WHY I PLAY CHAMBER MUSIC

19 string players talk about their passion for playing in small ensembles

By Greg Cahill & Heather K. Scott

Over the years

Strings magazine has interviewed thousands of chamber players. Oftentimes, our editors and contributors have dug into the technical minutiae: What led you to record Shostakovich? Which edition do you generally use for Mozart? Why did you choose that fingering? Did those metronome markings help or hinder?

But this time, Strings posed one simple question: Why do you play chamber music? The only direction: be spontaneous in your response.

Indeed, the replies are as varied as the music itself, as exhilarating as the interpretations of these great works, as personal as the intimate experience of putting bow to string with one, two, three, or more fellow musicians.
Whether I am playing Beethoven Sonatas with my friend, pianist Christopher O’Riley, or Schubert’s Cello Quintet, premiering an Elliott Carter sextet, or a new song cycle by Jake Heggie or Luna Pearl Woolf, I am enter ing a privileged world. It is a world that transcends the limitations of language, a world that moves beyond three dimensions or time as we know it. Without having to leave our orbit, chamber music opens our imaginations and hearts. There is a magical connection that happens between individual players in dialogue, finding a path to the composer’s conception, and ultimately bringing that to life for themselves and for anyone eavesdropping. One loses track of time rehearsing the nuances of balance, role, ensemble, rhetoric, affect, sculpting sound to blend or penetrate.

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—Matt Haimovitz

Some of my earliest memories are of my father, Eddie Jacobsen, a violinist in the Metropolitan Opera, coming home from some four- to five-hour opera and, along with friends and colleagues, proceeding to play chamber music throughout the night. I think there was some sense that what he did at the Met, (as incredible of a job that it was, and full of the richness of operatic rep and operatic backstage stories) was his job, but what he did with friends in our living room was for themselves. I grew up seeing music (and particularly chamber music) as a social, joyous occasion in which the goal was not perfection, but spontaneous communication through mutual exploration of the rich chamber music literature.

Fast-forward a number of years, and my brother Eric and I were continuing the tradition: we loved bringing friends together in discovery of music and each other, in our living room, outside of the pressures of school, teachers, and competition that characterize the conservatory experience for many. We’ve been lucky enough that most of our musical lives since that time have been engaged in the intimacy and immediacy that chamber music provides. Whether it’s Brooklyn Rider, our quartet, the Silk Road Ensemble—a chamber music ensemble that is made up of instruments and traditions from around the world—or the Knights, the chamber orchestra we started, we are looking to keep those communication lines open, so that hopefully magical things can happen in the moment onstage. Because getting back to that place of relaxed spontaneity after digging into a piece with the kaleidoscope of views represented in any group is difficult, and one that requires faith in the process, but one that is worth engaging in fully, with all the viva, diplomacy, and courage, at one’s disposal; ears and heart open, bow on string ready to go.

Chamber music allows a depth and variety of experience that includes the one-night stand and the long-term relationship in which you can get to an incredible place of unity where you feel like you are not drawing your bow across the string, but your colleague is, and your sounds are enmeshed in the space between the group and the notes.

Chamber music is in my blood. Growing up in New York City I had the opportunity to hear many of the great string quartets of the '50s, '60s, and '70s: the Budapest, Guarneri, Cleveland, Amadeus quartets, and such other
Chamber music is the most rarefied, sophisticated, and intimate literature in the repertoire. It draws the listener into a world that is sublime and intricate, and expresses the whole range of human emotions. It is a delicate, but intense, world in miniature.

PAUL KATZ, cello;
member Cleveland Quartet (1969–95),
chamber-music coach New England Conservatory of Music

You know the old joke, "A string quartet is a four-way marriage with all of the bad stuff and none of the good stuff!" Funny—but not true! There is the exhilaration of inspired teamwork, creative give-and-take, the satisfaction of deep study, and the fulfillment of performance. And no other genre has such an immense and profound repertoire. My life has been enriched beyond measure by more than 3,000 concerts (imagine the hours of rehearsal), and as teacher and mentor of hundreds of young people possessed by the same love and passion that has driven me.

In 1962, 13-year-old violist Pinchas Zukerman was brought to New York from Israel by Isaac Stern. Stern asked lucky me to put together a quartet. "Pinchas needs chamber music. No other form of music-making teaches listening at such a high level of awareness," said Stern. "This is the most important training we can give him." Yes, chamber music is an essential part of every musician's education—how to listen, lead, follow, and play, both as a soloist and to enhance another's primary line, integrate yourself as part of the whole through your own personal voice, and make music collaboratively with interpersonal chemistry. The rehearsal is an interactive, creative process that, for me, has been even more rewarding than concerts. Chamber musicians are people who like people. There is satisfaction in taking another's idea, playing it with conviction, and making it your own. In chamber music, we are part of something larger than ourselves, and yet allowed, required, to contribute our own imagination, individuality and artistry.

Yes, there is the "bad stuff" of the joke, but managing it in a chamber group develops values and skills that translate into real life, that one can use in relationships, in a business meeting, that go far beyond the purely musical experience. There is true fulfillment in compromise, cooperation, supporting and bringing out the best in your partner. A string quartet working well is a microcosm of an ideal functioning society, a role model for the world—members of Congress should play string quartets!

CHARLTON LEE, viola,
Del Sol Quartet

Chamber music is an idealistic microcosm of global relations, with different artists coming together to create something greater than the sum of the parts. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't, but when all members are clicking, magic can happen. In the case of the Del Sol Quartet, we strive to bring the voices of living artists to our audiences. All music was new music at some point and we are making sure that future generations will have a chance of experiencing the Beethovens and Bachs of today through our performances and recordings. Since we often work directly with composers as well as many other collaborators, from musicians of various disciplines to visual artists and...