

ECMTA Notes

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Working for education in chamber music: a Manifesto

European Chamber Music Teachers Association (ECMTA)

Note: At the last ECMTA gathering in Amsterdam, our colleague Filippo Faes shared some of the ideas that have motivated his recent innovative projects with teenaged students and young adults. These projects include concert/conferences which tie philosophical themes and classical chamber music to current political and social situations and questions. The delegates present felt that these thoughts were of tremendous pertinence, and so, in a departure from the usual pedagogical and professional content of this column, we have asked him to join with Carsten Dürer and myself to resume some of the central issues raised. We hope that this might be the beginning of a dialogue with our members and friends.

In times when the political systems everywhere in the world are under pressure and people are wondering if politicians still support their goals and aspirations, the practice of chamber music brings new perspectives into the picture. Does this seem improbable? Before we take a closer view, it might be interesting to note that today the crisis in Europe seems to be not only economical, but moral as well –as if Europe were somehow losing part of its identity, losing somehow the driving force of both its individuality and its shared cultural heritage. Today, the crisis' epicenter is to be found in the cradle of the rationalistic thought of Western culture, that is, in Greece.

There, thinkers like Plato, while being the first to imagine and describe modern forms of governance – republic and democracy- gave vehement emphasis to the fact that in order to become active and responsible members of the society, young citizens should undergo a process of education to strengthen their moral fibre and the subtlety of their discernment. Plato stated that "Musical training is a more potent instrument than any other, because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul." (Plato, *Republic*, III, 401.D) And he believed this in virtue of music's value as "supreme moral law".

We are now wondering how much this approach to music and its role in education is still present in the consciousness of the Europeans today - is still "unter die Lupe" - and, on the other hand, how its fading could somehow be related to the political passivity that can be observed among many young people.

Our experience suggests that it might be interesting to transpose some aspects of the musical training that our students experience daily into the political dynamics. For example, one of first and most important discoveries that our students make while playing chamber music is that, in order to make themselves as clear, convincing, and authoritative as possible in their musical expression, it is vital that they *listen* to the others. In other words, it is imperative to keep the others' musical idea always in mind and ear, to put the musical phrase that they are playing into a logic relationship and dialogue, and to make their own musical assertions *fit*, as much as possible, together. We can synthesize this skill by saying that one can learn "*to make the others follow him, while he follows*" or "*Sich folgen lassen, indem man den anderen folgt*".

Once engaged and guided by this spirit, a chamber music player would find unacceptable to deal with a colleague who, in order to *dictate* his point of view, would try to force the others to follow him by playing louder, stressing every beat and *closing his ears* to the others' nuances and differences. Such a partner would be soon excluded by the chamber music performers' circle.

And yet, this dynamic of overcoming, of "who shouts the loudest wins", together with the habit to show conviction, strength and power by diminishing or decrying the opponent's point of view, is broadly applied and accepted in many public political debates. Even recently, some demagogues who have had a profound and ominous influence on the fate of certain European countries owe their good fortune precisely to this attitude in dealing with others.

Why are voters so prone to accept this behaviour? And how much could the habit of playing music together with friends prevent them from witnessing these bullying attitudes without a proper reaction? In other words, could the practice of chamber music act like a moral *vaccination* against misuse of power?

Furthermore, continuing our attempt to relate Plato's ideas to today's reality, one may note that today, as never before in history, people are exposed to a continuous musical background (in public places, pubs, restaurants, airports, taxis, supermarkets...). This background - a sort of musical "ketchup" spread on our *soundscape*¹ - shows typical and repetitive features.

If we try to analyze commercial music in one of its forms (now specifically, it may be useful to think of the music that is heard in the discotheques), one observes that, from the point of view of the rhythm and the metrics, the expectations of the listener are always confirmed.

In other words, it happens that one hears a pattern of 4/4 and can expect that it will be repeated 4 times in a predictable *Satzbau* that obeys a stiff and simplified symmetry, without fear of contradiction. The idea of rubato - along with the endless possibilities that man has to find and to influence the perception of his own inner rhythm and to transmit it to others - has completely disappeared.

Why have the *consumers' expectations* today changed so much, compared with the tradition for which great music has always been characterised by the "unpredictable but unavoidable"? During many centuries, listening to great music and great performances has meant being exposed to continuous surprises which, while at first appearing to be in contradiction to expectations, revealed themselves afterwards to be more convincing than the obvious solutions that one could expect.

Once again, what might be the *political* consequences of this acquired habit - of the *resignation* we might say - to expect that everything that we have just heard will arise again, without allowing us to influence the series of events?

And what might be the consequences of the habit of *obeying* a synthetic rhythm generated by a machine that, by its very nature, is insensitive, and doesn't correspond or take into account the infinite variations and facets in the public's mood? (Once again, let's try to give to last sentence's words a political meaning...)

Unlike music from Beethoven to Bartók, where accents occur on the *unexpected* events, the typically stressed reiteration of a few, very predictable patterns in much of today's commercial music gives rise to a sort of "arrogance of the obviousness". This is as well another typical feature of some politicians who base their speeches on the repetition of a series of slogans that their public know already well beforehand, and which they embrace unquestioningly. This is, sadly, one of the keys to the success of their *communication strategy*.

The idea of *Form*, with which generations of composers have struggled, has completely disappeared. And yet, form is the representation of the genesis and evolution of a human thought, with its ability to relate itself to its different stages of evolution, drawing and broadening the arch of its development through time. Most of the commercial music simply fades away at a certain moment, its form has no evolution or implications. Once again: what might be the consequences of such a *renunciation* of the *forma mentis* of a young listener? What if young people have never had the possibility of experiencing a different kind of listening?

Would it not be in our interest to focus our attention on the music that is most widespread in our society, in order to help diagnose the state of health of the society itself? *

We would like to think that people who have had the chance to encounter different genres of music and who are involved in playing chamber music might have a chance to develop a deeper understanding of a certain social system. Why? Because they all have one goal: to bring the music they are performing together to a shared, high level of quality. But how do they get there? To reach this goal they have to go through a kind of social development, a shared learning process. Whoever understands this system of social practice will surely also understand that the kind of education necessary to reach this goal should start as early as possible.

¹ For more on the idea of our contemporary musical soundscape, see:
<http://www.filippofaes.com/gedanken/slow-music/>

The basic question is this: why should the thinking behind Chamber Music practice be widely acknowledged, especially in general education? Chamber Music practice means educating, working, and thinking in a completely different way from that of a soloist. The public view of musicians seems to be that it is only because they have individual talent that they are able to bring joy to an audience. But that is only partly true. Of course, without talent all accomplishments are more difficult. Yet every musician has to learn and to practice, and as long as the practice is only individual and solitary, there will be no opportunity to develop the social aspect of music making. Furthermore, in collaborative artistic performance, individual talent can be transcended. This happens through a process of collaborative, interactive work which solicits the musician's empathy, obliging him to engage in intense listening, activating a mode of interaction characterized by dialogue and compromise. These are the 'social' activities of music making, which many would simply refer to as the skills of 'musicianship'. They are the fundamental skills of the chamber musician. The results obtained by embracing this process bring not only joy to the audience, but also to the musicians themselves – which in turn affects and augments the joy of the listener.

By learning not only to respect the opinion of others but to search actively to validate them through one's collaborative performance, one might hope that the social view of every player would benefit from a significant deepening of understanding. Those educated in this way would learn to accept divergent opinions in the family with respect, as well as those in school, on the street – everywhere. Then even if one disagrees with the opinions of others, chamber music thinking provides the tools for discussing these differences in a productive way. On the highest level, the discussions of chamber music groups show that they *have* to respect each other, even if they are discussing for hours and even if they never agree. Not only must they try to understand opposing views, transcend their differences, and put the common goal of performing above their personal preferences and opinions; they must *actively* support their colleagues *even if they do not agree with them!* That does not mean that we need a world of performing chamber musicians, but it seems clear that it would certainly help if chamber music and the thinking behind it could be integrated into the curriculum in every school all over the world.

It sounds simple, but learning to play an instrument with other people – even on the most elementary level – could be considered the beginning of a better understanding of the world we live in. We have seen this proven time and time again, from the work of *El Sistema* orchestras in Venezuela to the storefront schools of Community MusicWorks in Rhode Island. The lack of mutual respect and the absence of fundamental ethics cause social and political problems all over the world. People with different opinions are fighting each other without even listening to the other side. Chamber music thinking goes beyond the basic concept of 'teamwork' to embrace a model of cooperation truly based on intense listening and on the desire to help one's partners achieve their goals.

We had started our article quoting Plato and the ancient Greeks' wisdom. Perhaps it is no coincidence that at the dawn of the twentieth century, shortly before that the most tragic and dreadful ὕβρις (*Hýbris*) devastated the old European empires, some composers like Debussy, Ravel, and Stravinsky had turned their attention, in a sort of idealized cult of ideas, to precisely that same Greek civilization that was first to warn us, through its great Tragedies, against ὕβρις and to tell us how to recognize its threat.

The ECMTA is devoted to promoting ways to bring chamber music thinking to all levels of education as a normal and widely acknowledged tool for making the world a better place. This goal transcends the task of simply teaching musicians to make music together – even though this is no simple task at all. But these processes, attitudes, and models of collaboration, which are essential parts of chamber music 'musicianship', need not be seen as the exclusive domain of the practicing musician. They represent broader, more general values. The earlier we will start to be successful in transposing these values to other contexts, the more possibilities we will have to fight the more serious problems later. We all know that it does not help to tell the children and teenagers how to behave, no more than it might with adults: they have to feel what it means to respect each other, and they must experience the special joy and satisfaction that comes with this intimate form of communication and collaboration. All can learn this way of social understanding through music, whether they can play an instrument or not: skilled teaching and opportunities to learn must be provided.

This is the goal of the ECMTA.