

Ensembles: An Owner's Manual, by Ross Harbaugh

I'll never forget my first quartet concert. We were all 14 years old playing Beethoven's Opus 18, No. 4, and I thought I had chamber music all figured out. "First you start together, play all the notes on the page, and end together." I was a lot wiser at the closing chord. Great chamber music isn't as easy as it looks. We couldn't even start together. In my college and high school teaching, I'm seeing other 19, 16, 14 year olds making the same unsettling discovery. Once, I asked a high school group what they did during rehearsals when I wasn't there. "We play through it. It's not together. We play through it again. What else can we do?" I hope this "owner's manual" will help answer that question.

So, four sophomores are entering a quartet competition. A college trio is meeting for the first time in a fourteen-week semester. These people have decided to "own an ensemble" for some months or even years. It's very much like buying a major appliance. How do you plug it in? How do you turn it on? I've listed some common problems and complaints in bold type, and listed some trouble-shooting ideas below each issue. Any of these headings could command a whole chapter of a book. I recognize that these may appear to be quick fixes to a great and subtle art. It is simply my wish that this trouble-shooting outline act as departure points for serious students, and get things up and running.

PROBLEM NO. 1: ENTRANCES NOT TOGETHER

1. First ask, "Does everyone know Who will cue the entrance?" Big hint: it isn't always the first violin. Write the name of the "Cue-Leader" or his/her instrument in your part just before the "Cue-Point."
2. Is everyone watching the Cue-Leader during the cue? Memorize your own notes before and after the Cue-Point, and then "eat up the fingers of the Cue-Leader" with your eyes.
3. Breathe together. Try having the Cue-Leader and Cue Reader(s) breathe together during the cue using sharp and gentle sniffs, depending on the tempo and character desired.
4. Every cue must indicate the tempo and mood of the music following the cue. Each member of the ensemble must be able to lead and read cues. A cue is a contract. Follow through with what you have promised.
5. Invite each other to play. Cueing is a non-verbal language. To speak it and understand it requires study and practice.

PROBLEM NO. 2: COMPLEX PASSAGES NOT TOGETHER

1. Are you all in the same tempo? A metronome knows all and tells all in this situation. Try different tempos during rehearsals and "clock" them with a

- metronome. Choose a target tempo and practice it individually at home...with the metronome. This procedure saves hours of rehearsal time.
2. Try everyone singing the passage, instruments down. Singing is a vital part of the interpretive process. In complex passages, singing removes instrumental problems and allows everyone to concentrate on the pure ensemble problem. Just sing rhythms. Don't worry about pitches unless you're working out the phrasing of a line.
 3. Play passages hitting only the beginning of notes without sustaining any pitches. This pointalistic approach clarifies composite rhythms and instrumental parings in complex passages.
 4. Reduce the tempo of the passage by percentages, ie. "Let's try this passage at 75% of concert tempo." This procedure is useful with or without a metronome.
 5. Use dramatic singing using the "ands" of beats. "One and, Two and, Three and, Four and. Bring out only the strong or weak beats on which your part changes rhythmically or melodically. It's often quite illuminating how many important changes occur on the "ands."

PROBLEM NO 3: OUT OF TUNE

1. Are all the instruments tuned to the same 'A?' It's a good idea to check tuning often during rehearsal. Choose one person to take an "A: from a tuning fork, iPhone tuner, Dr. Beat, or piano, and then give it to everyone else. Tune one at a time. In the Bergonzi Quartet, the cellist gives out the "A." My strings tend not to slip, and we've found that the higher strings have an easier time tuning to the lowest. Viola and cello should match C-strings as part of this tuning process.
2. Understand your instrument's role in a chord. For example, are you the root, third, fifth, or octave? Score-study is helpful in this process of self-discovery.
3. If a chord is out of tune, begin work by making the 4ths, 5ths, octaves and unisons ringingly in tune. Set these perfect intervals first without 3rds and 7ths. When you add 3rds and 7ths, make sure the 3rds and 7ths in a major chord are not too high. Make sure the 3rd in a minor chord is not too low. What sounds low or high when playing by yourself may bring the problem chord into perfect focus. Let your ears decide, not a system.
4. The Bergonzi String Quartet uses "Expressive" intonation in unison passages and unaccompanied cadenzas. We use "Just" intonation (tempered, chordal intonation) in almost all other situations. Intonation is a complex issue and will be addressed in another article.
5. When tuning a passage, play in a predetermined tempo, no matter how slow. If one chord is giving trouble in a passage, play up to that point in tempo and hold that chord. Try not to "squidge" the chord into focus after hitting it. Hold it, analyze it, then adjust it one person at a time. This method clarifies which note needs adjusting. Keep this process as objective as possible. Don't blame. Simply adjust.

PROBLEM NO. 4: GROUP SOUNDS WIMPY

1. Check for appropriate bow placement (contact point), direction, and distribution for each dynamic. Ensemble-playing requires the same kind of focused instrumental playing that one uses in the best solo playing.
2. Try arm weight, released hands and fingers, trunk rotation, foot with floor connection, “carving into the bridge,” flatter hair, “low and slow” bow connection for bigger sound production.
3. Try fast bow speed for singing “pp.” Try intense “ff” vibrato with “pp” bow connection for a breathy, highly emotional sound. A mysterious or “white” pianissimo with no vibrato still requires free bow speed to carry in a hall. Low strings on the cello may require slower bow speed, closer to the bridge in “p” to match the violins.
4. Everyone in the ensemble should study and perform concertos, sonatas, and other solo repertoire to be the best and most complete instrumentalists possible. This kind of solo thinking will give each player the technical command and flexibility to tackle chamber music.
5. Play to the back of the hall. Project the music as an actor projects his/her character in a play.

PROBLEM NO. 5: EVERYONE TOO LOUD ALL THE TIME

1. Does everyone know which voice is most important in a given passage? Study the score, and decide on a “Voice Hierarchy.” Pianists face this problem all the time, voicing chords and passages so that the important lines are clearly heard. Don’t fall into the trap of thinking the first violin is always the most important voice.
2. Less important voices can use a “transparent ff” (less bow weight, more bow speed) and “look ff” as they play. Don’t play blindly “all out” when you see “ff” in your part. This marking is not a “license to kill.”
3. Try delaying crescendos, and exaggerating diminuendos.
4. Listen to all the parts of the ensemble while playing your own. One of the greatest challenges of chamber music is to not only know your own part, and play it perfectly, but know all the parts and hear them as you fit into the whole. This kind of listening automatically helps the balance.
5. Great chamber music performance is like great stage acting. The audience needs to hear the words and the cast needs to clarify the script through enunciation and body language. If you make the other members of the ensemble look good, you look good.

PROBLEM NO. 7: OUT OF IDEAS

1. Study the score, and try to get into the mind of the composer. Read his/her biography, the composer’s Groves article or Wikipedia entry, or a collection

- of his/her letters. Understand the historical context of the music you are interpreting.
2. Suspect staccato dots and other articulations are not original. Try to get the autograph edition or the most original unedited parts and scores to work from.
 3. Have someone from the group walk out into your rehearsal room or auditorium to listen to the rest of the group play a passage. This is as close as you can get to “hearing yourself live.” And though not perfect, will help the group gain perspective on itself.
 4. Make recordings of run-throughs. Set aside time for non-stop private performances in your rehearsal room, and record them. Budget time to listen to the recording together and analyze them for intonation and ensemble. However, remember that “Do-it-yourself” recordings tend to be inaccurate for determining balance.
 5. Play for as many different people as possible.

PROBLEM NO 7: NOT GETTING ALONG

1. Be on time to rehearsals. Nothing raises the temperature of a rehearsal quicker than someone showing up late.
2. When a suggestion is made, always play it first before discussing or arguing about it. Keep working on it until the person who made the suggestion is satisfied, and can say “yes. That’s the way I imagined it.” Then discuss it, and accept or discard it. Everyone’s ideas are valid. Each member should feel free to delve.
3. Encourage and respect each other’s ideas and feelings. Hurt feelings, lack of respect, suspicion, and pent-up-anger are the carcinogens of ensembles.
4. Avoid sarcasm or accusatory statements such as “you always” and “you never.” This stuff doesn’t work well in human relationships, and it certainly will end in disaster in a chamber ensemble.
5. Keep a sense of humor and have fun.