

Signs, Games & Messages

- musings of a middle-aged chamber music nerd -

The title is my humble homage to one of the greatest composers of the 20th and 21st centuries, György Kurtág, who published his “Signs, Games and Messages” with Editio Musica Budapest. Kurtág has in many ways been influential and inspirational to me: between 2004 and 2008, I was lucky enough to take chamber music lessons with him on several occasions, including ten days on Beethoven’s opus 135 alone in Prussia Cove (UK). Besides, Kurtág has taught and inspired many of the other musicians I quote and honor in the text below.

Roeland Jagers

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Prelude

We musicians are faced with a wonderful but especially challenging task: we bring music to life, music which is often so ingeniously composed that we mere mortals are almost guaranteed to fall short of the “definitive” version. On the other hand: the music actually only exists when it is heard, so our role as performers and interpreters is crucial to the equation. Performing chamber music demands a certain level of instrumental command, and *teamwork* on the highest level. One must create a unit by combining individual voices so that the result is greater than the sum of the individual parts. The cellist and Orlando Quartet founder *Stefan Metz*, who taught my quartet at his Dutch String Quartet Academy (NSKA) for four years, instilled in me a great respect for the intricate and wonderful process of rehearsing and performing string quartet repertoire. The education in this unique academy has fueled my love for the chamber music genre and the string quartet in particular ever since.

The work of a chamber musician is possible on all levels, from beginner to professional. The first priority is not the end result, but rather the fascinating, challenging and sometimes also confrontational journey towards that end. The most beautiful thing about music making is that you’re never finished; it can always be better! I wish you a lot of pleasure and inspiration during the musical journey that you will make together.

What is our goal?

We have all become musicians, whether amateur players or (aspiring) professionals, for a variety of reasons. We love the wonderful works we are given by music history, and we enjoy the sound of our chosen instruments. Through our playing, we can give a special experience to our listeners, an intangible treasure which is truly unique. There’s also the added challenge of being able to search deeper and deeper into both the musical masterpieces and your own personality. Not many professions encompass such continuous personal development on as profound a level as studying and performing music. Your own motivation as a musician can probably be described as a combination of the above reasons.

But what are we looking for as we immerse ourselves in music?

Students, young and old, will recognize the first and most common answer, given by many of my colleagues: *beauty*. We are practicing long hours, for many years, in order to make a beautiful sound with a nice vibrato. We rehearse with others in order to create the most beautiful rendition possible of a chamber piece. For me, however, this goal is too limited. If we see art (and music in particular) as a reflection of life itself, beauty is quite often not the first thing we should go for. Music is more than that, it’s all-encompassing. Of course, beauty is important, but sometimes composers want to express something different: a desolate atmosphere of extreme loneliness in Shostakovich, or Bartók’s rugged folk dances, full of dissonance, in several of his string quartets. Those moments in music should not be polished to sound pretty! So, coming back to the question above: to me personally, *truth*, *honesty* and *integrity* are much more important qualities to strive for in music. Without pretending I have reached a certain level of truth (if there is such a thing – the journey is after all far more important and interesting than the destination), in this method I will describe my own personal quest, and give you some tools for embarking on your own musical journey.

How to begin?

The score, which is in fact the testament of the composer, is *always* the most reliable reference. It gives us much information about the intentions of the composer, and often also triggers more questions than answers. The score partially shows us the way, but by no means is it providing us with all the necessary information. Musical notation is limited by nature, and can only indicate very few parameters. As a result, most of what we need cannot be written down, and inevitably you need to add a little bit of yourself. So how do you bring the notes on the page to life truthfully, honestly and with integrity?¹

Below is a practical method for how to begin the process of interpretation.

Imagine that you hear the notes:

- *horizontally* (melodically),
- *vertically* (harmonically), and
- *spacially* (sound production)

One could compare this approach to the three dimensions in which we live (length, width and depth). What does this piece of art say to me? How do I identify with it?

Use simple words to define the characters and find the mood of the piece; this is based on the overall impression that the piece makes on the listener. Point out the *non-negotiable* aspects of interpretation; reading the score carelessly can lead to musical misunderstandings that are difficult to unlearn later². Therefore I recommend that you use an Urtext edition (*Henle, Bärenreiter* or *Peters Urtext*) rather than a version that has already been interpreted by another musician.

One can approach a work from several different angles. It is important to work from *big to small*, just as a sculptor would begin by first creating a basic form and then sculpting all the fine details around it. In this way you can become familiar with the available options of interpretation when learning a composition for the first time.

¹ Obviously, profound knowledge of the composer as a person and the historical context of the composition, in a musical, stylistic and general sense, is important. However, it is tempting to project "extramusical" information, not related to the composition, into your musical interpretation. The Germans call this "hineininterpretieren". This is why I recommend placing the musical score, the actual legacy of the composer (albeit incomplete by definition) as the very first priority.

² Much like in reading an article or watching the news, make a clear distinction between facts and opinions!

Substance & structure – basic forms, bar groups, phrasing

Essentially, discovering and defining the structure, big or small, comes down to the *substance* of our music-making. Before we decide anything else (for example *how?*) we need to establish *what* we have in front of us, and relate to it as musicians. Changing this order of business is a mistake that is too often made, sadly resulting in under-informed or superficial performances.

“Music is a spiritual current which articulates itself.”³

A musical work represents both *unity* and *diversity*. Most often, it presents itself in a few larger segments which in turn can be subdivided in smaller sections.

The basic forms of music are defined as sonata-allegro form, rondo and theme with variations. Determining the form could be compared to studying a map before visiting a city with which you are not familiar. Make a *blueprint* of the structure for yourself and make sure that everyone in the group is aware of the specific landmarks, such as the recapitulation, development, second theme, etc. I recommend spending most of your time using a full score, rather than your own individual parts – the latter being useful for the last stages of preparation and the performance.

Studying the form of the piece you are learning can be an analytical, cerebral activity, requiring a certain knowledge of music theory and harmony. Relating to the structure as humans and musicians certainly isn't; this is an *intuitive* process that precedes sensory observation, let alone reason or analysis. A musical form like the sonata-allegro form can be experienced as a universally human journey, based on the perfect fifth relationship (tonic vs. dominant) that is the metaphorical 90-degree angle in music. Starting from an established “home key” as in the exposition of a first melody, we find opposition in the dominant key of the second theme, and we're off exploring, digesting and developing the material until finally we can return home again. Matured and enriched by the journey, we have changed, and so has home: the recapitulation.

“Returning is not the same as staying.”⁴

Sometimes a coda is necessary to establish a structural equilibrium; sometimes a recapitulation includes more development-like explorations. During the development, the circle of fifths is often our *rudder*, the composer's helm which navigates back and forth, down to darker, earthier atmospheres, and eventually up to the dominant, resolving into the recapitulation.

Your personal perspective on the form becomes even more interesting when you begin to recognize the individual properties that differentiate one sonata form from another. This triggers more questions:

³ *“Musik ist eine geistige Strom, die sich artikuliert.” Prof. Eberhard Feltz, my former teacher at the Hanns Eisler Hochschule in Berlin.*

⁴ *“Terugkomen is niet hetzelfde als blijven” is a Dutch quote by Belle van Zuylen, part of a so-called street poetry project on the walls of a tunnel in the center of Amsterdam.*

- *Why does this phrase have an uneven number of bars (as opposed to four or eight)?*
- *Which moment in the development is the furthest away from home?*
- *Why is this coda disproportionately long? etc...*

Determine for yourself which bars belong together, and if these bar groups are consistent or irregular. Special traits or exceptions to the expected structure are often the key to interpretation. Often the surprises make the difference between a good composition and an ingenious one: the icing on the cake!

Defining the basic structure and bar groups will lead you to the next step: identifying the main themes and dividing these themes into phrases. What are the high and low points of the phrase; what is the direction? A typical phrase leads up to a specific moment of tension which is then released. Direction within the tempo and dynamic markings are the most important tools for making the phrasing audible.

Quoting Eberhard Feltz yet again: *"Phrasing is the humanization of physics."*⁵

⁵ *"Phrasierung ist die Vermenschlichung der Physik"*

Intonation & sound - *the string quartet as one instrument... or maybe not?*

The blessing *and* the curse of the string quartet as a genre is the ability to reach an incredibly high level of homogeneity, both in sound and in intonation. Working on intonation and blending requires immense concentration and regular attention; I recommend therefore to do this type of work often and in small amounts.

Intonation is much more than simply placing your fingers in the right place. It is also a question of blending sounds and pitch simultaneously; this is a form of hearing and listening which has very much to do with your imagination of sound itself. Playing well in tune is strongly connected to sound production and balance. Therefore it is important when working on intonation to not only concentrate on the placement of your left hand on the strings, but also on the speed, contact point and pressure of the bow.

Looking under the microscope, this is what needs to be done:

- *pre-hearing* by understanding the (harmonic) context, translated physically in
- *muscle memory*: train yourself to feel where the note is
- the action of placing the finger in the right place, in relation to what the others do
- micro-adjustments after the fact, in pitch, volume and sound color.

Tune carefully! A string quartet usually tunes its open strings very tightly, so that all tonalities can sound more or less in tune. Compare the G strings with one another, and for the viola and cello also check the C strings⁶. Ensembles with piano should tune tempered (slightly looser fifths), in order to be in tune with the piano. Make sure your instrument can be tuned easily and quickly – sticky pegs are a nuisance, not just for yourself but also for your colleagues. Traditional fine tuners are lifesavers for quartet players, and so are fine-tune pegs.

Quartet players differentiate between vertical and horizontal intonation, as in tuning chords (harmony, vertical) and melody (horizontal). Below are some tips for both methods. In practice, there are also moments where you need to combine both methods of tuning.

- *Vertical intonation* – In general we hear chords from the bottom up; often the cello part is the root (bass note). The skeleton of most chords is a triad or seventh chord. Start by making sure that the perfect intervals (5ths, 4ths and octaves) are tuned well before adding extra notes, like the 3rd or 7th. The perfect intervals allow less room for pitch flexibility than for example a 7th, so tuning notes in the right order is crucial. The major 3rd is a very important interval, because in a chord it needs to be tuned slightly lower than it would be when played as a single note in a scale.
- *Horizontal intonation* - When playing a melodic line, you need to be aware of how your notes relate to the underlying notes and chords in the music. In a slow solo line accompanied by long notes, every note needs to be in tune with the harmony (an

⁶ It may come as a surprise that the seemingly straight-forward key of F Major, in which several open strings can be used, causes intonation difficulties in a string ensemble. There is a discrepancy between the F when tuned to the C string and the slightly sharper F that is tuned as a major third to the A string. Choices to be made!

example of vertical intonation). But when the melody is faster, our ears demand a more melodic intonation, with expressive appoggiature (i.e. low flats and high sharps); this way of playing may not always sound in tune harmonically. A melodic line in unison with several instruments without harmony should therefore also be tuned horizontally rather than vertically.

More tips on intonation:

- Practice first without vibrato, and later add a narrow vibrato which matches that of your colleagues. A wide vibrato will stick out of the texture and is therefore not recommended for blending (however, if you have a solo line then wide vibrato is ideal).
- Always listen critically to your sound production: speed of the bow, contact point and dynamics.
- Don't forget to keep breathing!
- Tuning unison/octave passages usually works best when the lowest voice leads; all other voices blend into the sound of that instrument. In this case, the balance will NOT be evenly distributed! Also take into account how the octaves are distributed within the group, and make sure that doubled parts are not eclipsing single voices. Occasionally this means leaning on the middle rather than the bass.
- Practice slow scales as a group: in unison or in thirds (two begin, and the other two begin two notes later), four beats per note. You will find more about scales on page 16.
- Practice difficult passages using a pedal point (either a person or tuner) as a harmonic reference.
- Improvise together in the key of the piece you are playing as a warmup exercise. Alternate playing solo and accompaniment (i.e. tonic and dominant).

The word *balance* has already been mentioned above in relation to sound and intonation. To make a piece of music sound convincing, a certain hierarchy is required; in other words, the important things always need to be heard. Do you choose to be one homogenous instrument with 16 strings, or for four individual voices? Which voice is the most important?

These are questions that you constantly need to be asking yourselves. Experiment with balance in different ways: not only dynamically (solo voice louder than accompaniment) but also through vibrato (solo voice wider/slower, accompaniment narrower/faster). The greatest composers often write four voices that are brimming with richness already on their own, which makes it challenging to decide what is most important and/or interesting. Sometimes it's helpful to label each voice with a specific character, while at the same time choosing to have one of those voices leading in terms of sound.

Dynamics – much more than loud and soft

I'll never forget the comment that Norbert Brainin, first violinist of the legendary Amadeus Quartet, made to me about dynamics. My quartet, being a young student group at the time, was too focused on *volume*, trying desperately to make a stark contrast between loud and soft. The result was a forced *fortissimo* and a mousy, meaningless *pianissimo*. Brainin told us to let go of that approach. "Dynamics are characters", he said. The music emerged miraculously.

We have all learned the progression from *pp* to *ff*, with all the small steps in between. What most of us don't realize is that this is by no means an absolute scale, as in kilograms or centimeters. A *mf* dynamic doesn't equal a certain number of decibels; on the contrary, it all depends on the context. Orchestral string players need to produce a dynamic that blends in the group at all times. On the other hand, soloists can't afford to go below a certain minimum volume, even in *pianissimo*, and pay a lot of attention to projection in any dynamic. As chamber musicians, we need to use both approaches. In one place, a *piano* can be a communal sound (the *overall* sound should be *piano*, and individually we are contributors); and in another place it could be an intimate rendition of a solo line. Clearly these two examples require very different playing techniques, despite an identical dynamic marking.

I personally like to think of *piano* as a speaking voice in the intimate setting of an average room. No need to raise your "voice", nor should it be whispered or too careful. *Forte* is like speaking for an audience in a small venue: confident but without force. Don't think of *pp* and *ff* as variations of *p* and *f* respectively! Composers use these extremes for the most powerful moments in their music. A Beethoven *pianissimo* is often incredibly intense, and requires much more musical voltage than a *piano*. Similarly, *forte* vs. *fortissimo* can be like man vs. nature. The essential progression in dynamics to keep in mind, should be, in my opinion: *pp* – *p* – *f* – *ff*. Many composers have left out *mp* and *mf* altogether, and to me they merely seem practical nuances to direct us performers a little bit in the right direction.

No dynamics?

What to do when the composer writes no dynamics at all? Especially in earlier music, this happens often; apparently the musical intentions were implied, or made clear from the context. A significant factor in this case is the specific *texture* of the score. A narrow or close setting of the voices, as if played in one hand on the piano, implies a soft, intimate sound. When the voices are further apart, sometimes spanning many octaves between top and bottom, the music should be played more extravertly. Haydn quite often omits written dynamics, and being aware of his wide range of textures can be helpful. *Voice crossing*, for example a viola part playing a higher pitch than the second violin, is also part of this contextual information and should not be neglected!

Poco forte

Especially Brahms is known to have used the term *poco forte* (or *pf*) often – a term that raises questions and gives off the impression of a doubtful and somewhat insecure composer. My perspective on this indication is from a purely practical, not a musicological

point of view: I like to think of *poco forte* as a modest dynamic (allowing for transparency in an often rich texture), yet full of character – a *piano* with *forte* expression so to speak.

Repeated dynamics

Finally a few words about successive dynamics. The great composers don't write dynamics carelessly, so when someone like Beethoven repeats a *forte* several times in a row, it is usually not a reminder for those of us who have been asleep. Often, a series of *f*-markings underlines a musical urgency, a growing impatience, translated technically by making a gradual *crescendo* throughout. These *f*-markings can be read as *sforzati* or even as a *crescendo*.

Ensemble – *breathing, movement and leadership*

Playing together begins with breathing together. Therefore it is crucial to have a mutual musical vision: an interpretation which all members of the group can stand behind. Beware, this can lead to long discussions without guaranteed result! Even ideas that aren't yours, or those which go against your musical instinct, must be given a fair try. This is the only way to reach a true musical unity.

Playing together also has a physical aspect: who determines when and how to begin? There are countless ways to give a cue, dependant on the music itself: the style, the tempo, the articulation, the texture, etc. *Everyone in the group needs to be able to give cues*, not only the (first) violinist! Body language is crucial. Often it is most effective if the cue is given by the person who has the most important part at that moment, but that is not the only way: an accompanying voice that has pizzicato, for example, can very easily show the group when to play. Another example is an accompanying voice which plays a lot of fast notes in succession.

In a good chamber ensemble, no single person is the leader. Nothing is more deadly in a quartet than a “concertmaster” with three obedient followers. If the players are not equally involved this can work against the unity that you are trying to achieve. *Everyone should lead*, but not necessarily at the same time. Chamber music is a kind of relay race, wherein the leadership alternates at lightning speed between all the players.

Paradoxically, what we are trying to achieve during long hours of rehearsals and discussions is an almost primal, intuitive and inevitable kinship, similar to newborn mice in a nest with synchronized heart beats, all breathing together effortlessly. Maybe humans aren't the crown of creation after all...

Below are some exercises which can help you learn to breathe and lead together:

- Work both individually and as a group with the metronome, but don't treat it as a dry exercise! The biggest challenge is to stay expressive within the beat.
- *Human metronome*: one player claps while the others play, or subdivides the rhythm with the bow. This method is more interactive than playing with the metronome, and very useful in music with a lot of tempo changes.
- Sing the passage instead of playing. It's not important to sing in tune; this exercise is about learning to feel the rhythm and direction of the music as a group.⁷
- Create a situation in which one person leads the ensemble for a certain number of bars. Play the same passage four times in a row, alternating leadership, so that everyone has the chance to express the music in his/her individual way. This is useful not only for the person leading, but also for the others, and gives a new perspective

⁷ Individually, you can also train your inner pulse without the instrument. Try singing, or even just thinking your part while physically moving in the tempo – for example walking outside, on a treadmill or while using a rowing machine at your gym. The combination of mental practice and physical activity is a very successful one, also when memorizing music.

to the score. Beware: music should never sound the same, so allowing the space for spontaneity should be a high priority!

- Practice with your backs facing each other and/or with your eyes closed. Good chamber musicians listen with their ears, and respond instinctively to body language. Sometimes it can help to "switch off" the visual communication, which can sometimes be superficial; cutting off one sense can help to heighten another.
- When for example the first violin plays his/her melody freely, making it difficult for the others to adjust as a unit: imagine that the cello plays along with the first violin, and the middle voices are accompanying the cello, not the violin. This can be a more effective way to play together.

Tempo – how to choose the right one?

Finding the right tempo can be tricky. Above all it's a personal choice, so it's difficult to prescribe any fixed solutions that work for everybody. Instead, I will provide some considerations which will hopefully be helpful in finding the most satisfying answers.

- Obviously, the composer's *tempo indication* and *meter* are the first essential pieces of information. In binary meter, the difference between *common* and *cut time (alla breve)* is crucial. The meter will tell us more about the way the pulse manifests itself in the music. Think of this as stepping stones: slow, big strides, or rather lots of small steps.⁸ An interesting side-note is that tempo indications can have very different implications depending on the composer.
- *Harmonic rhythm* (the rate at which the chords progress) is a very important factor in determining tempo. As a thought experiment, imagine the extreme difference in density between an eight-bar phrase, all in one harmony, versus a passage with chromatic, tension-filled harmonic changes on each 16th note. Clearly, the first one moves much faster and easier than the second.
- Compare two movements with the same tempo indication and meter by the same composer. Look further than your own repertoire! Beethoven's piano sonatas for example have many similarities with his string quartets, and they give us plenty of wonderful material for comparison.
- Our personal feeling for tempo can be surprisingly deceiving. Some have a more reliable, objective inner pulse than others, but for all of us, it is connected to our mood and heart rate. It's important to recognize the difference between *playing* fast and *sounding* fast: a few notches faster on the metronome doesn't always come across as quicker. Regularity and transparency are just as important in this complicated issue. *Presto* only sounds exciting if we can understand what we hear!
- Speaking of transparency, the factor of *acoustics* is an important one in choosing your tempo. Obviously we adjust to the various spaces, big and small, in which we perform. A boomy church requires a different approach and maybe a slightly slower tempo than a dry studio. In our detailed concert preparation, we should leave space and flexibility for these types of last-minute adjustments.

Unity of tempo

Maintaining one tempo is generally considered the right approach in classical and romantic repertoire. If a single movement is played with large tempo fluctuations (excluding the ones specified by the composer), the structure may not hold together. However, on historic recordings (even composers playing their own works), we can hear that this "rule" is broken regularly. Understandably so: contrasting themes in a sonata-allegro form can certainly benefit from a contrasting approach, including in tempo. Musical direction within the phrasing can be underlined by subtle *accelerandi* and *ritardandi* – a certain amount of fluidity makes the music breathe. As always, our good taste should determine where we draw the line. Working with the metronome is very useful, but only if we use it as a *mirror*,

⁸ Prof. Eberhard Feltz would call this "Gangart" and he demonstrated its significance by comparing the first movements of Mozart's violin concerti: similar tempi and meter, but each with their very own unique Gangart.

revealing our habitual tempo changes, so we can decide whether or not we stand behind them.

Beethoven

Beethoven's metronome markings have been discussed from a wide variety of musicological perspectives. They are often quite extreme, both in fast and slow tempi. I won't go into great detail, but I would like to share what I learned from Rainer Schmidt, second violinist of the Hagen Quartet, when working with him on the second Razumovsky Quartet. In any case, a metronome marking, even from the composer, should never be set in stone, given the many circumstances influencing the eventual choice of tempo.⁹ What I learned in Beethoven is that being comfortable (or not) with a certain pulse depends entirely on your *perspective*. A movement may consist of countless, stormy 16th notes, while at the same time a gentle bass line of longer values almost gives a feeling of calm. This is certainly the case in the first movement of opus 59/2. Focusing on the fast notes results in a significantly slower tempo than when giving priority to the bass line, in which the 16ths rather become shapes or waves. In the trio of the third movement, one can honor the *Russian theme* quite literally, imagining original syllables being sung, or as a more detached reference, almost a caricature, completely different from the original folk song. Needless to say, the first choice results in a much slower interpretation than the second.¹⁰

Practice tempi

A well-known method of practicing when first learning a new (fast) piece, both individually and with a group, is gradually building up tempo. When practicing slowly, think *fast*. The purpose of the slow practice is to give yourself more time to *anticipate* what comes next, and to integrate that anticipation into your playing. Include all aspects of the music and make sure to remain invested in the musical content, or even exaggerate it. Violinist Gábor Takács-Nagy calls this "slow concert", a concept I like to use regularly in rehearsal. This is entirely different from the more emotionally-detached kind of slow practice, which can be equally useful for specific purposes like intonation. When building up tempo gradually, make sure to create and maintain a strong memory (both mental and physical) of the concert tempo, rather than the practice speed; this is especially tricky when these are coming closer and closer together.

Sometimes it is also interesting to play a slow piece *too fast*, as an exercise in phrasing and for being more aware of the harmonic progressions in the music.

⁹ An exception to this could be Dvořák: he wrote down his metronome markings only after working with musicians on the piece, so they often represent a very natural tempo.

¹⁰ A comparison of the Guarneri Quartet and the Hagen Quartet recordings of opus 59/2 is a very interesting one for these examples.

Vibrato

The topic of vibrato has previously been discussed in the contexts of beauty/truth, and intonation/sound. Since vibrato is such an important tool for the string player, I think it is worthwhile to address it in this separate chapter.

Similarly to the wide palette of sound colors we are training ourselves to develop with the bow, we search for a virtually unlimited variety of vibrati in order to underline different musical characters with the left hand. Consequently, we try to unify the choices we make within the group. Of course, the decisions we make should be closely connected to the musical *style*: based on our knowledge of historic instruments and performance practice, we make very different choices in Haydn than we do in Schönberg. Regardless of the stylistic aspect, always pay attention to clarity and transparency of the sound. These are important qualities which are inevitably affected by the (over)use of vibrato.

Vibrato is actually about more than expression.

Rather than thinking of “vibrating every note” in specific contexts I recommend that the hand/arm vibrates lightly and continuously, regardless of the finger used at any given moment. If the action of placing/lifting the fingers in this approach is not too percussive, but rather like a cat’s feet – soft on the pads, yet confident - we can create a beautiful legato with the left hand.¹¹ Think of this as a *state of being* of the hand, rather than an action which should be executed. My late teacher Ferdinand Erblich called this *vibrando*, the “process” of vibrating so to speak. Imagine the nuance between vibrato and vibrando as linguistically similar to the difference between *ritenuto* and *rallentando*. I believe that in any style, vibrando can make the sound more radiant, and intonation/blend easier, without sounding like an expressive, extra layer or sauce. A subtle vibrando also makes the hand loose, free to move in any direction on the fingerboard at any time.

¹¹ In fact, a true legato can only be successful if translated to both hands, whether vibrato is included or not.

Fingerings & bowings

The choice of *fingerings* is a very personal one, and is usually not discussed in the context of chamber music. However, I would like to devote a chapter to this topic, because being aware of fingerings *as a group* can have a big influence on the overall sound.

As stated before, everybody has their own personal preference when it comes to fingerings. Some like to go up high on the string, others prefer more basic options. Some are most comfortable in first, third and fifth position, others rely more often on half and second position.¹² But when we play together in a homogenous unity like a string quartet, our choices are dependent on one another. This of course applies mostly to parts that are paired (often the middle voices) and less to a melody line. For example, if the middle voices play an accompanying figure in parallel thirds, it would be natural for them to play this in the same or a similar place on their respective instruments. Choices like one string vs. over two strings, open strings vs. fourth fingers, etc. should be unified in order to sound like one instrument, just like we unify our choice of bow speed, vibrato and any other parameter. This is not very complicated between second violin and viola, but can be more challenging when the upper strings pair with the cello. If we use the same example of parallel thirds, the cello would be playing in a higher place on the instrument than the violin or viola. This means that for a beautiful blend and balance, the cellist needs to adjust the brightness that comes with its register to a darker sound, either by choosing a lower string or by producing a darker, softer sound with the bow. At the same time, the violinist or violist should consider playing on the brightest (highest) string possible.¹³ Being aware of these issues with our ears makes all the difference!

Sometimes the tonality determines our choice of fingerings, and other times it closes off certain options. In C Major we can enjoy the brightness of the open E string, but this would be out of tune if an open C string is played at the same time, and can only work in passing notes, depending on the tempo. Similar situations can occur in F Major, when we have to make a choice between C strings and A strings as our reference pitch, as mentioned before in the context of intonation.

In chords, but also in melodies, we can use our chosen fingering to serve the music. The *third*, whether a major or a minor one, is the emotional core of the harmony, and I recommend purposely choosing a fingering which underlines the third's musical meaning. Wherever possible, I prefer the major third to be bright (basic fingering, higher string) and the minor third on the darker side (lower string). In a melody, I like to organize my string crossings accordingly, making the third the first note on the new string where possible.

Unlike in larger groups like orchestra sections, *bowings* are in my opinion only relevant in a *musical* sense. The visual aspect of a whole lot of nicely organized bow arms moving in the same direction doesn't apply nearly as much in a chamber ensemble. Playing the same music with the same bowing – in other words being organized – will obviously benefit your common phrasing (although a professional should be capable of sounding the same using

¹² *Half position is a lifesaver for viola players!*

¹³ *As a violist and middle voice, I recommend basic fingerings in most classical and early romantic repertoire. In most cases, this adds clarity and helps balance and intonation.*

opposite bowings). But in chamber music, there are more options: two players could split a slur at different times in order to camouflage bow changes, or one could play slurred, short notes with separate bows while another maintains the original slur. One could even consciously do opposite things – I’ve seen a quartet start Schubert’s *Death and the Maiden* with two people playing down-bow and two playing up-bow!

More important than how a bowing *feels* (this can be more habitual than you realize) is the musical effect it has. In the slow movement of Beethoven’s first *Razumovsky Quartet*, the most comfortable bowing would clearly be to split the slurs per bar. However, underlining the pain and sadness in the music, I would choose to honor the original slurs here; this makes the listener part of a much denser atmosphere with more resistance.¹⁴ On the other hand, don’t overdo it in this approach, because we need to be able to realize our choices in any circumstance on stage. If you need to split the bow, just do it. As the great German violinist Thomas Brandis said: “The bow is shorter in the evening!”

As I stated before, we can camouflage bow changes by doing them “staggered”, between beats. But sometimes, changing exactly *on* a beat is more discreet and virtually imperceptible, for example synchronized with a pizzicato or a loud(er) entrance. In ensembles with piano, this also applies to changing with the piano part.¹⁵

¹⁴ Rainer Schmidt

¹⁵ Since a perfectly inaudible bow change doesn’t exist, I will share one more trick so we can at least pretend it does: if you change both the bow and the left hand position at the same time and play the same finger (for example 1-1 or 2-2), you can hide both changes! This will actually sound smoother than either change would sound on its own.

Chamber fitness – useful study material for string quartets

The great string quartet repertoire provides ample study material for a lifetime of inspiration. However, for specific practice purposes it can be helpful to step away from the literature and use other materials. In addition to individual practicing, quartets should devote time to playing scales, four-voice chorales (Bach is the most obvious choice), and quartet etudes.

Scales

Start off with a two- or three-octave scale, played in unison/octaves, four slow beats per note. Gradually start slurring two or more notes in a bow. Experiment from there; the options are endless! For example, playing in thirds (two pairs within the quartet), crossing voices (someone else than the cellist playing the bottom octave), adding a crescendo and/or diminuendo per bow, blending or deliberately not blending vibrati. Adding a scale routine to your rehearsals will not only improve the (horizontal) intonation of the quartet, but it's also a great way to open the ears and get into the right focus for the repertoire which you are about to rehearse.

Chorales

Unfortunately, J.S. Bach never composed for string quartet, but this should not hold us back from putting his music on our menu! Aside from the *Art of Fugue*, which works very well for string quartet, I highly recommend studying Bach's *Chorales* on a regular basis. Not only is this music some of the most wonderfully inspiring harmony writing in history, the Chorales are also a great school for quartet players. A Chorale a day keeps the doctor away! Similarly to the way you can approach practicing scales together, these little choir pieces lend themselves to a myriad of useful study purposes. On top of the benefits you get from practicing scales, the Bach Chorales will also teach you about harmonic (vertical) intonation, each voice's specific harmonic role (resulting in balance/sound choices) and shaping the tension/release between chords. In order to appreciate and enjoy each voice's emancipated independence and beauty, I also recommend alternating voices while working on the Chorales. Eventually, it is interesting to realize that any passage in tonal repertoire can be reduced to a chorale-like form; this is a great tool for capturing the essence of its musical meaning.

Etudes

One can find several sets of string quartet etudes on the internet. I recommend "The Technique of String Quartet Playing" written by *Jenö Léner* (published by J&W Chester, Ltd.), a wonderful book that came to my attention via my former quartet teacher Stefan Metz, and the "Exercises for String Quartet" by *Mogens Heimann* (published by ESTA). These etudes address many different techniques specific to ensemble playing. They are particularly interesting for aspects which are not addressed in scales or chorales, such as sharing a melodic line between voices and passing it on seamlessly. Another topic is rhythmic accuracy and learning to imitate one another perfectly when necessary. These specific skills will prove to be indispensable when working on Beethoven's *Razumovsky* Quartets, for example. Heimann's exercises also focus on being unified on the wide spectrum of different approaches one can use to start a note. Some composers have been inspired by etudes as an

artistic genre as well: Chopin wrote two wonderful volumes for piano, and György Kurtág composed his *Twelve Microludes, opus 13* for string quartet as (in his own words) “studies in expression and technique”, a fantastic work that I highly recommend.

Teamwork – *if things start to get unpleasant...*

“In chamber music it is of no use to be right; you must be together... convincingly.”¹⁶

Playing chamber music can sometimes be confronting. You can get to know not only your colleagues but also yourself better, and that is not always comfortable! Below are a few tips which can be useful, also outside of music making.

Always stay open for criticism from your colleagues. Constructive comments are a wonderful way to help one improve, and if the atmosphere is healthy, you can even encourage one another to criticize. It can also happen that you think you are open to comments but are still giving off the impression that you are not interested in changing. Try to stay aware! Give comments in a way that makes your colleagues feel appreciated and comfortable, and therefore are actually inspired to honor your request (“I think you’re playing a little too slow there” instead of “You’re always too late!” or even worse: “Do you guys also think that he/she is too late?”). Be professional and avoid getting personal! Frustrations can arise if people feel that they are being attacked personally, and this can damage the atmosphere in the rehearsal.

Really listen to each other, even if you think you already know what your colleague is about to say, and even if you happen to have a brilliant idea at that moment.¹⁷ Try out every idea that is brought into the rehearsal, even if you completely disagree. An uninspired attempt is doomed to fail, so make sure to embrace even the ideas that are not your own. Who knows, you might be pleasantly surprised and learn something new!

Chamber music is, as you already know, a very unique form of collaboration. Every player, regardless of the level of playing, brings specific qualities, but also imperfection to the ensemble. The real art is learning to accept and embrace contributions from all members of the group, and allowing those contributions to shape your collective interpretation.

¹⁶ Dr. Evan Rothstein, Deputy Head of Strings at the Guildhall School in London, a wonderful chamber music teacher and a great friend. He explains: “Each player should be ready to abandon or modify preconceptions at any point as the group seeks to find common ground; true in rehearsal, this is especially true in performance.”

¹⁷ Sometimes I write down a key word in my part so I can bring up my “brilliant idea” at a later time.

Showtime – more about performing

“The real learning of the piece begins with the first performance.”¹⁸

After working intensely and in great detail, which string quartets spend a lot of time doing, it can be hard to bring this whole intricate process together to present a convincing performance. Ideally, when we’re on stage we’re no longer “busy” thinking about prior discussions and decisions. This only holds us back from communicating our art freely and from reaching a state of “flow”. The more detailed you’ve been working, the harder this transition can be. After the process of *zooming in* (working from big to small), it is crucial to remember to *zoom out* as well! Practice running through a movement, and then a whole piece without interruption. This way you give yourselves a chance to judge how things fall into place, and how the eventual performance is going to hold together. In this stage, we learn a lot, especially when we record our run-throughs and listen back together. Often, in the final days before a performance, this will prove to be the best use of your time, even when you might think that not all underlying problems have yet been solved. It can also help prevent unnecessary discussions and disagreements during the rehearsals.

Stage fright

In a chamber group there are often very different personalities, each with their own sets of strengths and weaknesses. Some may be fearless, while others get anxious for each and every performance. The great advantage of playing chamber music is that we can help each other not only to rise to our individual potential but to become more than the sum of four parts. In a situation of horrible stage fright (which happens to all of us!) we chamber musicians have the option of shifting our mental focus to other things than our own fear: a beautiful line played by a colleague, a common pulse, or really any event or process which may occur within the group. Deliberately changing the object of your attention like this, along with simply *accepting* the anxiety when it occurs, can be extremely helpful on stage.

As a conclusion to this chapter, a few words on performing from Dr. Evan Rothstein:

“Once you start to perform, once you send the music out, it is no longer yours – it is a gift you have offered, which you must not try to take back. The gift for yourself was in the act of preparing and performing, and it should be appreciated and considered according to your desires and needs: but the audience deserves to receive this gift, to appreciate and consider it also according to their desires and needs. Let them have it with generosity and kindness. Your concerns and preoccupations about your own playing should remain entirely private.”

¹⁸ Prof. Mimi Zweig, Indiana University Jacobs School of Music

Coda – *some final thoughts about rehearsing*

“High creativity is responding to situations without critical thought.”¹⁹

The rehearsal studio is our *laboratory*, a safe place for experiments without the risk of premature judgement. Making mistakes is inevitable, and even welcome! As the late *Jerry Horner*, violist in the Vermeer and Fine Arts Quartets pointed out: mistakes are merely pieces of information, and very valuable ones. Making and objectively identifying mistakes will help you improve! Appreciate and protect this non-judgemental safety, so that nobody feels curtailed in their creativity and artistic freedom. Chamber music and especially string quartet playing can be daunting and limiting by nature, almost like walking on a tight rope as Siamese quadruplets – all the more reason to give *and* take space for our artistry, individually and as a group.

Variation is paramount. When you spend a lot of time in rehearsal (most quartets do), make sure to avoid routine. Our work needs detailed focus and includes a lot of repetition, but never allow that to switch off your artistry. Keep surprising each other (and yourself!) and challenge yourself to come out of your comfort zone regularly. Make it your priority to *create*, and not rely on mindless repetition.

Practice in smaller groups (alternating two/three different people) while the person not playing gives feedback. Sitting within the ensemble makes it almost impossible to hear a realistic balance. Actually you should have your ears somewhere in the hall while the rest of your body is playing onstage! This exercise trains the skill of having an objective ear.

Last but not least, a reminder of what it’s all about:

“Character is the quintessence of diversity.”²⁰

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Advisor/editor: Sarah Kapustin

¹⁹ *John Cleese*

²⁰ *“Charakter ist die wichtigste Reduktion der Vielfalt.” Eberhard Feltz*

Violist **Roeland Jagers** is a passionate chamber musician and was a founding member of the *Rubens Quartet*, laureate of several international competitions including in Eindhoven (Tromp 2004), Prague (Spring Competition 2005) and Graz (Schubert Competition 2006). The quartet enjoyed an active international career for 16 seasons in Europe, the United States and Israel. Currently Roeland is active as a member of the *Rubens Consort*, a flexible chamber music ensemble which has come into existence as a follow-up to the quartet. He is also a member of *Metamorphoses*, a trio made up of international chamber musicians (clarinetist Jean Johnson and pianist Ilona Timchenko), which released a highly acclaimed debut album. In 2020, Roeland and his wife, violinist Sarah Kapustin made a duo album titled *Reflections*.

Roeland performs regularly in venues such as the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, the Tonhalle Zürich, the Konzerthaus in Vienna and the Philharmonie in Berlin. He also appears as a guest in international festivals such as Mecklenburg Vorpommern and Schleswig Holstein (Germany), Larzac (France), Kuhmo (Finland), El Paso Pro Musica, Sitka Music Festival and Indiana University Festival of the Arts (US).

As a soloist Roeland has appeared with several ensembles. In past seasons he performed the Solo Sonata by György Ligeti throughout Europe and the US with great success; this sonata is one of the highlights of the viola repertoire, and yet is considered by many to be unplayable. Between 2013 and 2017, Roeland was principal violist of Sinfonia Rotterdam. He plays regularly with Amsterdam Sinfonietta and with the Radio Philharmonic Orchestra, and recently joined the North Netherlands Orchestra as principal violist.

Roeland is a viola and chamber music teacher at the prestigious *Indiana University Summer String Academy* (Bloomington, US). He has extensive teaching experience, working regularly with all levels from amateurs and students to aspiring professionals.

Roeland studied viola with Gisella Bergman and Ferdinand Erbllich. In 2001 he received his Bachelor of Music diploma with honors, and continued on to receive a Master of Music in 2004 with Vladimir Mendelssohn, also with honors, at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague. In addition to his activities as a violist, Roeland also studied piano at the Brabant Conservatory, where he received his Bachelor of Music diploma in 2003. As a member of the Rubens Quartet, Roeland studied for four years with Stefan Metz at the Dutch String Quartet Academy in Amsterdam, where he also had the honor of working intensely with members of the Amadeus, Hagen, Juilliard and Borodin quartets, followed by two years at the Hochschule für Musik *Hanns Eisler* in Berlin with Prof. Eberhard Feltz, one of the world's most renowned specialists in the art of string quartet playing.

Roeland plays a Giovanni Pistucci viola, on loan to him from the Nationaal Muziekinstrumenten Fonds in Amsterdam.