and take responsibilities; being ready to share common ideas, ambitions and interpretations. “The crux of the matter is that unanimity of our approach in a performance is determined not by preconceived philosophy of what string-quartet is supposed to be but by our musical conception of the work at hand. We’re four musicians performing a single piece of music, and we come to a common opinion about that work” (Blum 1987, 4).

2. DESCRIPTION

Chamber music is a form of classical music, written for a small group of instruments which traditionally could be accommodated in a palace chamber. In general, it includes any art music that is performed by a small number of performers with one performer to a part. The word "chamber" signifies that the music can be performed in a small room, often in a private salon with an intimate atmosphere. Because of its intimate nature, chamber music has been described as "the music of friends" (Bashford 2003, 3). For more than 200 years, chamber music was played primarily by amateur musicians in their homes, and even today, when most chamber music performance has migrated from the home to the concert hall, there are still many musicians, amateur and professional, who continue to play chamber music for their own pleasure (Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia).

3. HISTORY

During the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance, instruments were used primarily as accompaniment for singers. String players would play along with the melody line sung by the singer. There were also purely instrumental ensembles, often of stringed precursors of the violin family, called consorts. Some analysts consider the origin of classical instrumental ensembles to be the sonata da camera (chamber sonata) and the sonata da chiesa (church sonata).

During the Baroque period, chamber music as a genre was not clearly defined. Often, works could be played on any variety of instruments, in orchestral or chamber ensembles. *The Art of Fugue* by Johann Sebastian Bach, for example, can be played on a keyboard instrument (harpsichord or organ) or by a string quartet or string orchestra. The instrumentation of trio sonatas was also often flexibly specified; some of Handel's sonatas are scored for "German flute, Hoboy [oboe] or Violin". Bass lines could be played by violin, cello, theorbo, or bassoon, and sometimes three or four instruments would join in the bass line in unison. Baroque chamber music was often contrapuntal; that is, each instrument played the same melodic materials at different times, creating a complex, interwoven fabric of sound. Because each instrument was playing essentially the same melodies, all the instruments were equal. In the trio sonata, there is often no ascendent or solo instrument, but all three instruments share equal importance.

Joseph Haydn is generally credited with creating the modern form of chamber music as we know it. Haydn established the conversational style of composition and the overall form that was to dominate the world of chamber music for the next two centuries. Unlike counterpoint, where each part plays essentially the same melodic role as the others, here each instrument contributes its own character, its own comment on the music as it develops.

If Haydn created the conversational style of composition, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart greatly expanded its vocabulary. His chamber music added numerous masterpieces to the chamber music repertoire. Mozart's seven piano trios and two piano

quartets were the first to apply the conversational principle to chamber music with piano. Haydn's piano trios are essentially piano sonatas with the violin and cello playing mostly supporting roles, doubling the treble and bass lines of the piano score. But Mozart gives the strings an independent role, using them as a counter to the piano, and adding their individual voices to the chamber music conversation. Mozart's string quartets are considered the pinnacle of the classical art.

The turn of the 19th century saw dramatic changes in society and in music technology which had far-reaching effects on the way chamber music was composed and played.

Throughout the 18th century, the composer was normally an employee of an aristocrat, and the chamber music he composed was for the pleasure of and the performance by aristocratic amateurs. With the bankruptcy of the aristocracy and new social orders throughout Europe, composers increasingly had to make their own ways by selling and performing their compositions. They often gave subscription concerts, renting a hall and collecting the receipts from the performance. Increasingly, chamber music was written not only to be performed by rich amateurs, but to be performed by professional musicians to a paying audience.

At the beginning of the 19th century, violin makers developed new methods of constructing the violin, viola and cello that gave these instruments a richer tone, more volume and more carrying power. Also at this time, bow makers made the violin bow longer, with a thicker ribbon of hair under higher tension. This improved the projection of the instrument, and also made possible new bowing techniques.

The pianoforte was actually invented by Bartolomeo Cristofori at the beginning of the 18th century, but not until the end of that century, with technical improvements in its construction, did it become an effective instrument for performance.

Straddling this period of change is the giant of western music, Ludwig van Beethoven. Beethoven transformed chamber music, raising it to a new plane, both in terms of its content and in terms of the technical demands it made on its performers and its audiences. His late quartets, in particular, were considered so daunting an

accomplishment that many composers after him were afraid to essay the medium; Johannes Brahms composed and tore up 20 string quartets before he dared publish a work that he felt was worthy of the “giant marching behind”. In his 17 string quartets, Beethoven goes from classical composer par excellence to creator of musical Romanticism, and finally transcends classicism and romanticism to create a genre that defies categorization.

As Beethoven, in his last quartets, went off in his own direction, Franz Schubert carried on and established the emerging romantic style. Schubert devoted much of his life to chamber music. His own short life was shrouded in tragedy, wracked by poverty and ill health. Chamber music was the ideal medium to express this conflict, “to reconcile his essentially lyric themes with his feeling for dramatic utterance within a form that provided the possibility of extreme color contrasts”.

While improvements in instruments led to more public performances of chamber music, it remained very much a type of music to be played as much as performed. Amateur quartet societies sprang up throughout Europe, and no middling-sized city in Germany or France would be without one. But opposing forces were at work. The middle of the 19th century saw the rise of superstar virtuosi, who drew attention away from chamber music toward solo performance. Although amateur playing thrived throughout the 19th century, this was also a period of increasing professionalization of chamber music performance. Professional quartets began to dominate the chamber music concert stage.

It was Johannes Brahms who carried the torch of Romantic music toward the 20th century. On one hand, Brahms was a traditionalist, conserving the musical traditions of Bach and Mozart. Throughout his chamber music, he uses traditional techniques of counterpoint, incorporating fugues and canons into rich conversational and harmonic textures. Not only in harmony, but also in overall musical structure, Brahms was an innovator. Rather than discretely defined phrases, Brahms often runs phrase into phrase, and mixes melodic motives to create a fabric of continuous melody.

The end of western tonality, begun subtly by Brahms and made explicit by Debussy, posed a crisis for composers of the 20th century. It was not merely an issue of finding new types of harmonies and melodic systems to replace the diatonic scale that was the

basis of western harmony; the whole structure of western music; the relationships between movements and between structural elements within movements; was based on the relationships between different keys. So composers were challenged with building a whole new structure for music.

The search for a new music took several directions. The first, led by Bartók, was toward the tonal and rhythmic constructs of folk music. Bartók's research into Hungarian and other eastern European and Middle Eastern folk music revealed to him a musical world built of musical scales that were neither major nor minor, and complex rhythms that were alien to western music. Bartók's six string quartets are often compared with Beethoven's late quartets. In them, Bartók builds new musical structures, explores sonorities never previously produced in classical music.

A second direction in the search for a new tonality was serialism. Arnold Schoenberg developed the serial, or twelve-tone, method of composition as an alternative to the structure provided by the diatonic system. Serialism was not the only new experiment in tonality. Darius Milhaud developed the use of polytonality, that is, music where different instruments play in different keys at the same time.

The plethora of directions that music took in the first quarter of the 20th century led to a reaction by many composers. Led by Stravinsky, these composers looked to the music of preclassical Europe for inspiration and stability. While Stravinsky's neoclassical works; such as the Double Canon for String Quartet; sound contemporary, they are modeled on Baroque and early classical forms as the canon, the fugue, and the Baroque sonata form.

As the century progressed, many composers created works for small ensembles that, while they formally might be considered chamber music, challenged many of the fundamental characteristics that had defined the genre over the last 150 years (Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia).

4. INTERPRETATION

4.1 Rehearsing and practicing

In chamber music string quartet, some questions have to be discussed between the players before starting to practice.

Which one of the four players is the leader of the quartet through the piece? Traditionally, the first violin leads but actually it is the score itself which says who has to lead and when. The first violin doesn't have always the theme or the most important melodic part. "Naturally, in any given passage there will usually be a leading voice, but that may be in any one of the four instruments" (Blum 1987, 8). "(...)If the first violin has the upper voice, he should give the lead; and if someone else has the melodic line, he will give the lead" (Blum 1987, 10). The reason can also be some particularity in instrumental technique between the different instruments such as pizzicato for the left hand or spiccato for the right hand; in these both cases, the cellist will need more time to get prepared because of the size of his strings, the sound does not come as easily as for a violin. "We'll often ask Dave to lead in pizzicato passages. A cellist's preparatory motion for pizzicato is larger and slower than that of a violinist. It's much easier for us to follow him than for him to follow us" (Blum 1987, 11). Every player is allowed to lead and to let a greater freedom to the musician who is expressing himself on the moment. "(...) Arnold is busy playing an expressive transitional passage going into a place that has to be led (...) Then I might say, "Why don't you just play it, I'll lead here" " (Blum 1987, 10).

The transmission of melodic or rhythmical motives is essential in string quartet. It gives mental comprehension and hearing understanding of the text for both players and audience. It also causes a great feeling of unity between musicians, because this transmission, well done, is one of the most difficult part in chamber music string quartet. Often, mistakes happen because of a lack of deficient listening and communication between players.

In string quartet, the involved and supportive accompaniment is the fact that accompanists have to help the theme player with their entire mind and body. "And I'm expected not merely to follow him but to react to him, which is a lot different from being an accompanist" (Blum 1987,6). Sometimes, a part seems a bit insipid but in fact it is because the player does not pay enough attention to it. Most of great themes have simple accompaniments but a careful musician will give his best to embellish them. The accompanists will make their little motives such as silences, few notes, pizzicato in a way to welcome the soloist to play with them and then bring everyone to play even better. "In passages where there are many rests, it's important that the sense of connection be sustained. This is both a physical and a mental process (...) you mustn't collapse and wait for the next chord to come. (...) One should feel as if one is playing the silences" (Blum 1987, 13). And because of all of this, the theme player is very aware that without this accompaniment in place, he could not play so beautifully.

During the rehearsals, players have to discuss about their views of interpretation and find the best compromises and decisions for the quartet. "Should any questions be raised about interpretation, that player would have the deciding vote. In this way everyone has an opportunity at some time to assert his or her musical convictions but must at other times submit to another point of view" (Blum 1987, 8). But because music is spontaneity and flexibility, it can happen that in concert, players will change their habits and do something new, including that others react instantaneously. "After twenty years in the Guarneri Quartet, I'm happily surprised on occasion to find myself totally wrong about what I think a player will do, or how he'll react in a particular passage" (Blum 1987,5). "Any one of us might interpret a given phrase many times in a certain way and then play it quite differently without warning" (Blum 1987, 5).

4.2 Common sound and balance

“Color and texture are, of course, the elements that give quartet music its special character, that typify this particular crystallization of musical thought” (Norton 1966, 120).

To find how to have a common sound in chamber music is not easy because every player has already his own way of playing and every instrument demands a certain technique; violin requires to be played differently than viola and cello. It is complicated by the fact that every player has his own part which sometimes does not go the same way than others; there are differences of dynamics, rhythms, phrasings. To get to discover that common sound, the players must take care of some particularities such as which bowings to choose as well as which length of it to use, depending of the instrument, and does it has to be the same for everyone? “The bow is a many-faceted tool and should be used as such. It’s helpful not to restrict yourself to conventional ways of doing things” (Blum 1987, 54). Fingerings and left hand effect like harmonics, open strings, glissando are also very important to be chosen carefully. But vibrato is one of the most essential thing (with bowings) which will help to blend the group sound. It is very important when a musician plays alone but when it comes to play with other string players, it is a great deal to choose where and how slow or fast does it have to be. Each player has his own vibrato. “To a large extend one’s vibrato develops itself and becomes a second nature, just like one’s way bowing (...)” (Blum 1987, 35). But it must have lot of varieties in it; “Even the most gorgeous vibrato become monotonous if it is not used creatively” (Blum 1987, 37). “The main point to remember is that all nuances have to be thought of not only in terms of volume but of intensity. You may, for instance, want to add intensity to the sound without making a crescendo and that can be done by the left hand” (Blum 1987, 41).

The balance in chamber music means the amount of sound that the different instruments can produce and when this or this player should heard. “Yet it should be remembered that a quartet is based on four individual voices. The fact that we have to coordinate and find a proper balance doesn’t mean that any of us should become faceless. On the contrary; the re-creation of a masterpiece needs the full, vital participation of each of us.” (Blum 1987, 3).

4.3 Intonation and inner hearing

The intonation in chamber music string quartet is especially laborious. “The difficulty in string -quartet intonation is to determinate the degree of freedom you have at any given moment” (Blum 1987, 28). It is needed to be play with a special intonation, called expressive intonation. “(...) Semitones in particular have a tendency to be drawn slightly up or down as the case may be. In this sense “expressive intonation” is an essential element of interpretation” (Blum 1987, 28). This expressive intonation leads to transform the mood of the passage being played. “The exact kind of intonation used sometimes varies many times within the course of a movement, depending on the musical context” (Blum 1987, 31). One way to practice it is to play chord by chord very slowly and softly.

A piano is tuned in equal temperament and because of that, all intervals are a little out of tune except the octaves. On string instruments, it is possible to play exactly the just intonation. Just to the ear; in consequence the major third should be played higher and the minor third lower, even if some intervals must be pure. “(...) There are anchor points: these are octaves, fourths, and fifths. When played simultaneously these intervals should be exact” (Blum 1987, 28). “(...) seconds, thirds, sixths, and sevenths, whether major or minor, are up for grabs, as are augmented or diminished fourths and fifths, in all cases there’s considerably more flexibility than with fourths and fifths” (Blum 1987, 28).

Harmony must be well known and understood by every musician playing string quartet. Unfortunately it is one part which is often neglected. During the rehearsal, it should be a time for analyzing the harmony of a difficult passage of intonation. There is a concrete and safe technique to get to play in tune: take a chord, seventh for example; every player has to know which interval does he plays (fundamental, third, fifth or seventh). First the fundamental is played, then the fifth, the third and finally the seventh; the fifth must be pure, the third high or low depending in major or minor and same for the seventh depending on which one it is. And from that knowledge each player should correct his intonation.

States of mind and emotions are closely connected to the homogeneity of sound and timbre therefore to intonation. Music is much more than some notes written on the score. Every part is very important even if it is not the melodic line and each player is an entity

of a structure. Every one has to blend himself into a common sound which will help to play good intonation.

4.4 Rhythm

One of the most important part of chamber music is the collective rhythm.

The interconnecting rhythm is substantial and subtle. The player with fastest notes is the leader of the tempo and rhythmic synchronization; the others have to listen it very carefully to be right in time with the shortest notes. That rhythmical consciousness gives a high stability to every player. It must be one of the most important string quartet rule that the one who is in charge with the tempo should be very strong; because one tiny gap in this fragile structure can lead to the total collapse of it.

Each player have is way to play the length of a note following his own musicality. But actually the length of a note will also depends of the nature of the piece, if it is slow or fast tempo. "The length of short notes is always subject to the nature of the piece. When the character is expressive and lyrical, we might go out of our way to emphasize their sustained quality" (Blum 1987, 89). "Obviously, every movement has its own character, some are more susceptible than others to fluctuations of tempo" (Blum 1987, 90).

5. ROLE OF CHAMBER MUSIC IN MUSICIAN'S LIFE

As string player there is only a few possibilities for professional playing. The orchestra musician is a part of a giant group which has to uniformize his sound, differences of playing and his musical ideas. A conductor is needed in that process but each player in the orchestra must listen very carefully every other musician and adapt his playing functions of what the conductor says and what he hears around him. The soloist, playing with the orchestra musicians, has a big amount of accompanists; he is one of the leader of the orchestra and play the principal part of the composition. He must share his personal ideas with the conductor and they make musical decisions together. The orchestra has to react to his playing but it doesn't mean that the soloist can do what he wants and not care about the orchestra musicians; he should listen to them the same way as he was a part of the orchestra. And finally the chamber musician who is dialoguing with his colleagues; they have the same rights, they lead or follow and express their view of music. He is a person in a group in which everyone has equal and common responsibility.

Being a soloist or an orchestra musician does not suit everybody. First of all because becoming a soloist is extremely difficult and second of all it can be very frustrating for truly expressing yourself to be "only" in an orchestra musician. Chamber music musician is between these two extremes and it is a great opportunity to combine both. Anyhow, every musician should learn and practice how to lead and how to follow and only chamber music allows that and that as young as possible then it will become a second nature.

When musicians do not have access to chamber music, they will have lacks in their musician life, as well as a player and as a teacher.

String quartet teaches how to play together, but also how to live, to communicate and to face different people. Music is made to gather people for enjoying the fact that they are making beauty together. There is often some competition between musicians; through chamber music they can learn to know and respect each other.

Chamber music trains musician to be in contact with music at every minute. To be aware that he needs others to play interesting music and has to open his mind and his heart instead of focusing on instrumental technique.

6. CONCLUSION

Chamber music is the way for a player to develop himself as musician but also as human being.

By playing it, players learn how to listen inside and outside themselves, they develop the inner and external ear. They have a new point of view of music and how to play it. They have a better understanding of the structure and harmony; they develop a specific way of playing. They are personally involved in the musical process, they have power to make it wonderful or flavourless. Great emotions and feelings are accessible to every musician who wants to reach them.

They have common directions and goals. Sharing music of course, but also the excitement of seeking beauty together and happiness of finding it. Chamber music is an experience human relation, it demands love, passion, patience, diplomacy and kindness.

7. SOURCE MATERIAL

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