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STARTING A HIGH SCHOOL CHAMBER MUSIC GROUP

A chamber group can enrich the lives of your students as they gain musical independence and sensitivity. Here are some suggestions for launching such an ensemble.

BY JOSEPH RUTKOWSKI

Chamber music is one of the most intimate yet sophisticated types of music performance. The subtle nonverbal dialogue that must be maintained in rehearsals and throughout performances is difficult to describe, yet it is an exchange that can greatly broaden the musical experience of students.

In the interest of encouraging the maximum number of music students to participate in chamber music ensembles, this article presents ideas on how to begin chamber playing with a large group where each part is played by more than one person. A brief discussion of how to find time to accomplish chamber music playing in and around the school day is included, as well as short descriptions of some typical chamber music works that directors can use with their groups. Collections that serve as introductions to chamber music playing are listed, followed by standard ensemble works and works for unusual combinations.

Getting Started

One of the main objectives of chamber music playing is to have one person on a part, thereby teaching true

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Photo courtesy of author

Playing in an ensemble of chamber musicians offers students a chance to experience music making in an especially meaningful way.

musical independence. However, it is initially better to invite as many students as possible to replicate the band or orchestra experience of having multiple players on a part. A director can start by doubling, tripling, and even quadrupling the parts.

The wonderful serenades for woodwind octet by Mozart and Beethoven (two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, and two French horns) can provide an excellent starting point. Instru-

mental directors are wise to purchase three or four sets of parts and at least two scores of each work. The editions selected should, whenever possible, contain parts for French horn in F, as well as the original horn in E-flat. (See the sidebar titled Some Chamber Music Resources to begin finding music for your groups.)

Everyone from the band, orchestra, and even chorus can participate. Singers can use neutral syllables to

Some Chamber Music Resources

■ **Music Industry Conference Guide** (The MIC Guide) lists a number of publishers of music and instrument suppliers. It is available free of charge by calling MENC at 800-828-0229 or by writing to MENC Publications Sales, 1806 Robert Fulton Drive, Reston, VA 20191-4348.

■ **Chamber Music America** is a national service organization that is committed to the promotion of chamber music and to chamber music education. Information is available from Nancy Christensen, Education Director, Chamber Music America, 305 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10001, Phone: 212-242-2002, ext. 21, Fax 212-242-7955, e-mail: nchristensen@chamber-music.org, website: www.chamber-music.org.

■ **NYSSMA Manual, Edition XXV (1997)**, New York State School Music Association. This manual includes standard and unusual combinations of instruments for chamber music, as well as solo and large ensemble selections. It is available from Donald N. Coley, Editor/Chairperson, 132 Community Manor Drive, Rochester, NY 14623.

■ **Education Department at Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center** offers opportunities for students to participate in open professional rehearsals and coaching sessions by chamber music artists. Another benefit of the society is a student ticket subsidy program for professional and advanced student recitals at Alice Tully Hall in New York City. Information is available from Bruce Adophe, Music and Education Adviser/Shoko Kashiyama, Director of Education, 70 Lincoln Center Plaza, New York, NY 10023.

sing oboe or violin (soprano, alto, and tenor) or bassoon or cello (baritone and bass) parts. Some of the instrumentalists will have to transpose their parts. Violists will have the biggest challenge, but some of them may have transferred from the violin and can pick up their old instrument for these reading sessions. Starting with a large ensemble is just the first step to teaching students to become true chamber musicians.

When to Rehearse

No matter how involved high school students are with other academic studies, sports teams, and special clubs, there will still be many students who will manage to attend chamber music rehearsals after school, before school, or during their lunch periods. A director who wants to start a chamber music group will have to keep his or her own after-school schedule open and flexible for at least two reading sessions per week. If students can attend only once a week,

that level of participation is better than not playing at all. The students who attend most of the rehearsals will probably be the core group of players, and these students will very likely go on to higher levels of chamber music artistry.

To launch a group, the director can announce in all music classes and publicize over the public address system and via posters and memos that chamber music jam sessions will be held two afternoons each week after school in the instrumental rehearsal room. It is important to attract the attention of student musicians who may not be typical chamber music devotees (that is to say, string players). Wind players, brass players, percussionists, singers, and especially pianists and guitarists that might not be found in the normal band, orchestra, or chorus classes should be specifically invited and welcomed.

Students who attend the after-school, before-school, or lunch-period chamber music sessions will need time

to rehearse with their groups in practice rooms during their band or orchestra classes (once a week). This gives these advanced and dedicated students a break from the regular routine. It also gives the rest of the class a chance to play their parts without their principal players leading them. A director need not work directly with the chamber music students at this point. Coaching becomes more critical once students get to the true chamber music repertoire (such as woodwind quintets, string quartets, and piano trios), and some of these sessions must take place outside of class.

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A director who is still playing his or her instrument is probably willing to invest the extra time and effort required for chamber music playing. Chamber music is usually rehearsed and performed without a conductor. When a director puts down the baton and sits down to play one of the parts with the students, he or she is demonstrating mastery of the skills the students want to learn. This can be a very positive motivating force. Playing an instrument in this situation can be extremely effective for demonstrating how a certain passage in the band or orchestra repertoire is supposed to sound. For rehearsals in a large band or orchestra class, it pays to have an advanced student demonstrate a difficult passage or technique. In the

chamber music setting, it's a different story. By playing along, directors put themselves on the same level as the rest of the musicians. In addition, the director can enjoy the music-reading sessions as much as the students.

Some Chamber Works

After the students have experience working one on a part, they can begin playing authentic chamber music—works for woodwind quintet (flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, and French horn), string quartet (two violins, viola, and cello), piano trio (violin, cello, and piano), brass quintet (two trumpets, French horn, trombone, and tuba), or brass choir. See the Additional Chamber Works sidebar for suggestions of other works that students might enjoy. There are many superb pieces for percussion ensemble, ranging from duos to octets and from very easy to advanced. Having percussionists work on chamber music will make them better musicians; this improvement will probably be noticeable in their band or orchestra playing after a short time.



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Mozart's Serenade no. 12 in C minor, K. 388, is a useful starting point because Mozart also made a version of this work for string quintet, K. 406 (two violins, two violas, and cello). Here, no one needs to transpose. Flutists can play the oboe parts.

Additional Chamber Works

Woodwind Octet Repertoire

Albert Einstein's edition of Mozart's Divertimento in E-flat, K. 182 (available from C. F. Peters Corporation, 373 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016).

Mozart's Serenade no. 11 in E-flat, K. 375 (available from Broudie Brothers, Ltd., 170 Varick Street, New York, NY 10013).

J. N. Wendt's arrangement of five selections from Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* (available from Musica Rara, c/o Elkin Music International, Suite 140, 16 Northeast 4th Street, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33301).

Johann N. Hummel's Partita in E-flat (available from Musica Rara, c/o Elkin Music International, Suite 140, 16 Northeast 4th Street, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33301).

One-on-a-Part Chamber Works

Five ensemble collections (*Flute Sessions*, *Clarinet Sessions*, *Trumpet Sessions*, *Fiddle Sessions*, and *Bass Clef Sessions*) for two, three, and/or four players have been compiled, comprised, collected, and arranged by Livingston Gearhart, Elizabeth A. H. Greene, Frederick Wilkins, Don Cassel, and Wallace Hornbrook. These "sessions" are perfect for group lessons of like instruments or for band and orchestra classes (published by Shawnee Press, Inc., Music Sales Corp., PO Box 572, 5 Bellvale Road, Chester, NY 10918).

Samuel Applebaum has arranged two volumes of *Beautiful Music for Two*—violins, violas, cellos, string basses, and any two-instrument combination (published by CCP Belwin, Inc., 15800 Northwest 48th Avenue, Miami, FL 33014).

Himie Voxman has arranged duets for all woodwind and brass instruments. His arrangements include mixed woodwind duos, mixed trios, and mixed brass instruments, as well as duets (available from Rubank, Hal Leonard Publishing Corp., P.O. Box 13819, 7777 West Bluemound Road, Milwaukee, WI 53213).

Bass clarinetists, tenor saxophonists, trumpeters, and baritone treble clef players can adapt the clarinet parts for their ranges and idiosyncracies. The Alberti bass arpeggiated sixteenth-note figures that lie so well in the clarinet's low register can be played as quarters or eighths on the lowest notes of the figures. Displacement of octaves should not be a cause for concern. Trombonists, baritone hornists, and tubists can play or adapt the bassoon parts. Alto clarinetists, alto saxophonists, and baritone saxophonists can

read the E-flat horn parts. Percussionists can play or adapt the oboe part on the mallet instruments (glockenspiel, xylophone, etc.), or they can even devise a Latin or rock beat.

Pianists can play from the score; directors can start them off by having them read the bass part. Later, pianists can add a top treble part. Here is an excellent opportunity to introduce four-hand piano duets. The most advanced musicians in the piano section will benefit from learning to read the inner voices, including the transpositions.



Photo courtesy of author

When introducing chamber music, a director can start by doubling, tripling, or even quadrupling the parts.

Vocal students can try playing one of the lines on the piano, keyboard, or glockenspiel, or they can sing along on any one of the nontransposing parts. Singers help fill out the sound when the group begins to explore unusual instrumental combinations.

■ When students have mastered the Mozart Serenade and are enjoying the exploration of chamber music, the director can move the group on to a piece that still has some string parts (cello and contrabass are added to the woodwinds and horns) and is one of the most popular pieces in the chamber music repertoire, Dvorak's Serenade in D minor, op. 44.¹ This piece offers a third horn part in B-flat that makes it perfectly accessible to the tenor saxophone, bass clarinet, and baritone horn treble-clef players and to the trumpet players down an octave. There is also a contrabassoon part that is suitable for the tuba players and baritone saxophonists. Baritone saxophone, alto saxophone, and alto clarinet players can read the bass clef (bassoon or cello parts) as a treble clef, adding three sharps to the key signature. The tubist can play the contrabass part down an octave. Violinists should play from the oboe parts.

■ After this, students will be ready for what many consider to be the most

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classic piece in the literature: Mozart's *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*, K. 525. French hornists must learn to transpose from the bass clef (add one sharp and read as the treble clef down one step and an octave, which is like reading it as the tenor clef) or from the alto clef (add one sharp and read as the treble clef down two steps, which is like reading the soprano clef). Clarinetists must learn to read from the

viola part and actually read it as the bass clef up an octave, adding two sharps (this works best with clarinetists who also play the piano). Clarinetists and trumpeters can also read the C part (second violin preferably) up a whole step and add two sharps, which is like reading the alto clef.

■ The Gounod *Petite Symphonie* is a superb work that features a real flute part. The horn parts are in B-flat. While the French hornists must transpose (add one flat and read as the baritone clef, or go down a perfect fifth), the music is straightforward for the trumpeters, tenor saxophonists, and bass clarinet players. Cellists and bassists should play from the bassoon parts.

■ The American-born composer Alan Hovhaness composed his *Diver-timent*, op. 61, no. 5, for three clarinets and bass clarinet, as well as for a woodwind quartet—oboe, clarinet, bassoon, and French horn. This piece offers a chance to expose students to a remarkable twentieth-century composer with a unique style that combines influences of Eastern tonalities in a baroque texture with post-Romantic harmonies.

■ Beethoven's Octet in E-flat, op. 103, is another traditional woodwind octet. This piece should have horn parts in E-flat for alto saxophone, baritone saxophone, and alto clarinet players. Presenting this piece after the Dvorak, Gounod, and Hovhaness works gives students the chance to hear a variety of styles, since Beethoven's style is more like Mozart's than the others are.

■ The score of Haydn's London Trios for two flutes and cello is also available in a transcription by Louis Moyse for flute and oboe or clarinet and viola or bassoon (Southern Music Company). Directors should not be put off by the immense number of players on each part. Violists can read from the alto clef part.

■ Mendelssohn's Octet for Strings in E-flat, op. 20, is for the most ambitious students who wish to learn a staple of the chamber music repertoire. For the most experienced student musicians, this work offers a challenge while exposing them to one of the best-known chamber works for

strings. Wind players can adapt parts as they did with *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*.

The Next Step

Directors can investigate unusual combinations of instruments—mixing woodwinds with strings, using percussion or voice with the more traditional chamber instruments, trios of violin-clarinet-piano, brass with percussion, voice-flute-piano, flute-violin-violoncello, flute-guitar, four- or six-hand piano ensembles, piano quintets (piano plus string quartet), and oboe quartet (oboe, violin, viola, and cello). If there is a harpist among the students, the harp can be added to these combinations. Directors can also enlist the talent and interest of composition students in school. The music theory teacher and his or her students can be invited to the reading sessions and can choose a part to play or sing.

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Performances and Camaraderie

The director can program the large serenades for an open school night, a Tri-M induction ceremony, a coffee house concert, or a performance at a hospital.² Other opportunities for chamber music performances include an orientation night for new students, a senior awards night, or a tour of the local elementary and middle school; or a performance could be used as an overture to a winter or spring concert.

Selected Readings on Chamber Music

Brown, Michael R. "Chamber Music for Better Bands." *Teaching Music* 5, no. 5 (April 1998): 38–39, 72.

Brown, Michael, and Chris Ann Lessly. "Teaching Musicianship through Chamber Music." *The Instrumentalist* 51, no. 7 (February 1997): 60–63.

Coffman, Don D., and Katherine M. Levy. "Senior Adult Bands: Music's New Horizon." *Music Educators Journal* 84, no. 3 (November 1997): 17–22.

Gellert, Thomas N. "First a Musician, Then a Teacher." *School Music News* 61, no. 8 (May/June 1998). New York State School Music Association, Westbury, NY.

Johns, Michael. "Matching Sounds across the Ensemble." *The Instrumentalist* 53, no. 2 (September 1998): 16–20.

Stees, Barrick. "Bassoon Ensemble Repertoire." *The Instrumentalist* 51, no. 12 (July 1997): 56–60.

A Tri-M chapter may choose to begin or end each meeting with a serenade reading. The camaraderie of playing together must be promoted. Any divisions that exist between orchestra players, band students, and choristers will fade when the groups are performing great music together.

Most music directors know that an important goal of music education is that students currently playing and singing in performance classes find or make opportunities to continue making music through their adult years and beyond. Chamber music is the most practical way of keeping up performance skills at all levels. (See the Selected Readings on Chamber Music sidebar for articles about chamber groups and related topics.)

In summary, to form a chamber group, the music director must enlist a large variety of students and select excellent music for the group to play. In addition to forming standard chamber ensembles, directors may

need to create teams of unconventionally matched instruments. Finally, the skills of the new flock of chamber musicians can be displayed in new public forums, as well as in the context of school activities. In this way, music educators can help all their students participate in the delights of playing chamber music.

Notes

1. Experience has shown that it is wise to work on the first movements of all the pieces suggested in this article for the first year with a chamber group. This will ensure that students are exposed to a variety of styles. In subsequent years, students can play the first movements as a review and then move on to the slow movements, followed by the more challenging and up-tempo finales.

2. It is critical to obtain permission from the administration (and often parents, as well) before taking or sending students outside the school building. ■