

ECMTA Notes

From the Chairman of the European Chamber Music Teachers' Association

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ECMTA Annual Meeting in Tallinn: Empathy in chamber music teaching and practice (Part 1)

The last issue's ECMTA article was devoted to reflecting on how the listening and understanding learned in chamber music practice could be transposed to the wider social sphere; it will be therefore no surprise that at the last ECMTA annual meeting at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre in Tallinn, almost all of the themes discussed were related to the notion of empathy in its multiple meanings and manifestations. The round table topic, *The Psychology of Chamber Music*, was born of a proposition from our Board member Petras Kunca, Professor of chamber music at the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre, who was primarily interested in the ways that thinking about empathy in teaching might have an impact of chamber music pedagogy. But as we prepared the meeting, we realized that the question of empathy was in fact crucial to a wide array of subjects, impacting not only on interpersonal relations – between peers, between teacher and student, between performer and public – but also on questions of performance/performativity, programme/career development, and improvisation/interpretation. These questions were not at all limited to the round table; they were omnipresent throughout the weekend. While there were of course many other excellent member presentations touching on subjects unrelated to this central theme, each of our guest speakers and many of our member presenters looked at the idea of empathy from a different angle, and the overall view was exceptionally stimulating in its breadth and diversity. The general conclusion is that the notion of empathy is an important key for musicians, not only in order to understand others, but in order to arrive at a higher level of self-awareness and realisation.

The point of departure was, appropriately, established on the first morning with a talk by Professor Marje Lohuaru, Vice-Rektor of the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre, our host for the meeting. Professor Lohuaru's task was to explain to ECMTA members the structure and objectives of chamber music instruction in Estonia, and although there was a good deal of description of programmes and curricula, the central point was that chamber music had become a compulsory part of music education because of its role in promoting certain general skills, such as the ability to share experiences and values, or the ability to communicate socially, professionally, and artistically. It is important to underline here that the usual motivations for inclusion of chamber music courses – the learning of a certain repertoire or the acquisition of certain purely musical or instrumental skills – were simply taken for granted. Professor Lohuaru emphasized the fact that the processes implied in chamber music training had a higher purpose, and thus the acquisition of much broader transposable skills became the ultimate focus. The power of this activity in the curriculum to move students to connect with one another was also presented here for its importance in *networking*, an essential skill once students arrive on the labor market. Nevertheless, whether for pedagogical, artistic, or career building purposes, the message was clearly that chamber music study and practice gained value and interest because of its capacity to put people in a synergistic relation to each other, and it was implicit that the skills required then to work efficiently in this context involved both empathy and communication.

Following this presentation, Dr David Dolan of the Guildhall School of Music & Drama spoke about his workshops in creative expression in collaboration with Kenneth Rhea, a professor in the Drama department. This workshop, which brings together music and drama students in year-long sessions, is entirely focused on the question of receiving and communicating dramatic intentions. Although initial exercises are conducted on a purely physical level, music students later work both with and without instruments, actors with both words and gestures. Dr Dolan stressed that the actual musical performance is not important in this context: what counts is for the students to understand and react to the expressive intentions of their peers.

This renunciation of result-based work is unusual in the framework of a classical-music conservatory, and yet it has proven an indispensable part of the process of focusing student's efforts on understanding each other – the fundamental requirement of an empathetic attitude - rather than focusing on achieving a single individual's goal. Here the central question raised is essential to effective chamber music practice: how do we express what we mean? In the workshop, students learn through a series of improvised exercises how the different expressive parameters - intonation, iteration, register, articulation, dynamics - may communicate through music what is said – or not said – by an actor, and vice-versa. The only test factor for the students is to ask afterwards whether or not the musicians had developed the ability to both capture and communicate meaning with their non-musician partners. In the video samples shown at the meeting the students demonstrated a very high level of empathetic understanding, which facilitated the creation of effective dramatic dialogue.

All of these issues concerning the intimate connection between expression, communication, artistic and professional development were raised in provocative ways during the *Psychology of Chamber Music* session. Stephan Goerner, cellist of the Carmina Quartet, and Dr. Georges Tovstiga of the Henley Business School of the University of Reading presented complementary talks about the String Quartet as a “high-performing” organization.¹ Dr Tovstiga, Professor of Strategy and Innovation Management, had studied the inner workings of the Carmina Quartet in order to adopt a detached analytical view of the elements of sense-making and learning in a successful string quartet. Professor Goerner spoke, as a musician from within the quartet, about the need for such processes in order to facilitate participation, growth, and mutual respect and understanding. The point of departure was a simple question (alas, not so simple!): how to grow together as a quartet for 25 years quartet?

Professor Goerner remembered that the quartet's teacher Sandor Vegh spoke immediately in their first lesson of the importance of breathing, both individually and collectively. For him, music could be symbolized as a great river into which one could jump by breathing together. But the quartet found that breathing together was hard: even the speed of their heartbeats was different. As part of their search for a more harmonious and unified breathing, they tried exercises which included showing gestures and cues without bows. They continued intensely practicing the breathing exercises, but found that progress was not fast enough. Some learned faster than others. Was it gender related? Was it because of sitting instead of standing? The quartet tried standing silently without instruments looking into each other's eyes to establish a deeper connection before rehearsal. But this exercise raised curious doubts and insecurities!

In rehearsal they found that not everyone gave input equally. So they devised a procedure to facilitate participation: each person got 45 minutes to run the rehearsals. This reduced the time spent in debate and discussion, but produced more input and ideas, and in the end everyone seemed much happier. A similar strategy was adopted in order to help to improve listening both to oneself and to each other. A simple folk melody could be played all together, then with each musician playing a single bar in rotation, and then a single note in rotation like a hoquet; after which they could add progressively more difficult dynamics and other sophisticated nuances. This game of unlimited possibilities, disconnected from the performance repertoire, allowed the group to focus on the *quality* of their listening and of the quality of their sense-making rather than on the production of a performance result.

It is clear here that beyond purely musical or instrumental competence, Professor Goerner had chosen to underline the fact that what might have been responsible for the success of his ensemble and their ability to continue to grow together over such a long period was the time and thought dedicated to cultivating an *empathetic attitude*. As he concluded: “All musical communication is non verbal: who wants to listen can lead and follow. This means mastery, because if one must only focus on oneself, it is not possible to listen.”

¹ A ‘high-performing organisation’ is one in which the concrete results of organizational procedures are immediately measurable.

Professor Tovstiga's analysis then of these processes in the context of organizational science was particularly fascinating. But he underlined the fact that he was not concerned with establishing a mechanical method for sense-making, but rather was looking to identify productive processes and general characteristics of good working systems. Most importantly, he insisted that these processes were continuously changing and adapting: "Man is completely human only when he is at play." He described the string quartet as a "holistic entity in which there must be continual interplay with absolute assurance," and that this interplay is constantly moving between both individual and collective preoccupations, and explicit and implicit processes. These processes all involve sense-making, knowledge exchange and learning, and involve:

- Intuiting, interpreting, institutionalizing, integrating.
- Shared mental models: tacit knowledge and socializing
- Non verbal exchange
- Situations in which ambiguity does not present a deterrent: conflict and the unknown are not a problem

He further observed that the organisational culture and nature of interactions in a string quartet seem to work best when partners are able to move beyond paradoxes without necessarily resolving them, in an atmosphere in which democracy is espoused, while, paradoxically, the need for directive leadership is also recognized.

And in keeping with Professor Goerner's observations, Tovstiga noted that the evolution of a quartet necessarily implied three strands, two of which had to do primarily with the development of empathetic attitudes and competence:

- technical process
- communication process
- social process

Tovstiga's analysis reminds us that, from an organizational point of view, communication and social processes are at least as important as "technical" considerations for the successful life of an ensemble. And yet, and this is something which will be examined in the next article, this aspect of ensemble work is only recently gaining attention of chamber music teachers. These first presentations treated the question of empathy from the perspective of professional practice; in the next issue we will see how some of our colleagues are dealing with the question from a pedagogical point of view.

Dr Evan Rothstein, Chairman ECMTA

React to this article: evan.rothstein@ecmta.eu

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Dr George Tovstiga's most recent book, "Strategy in Practice" was published by John Wiley & Sons in 2010.

weblink: <http://www.henley.reading.ac.uk/about/staff/george-tovstiga.aspx>

Stephan Goerner is cellist of the Carmina Quartet: www.carminaquartet.com

In the preceding column, we presented summaries of presentations at the ECMTA meeting at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre in May 2012, many of which seemed to focus on the question of empathy in chamber music practice and teaching. The value of chamber music training was seen from an institutional perspective as an activity providing multiple professional and artistic skills related to empathy, running from high-level listening to the ability to network. Empathetic listening was also the basis for an experimental workshop run by David Dolan which focused on the creation of meaning through sound and gesture. And a large part of our round table on the *Psychology of Music* was devoted to presentations concerning sense-making, decision-making, and strategies for growth in a professional string quartet, all of which seemed as well to center around considerations of empathetic reaction and involvement.

After the presentations which treated the question of empathy from an organizational and professional perspective, another pair of presenters, Dr Remigijus Vitkauskas, (Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences) and Professor Petras Kunca (Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre) dealt with the question of empathy from a pedagogical perspective. Professor Vitkauskas presented the results of research with a very large sample of chamber music teachers in Lithuania which investigated whether teachers understand students' attitude to the subject of chamber music. If empathy is about being inside another person's point of view without prejudice or judgment, it would seem that empathy would be indispensable for the chamber music teacher in order to accompany his students towards self-realisation.

The results of the survey were destabilizing and even worrisome. According to these results, only 2.5% of the professors felt that they definitely know how to assist pupils. And more alarming, only 4.9% of the teachers questioned think pupils certainly understand their well-meant goals! Although some of our ECMTA members objected that these discouraging figures were more likely the result of an excess of modesty on the part of teachers, and that a follow-up study of students' attitudes would be necessary to complete the research, it was hard not to give credence to some of Dr Vitkauskas's conclusions: that perhaps many music teachers are not prepared to assist in pupil's self-realisation, that probably many do not understand the psychology of pupils, that this lack of understanding leads to an absence of any feeling of partnership. Again, in defense of a more empathetic attitude in teaching, it was underlined that authoritarianism limits teachers' understanding of the pupils' emotional attitudes, and thus limits productivity and creativity.

Professor Kunca followed up on this presentation with a general plea for greater attention to the development of empathetic competence in teaching. Throughout his distinguished 48 years of experience in his own school, in Erasmus exchanges, and in ECMTA meetings, Professor Kunca has confronted many of the issues of building empathy in chamber music teaching. He presented his case quite strongly, that more teachers should start to think about group psychology, collaboration, and inter-personal relations in relation to chamber music practice. Knowledge of these questions is necessary for continued development. Why? Because, in chamber music, as in life, the inability to evaluate a situation without pre-conceived judgments remains the most common cause of conflict.

Perhaps most importantly, Professor Kunca reminded us that although empathy is connected with self-understanding, empathetic feelings must be learned. This learning involves necessarily a deep recognition of one's own self, a capacity to experience the feelings of another, and the ability to communicate these feelings. He suggested three stages of development, using chamber music instruction as the central reference:

1st stage: chamber music for children. Although this is a time to acquire individual skills, it is necessary to train this empathetic sensitivity from the beginning.

2nd stage: chamber music studies in the academy. At this more mature level, emotions should be more connected with actual musical expression.

3rd stage: professional level. Empathy leads to creativity.

The teacher plays an important role in the first 2 stages, but in the third stage, the teacher becomes a partner in the creative group with a clear goal. Throughout, Professor Kunca emphasized the fact that the development of empathetic feelings must be motivated by friendship activity, positive encouragement, non-result based situations.

The keynote speaker for the weekend was Dr Martin Tröndle, a specialist in the interaction between performance, cultural studies, and the music marketplace. As creator of a special music academy for performance studies and music management in Germany, he has been thinking seriously, in both a philosophical and a very practical way, about the relationship between musicians and their audience. His discoveries and experiences are of capital importance for teachers, especially in higher education, and it can be said that the question of empathy is here too found to be at the center of the discourse.

Concerto21, a project of the Alfred Toepfer Foundation F.V.S., is designed to help a small number of Germany's most talented and promising young artists to define their career goals, respond to changing market demands, and deal with the challenge of preserving classical music culture. The point of departure was, of course, the crisis of the diminishing public for classical music and the need to justify continued public spending. The concept of the classical concert is one of the central questions, and Tröndle deals with it in historical terms: when and why did concerts adopt their present format? Was there a time when the concert had a more socially or artistically pertinent form? Examples drawn from the 19th century showed that the concert has undergone many transformations, and that perhaps this could be a key to framing the repertoire in ways that maintain its relevance and appeal.

While the Concerto21 project would deserve an entire article, it is enough in this context to point out how the programme is designed to allow musicians to get past the mental boundaries that limit experimentation and realize both their own potential and establish greater connection with audiences. In the first phases, participants study the history of concerts, the history of the classical music industry, the sociology of audiences, performance studies, scenography/staging, programming, concert curatorship, and the practice of phenomenology of music, that is, how to deliver a discourse that goes beyond the reciting of historical facts.

Participants work with specialists from a broad variety of disciplines developing a marketing concept, thinking about their own artistic development, public relations and media work (writing, bios, color, logos, pictures, websites), image management, EPK (electronic press kit), Facebook, strategic ensemble management, funding, interview training, career planning and concert solicitation. ECMTA members could appreciate the potential for success of this kind of intensive training, since the members of Spark – the Classical Band, alumni of this programme, gave a detailed and impressive presentation of their activities at the ECMTA annual meeting in Rome last spring.

Although this last presentation seemed primarily concerned with career development, marketing, and audience building, it was absolutely clear in relation to the earlier presentations that the development of empathy was central to the success of this approach. Each phase of the Concerto21 programme solicits the participants to reflect on their relation to each other, to their music, and to the context in which this music might evolve. Communication and its tools are indispensable in the fight to preserve a musical heritage, and this necessitates a deeper understanding of who we are and what is the essence of our artistic project. The musician who is simply entirely preoccupied with himself and his own individual

production will be missing opportunities to connect with audiences, and his artistic message risks becoming irrelevant in a world who, tragically, is in ever greater need of his message of empathy and beauty. Should these lessons be integrated into our chamber music pedagogy? The presentations of our colleagues would seem to indicate that not only they should, but they already are.

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Dr Remigijus Vitkauskas, Assistant Professor, *Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences*. For more information and publications: www.vpu.lt

For more information about Dr Martin Tröndle's *Concerto*²¹: <http://toepfer-fvs.de/concerto21.html>

Recent publications include:

Tröndle, Martin (Ed.) (2011): *Das Konzert: Neue Aufführungskonzepte für eine klassische Form*. 2. erw. Aufl., Bielefeld: Transcript.

Tröndle, Martin (2006): *Entscheiden im Kulturbetrieb: Integriertes Kunst- und Kulturmanagement*. Bern: h.e.p.