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8 Chamber music

Overview

- Amateur chamber music is a satisfying activity for participants — a good thing.
- Amateur chamber music can be promoted by awareness, valuing, understanding, endorsement and action, at both individual and group levels.¹

I play the clarinet. I learned classical style and that’s what I usually play. When people think of classical music, they usually think of orchestras. There are also concert bands, in which clarinet sections are the equivalent of violin sections in orchestras. And there’s another type of music — chamber music.

Chamber music involves a small group of classical musicians playing together. When I play a duet with flute, that’s chamber music. When I play in a woodwind quintet — flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon and French horn — that’s chamber music. So is a string quartet or a trio for piano, flute and cello. There are some larger combinations, up to 10 or 12 instruments. Larger than that and the group might be called a chamber orchestra.

The term chamber music comes from the history of these small ensembles playing in chambers, otherwise called rooms.

¹ I thank Susan Butler, Lyn Carson, Peter Nickolas and Daniel Nimetz for valuable feedback on drafts of this chapter.

Today, the term applies to music played by any small classical ensemble, even when performed in a large hall.

From the point of view of most participants and audiences, chamber music is a good thing. I'm going to focus on amateur music, because professional music raises various complications including money, careers and competition for prestige. It's easier to argue that amateur chamber music is a good thing: people do it because they want to, usually with no audience. They get together with each other to play music because they enjoy it.

My focus is on chamber music because that's what I know most about. The same sorts of comments could be made about other sorts of amateur music — jazz, rock, folk and much else — and about other forms of amateur activity, such as drama.

Playing at home and beyond

My parents met each other in the orchestra at Purdue University in 1941. They each played flute. They kept playing flute for over 65 years thereafter. Dad played in some orchestras and bands, but the mainstay of their playing was chamber music.

Dad's idea was to have a woodwind quintet in the family. He would play the flute part and my mother the oboe part (on flute). I was started on clarinet and my brother on horn. But my sister was too small to play bassoon, so the plan came unstuck. But the plan was not all that important. The main thing was playing chamber music. Dad played flute and clarinet duets with me. When I was good enough, I joined my parents to play trios, or quartets with my brother on horn.

For a quintet or larger, we needed to invite others. I remember visiting bassoonists and horn players. My aunt played piano and my uncle played bassoon, but they lived on the other side of the country, so there were only very occasional get-togethers. Few families have enough players to play lots of chamber music,

so playing with others — strangers, at least initially — is part of the tradition.

Playing chamber music is much more satisfying when the music is challenging but not impossibly difficult for the players. That means you need to be good enough to play the music but not so good that it's boring. To have a satisfying session, you need to find a group of players of about the same standard. That's not always easy.

To arrange chamber groups, it helps to know other musicians in the locality and find ones who are compatible, in playing ability, punctuality and personality. Developing networks of players can be quite an art. Decades ago, to assist the process, several players started the Amateur Chamber Music Players (ACMP). It grew, filling a need, and now goes by the name ACMP—The Chamber Music Network, because too many people confuse amateur — being unpaid — with amateurish.

The ACMP's base is in the US but there are members all around the world. The core of the ACMP is a list of musicians. Anyone who wants to can have their name listed in this directory. Each musician has their name and contact details listed, plus their instruments and a rating of playing ability. This is a self-rating based on questions such as the amount of time spent practising per week and whether you've played certain pieces. Strong experienced players are rated A and those less advanced are rated D. The ratings are important because a group of As can play difficult pieces but Ds would be wise to try easier ones.

If you're travelling to Peru or Romania, you can look up the ACMP directory and contact someone who looks like a reasonable prospect, set up a playing session and have some fun playing music and meeting new people. The ACMP newsletter is filled with stories about musical adventures while travelling.

In my own region, there is a separate organisation called the Amateur Chamber Music Society (ACMS). Originally designed for players in New South Wales, most of whom live in Sydney, it now lists individuals from across the country. ACMS is a model for how to organise chamber music.

Like the ACMP, the ACMS produces a directory of all members with names, addresses, phone numbers, email addresses, instruments and self-ratings. Members are welcome to contact others to arrange to play with each other. In addition, the ACMS organises several “playing days” during the year. Members sign up for a playing day and the organisers arrange individuals to play in groups, matched as well as possible for ability and aiming to fit everybody into a group for each of the sessions, typically 90 minutes long. String players might be grouped into quartets but if there is a surplus of cellists, for example, some of them could be grouped into cello duets. Wind players might be grouped with each other or in combinations with strings. Pianists can be grouped with either strings or winds or both. The complexities increase when someone has to cancel out at the last minute, requiring rearrangements of the groupings.

The highlight of the year for the ACMS is a music camp lasting three days, held in Wollongong. In recent years, more than 100 players have attended. The two morning sessions, 90 minutes each, are pre-arranged by the organisers. The two afternoon sessions are “self-arranged”: participants can arrange groups in advance or do it on the spot using sheets of paper on the wall in the main room — or they can skip a session and go to the beach.

Each year the music camp is slightly modified based on feedback from the year before. The starting times change a bit or the barbecue menu is modified. However, the core of the camp

remains the same: amateur musicians play chamber music with each other, doing something they enjoy with others.

Amateur chamber music is, most of the time, a good thing. Participants enjoy it. It’s not easy: playing a musical instrument requires practice, indeed years of practice to become reasonably good, plus ongoing playing to maintain one’s skills. This is part of the attraction: playing music together is an accomplishment, all the more satisfying through the collective effort required. It is easy to put on a CD with professionals performing pieces flawlessly; that can be enjoyable, to be sure. Making the effort to play the same works yourself, however inadequately compared to professionals, can provide a different sort of satisfaction, sometimes much deeper.

A good session requires everyone to concentrate to play at their best. If the music sounds decent, that’s nice too! However, perfection is seldom the goal. Many players would rather tackle a challenging piece, perhaps going through it slowly and with mistakes, than a really easy one. Playing music can be a way of entering the experience called flow, in which focused effort using well developed skills absorbs one’s capacities so that time passes pleasantly; consciousness of self may melt away.

Orchestra politics

How is chamber music different from playing in an orchestra or concert band? The most obvious difference is that orchestras and bands have dozens of players, sometimes more than a hundred, whereas chamber groups typically have two to six players, occasionally up to a dozen or so. Orchestras and bands, along with size, usually have a different sort of interpersonal politics. There are status hierarchies in orchestras: playing in the firsts (the violinists playing the first violin part) is more sought after than playing in the seconds; being on a higher desk (the front of

the section) usually signals more status; being the concertmaster — the leader of the violins and of the orchestra — is the pinnacle among the players. The decision about who gets to play the first, second, third and fourth horn parts can be contentious.

For some instrumentalists, even getting into an orchestra is a challenge. There are often many more capable flautists than there are parts in an orchestra, so being chosen is a matter of competition. In a professional orchestra, the competition is about careers and can be fierce, sometimes ruthless. In amateur orchestras, the stakes seem smaller but the competition can be just as fierce, because opportunities to play, especially to play a good part, may be limited. A good player — or someone who thinks they are good — wants to play in a good orchestra.

Amateur orchestras sometimes have auditions, but often players obtain their positions through appointment by the conductor or orchestral manager. This means it can be more a matter of who you know than how well you can play. Some orchestras are models of harmony, musically and personally, but many are riven by petty rivalries and jealousies.

Then there is the conductor, a person with considerable power to shape the choice of programmes, the selection of players and the conduct of rehearsals. A good conductor can inspire musicians; a poor one might waste time, choose inappropriate music or even humiliate players.

A few orchestras operate as participatory democracies, making collective decisions and sorting out problems in a sensitive way. Many, though, are patronage systems, with the conductor and other key figures handing out favours. Few players are willing to voice their true feelings for fear of losing their opportunities.

Chamber groups, in contrast, are far more likely to run things themselves. In a woodwind quintet, for example, every

player has a separate part, so no player is formally superior to another. Composers of chamber music most commonly assume the players have roughly equal proficiency.

There's a partial exception in some groups. For example, in a string quartet there are two violins, one viola and one cello. The first violin part is usually more challenging and likely to carry the melody and thus for most players is more desirable, leading to occasional competitive tensions among violinists. Sometimes these can be resolved by the two violinists switching back and forth between parts or by the group finding someone who is happy with the second violin part. There's no such resolution in most orchestras if more than one violinist wants to be the concertmaster: changing orchestras is not that easy and having different players as concertmasters for different pieces is seldom the done thing.

Chamber groups have frictions and other problems, to be sure — just like any group of people trying to accomplish things together. All I'm suggesting is that the problems are likely to be less acute when the groups are small (making them easier to form and reform) and the players are amateurs (so careers are not at stake).

I once met a professional cellist from Germany. He said he enjoyed playing with amateurs because, even though they seldom could play as well as professionals, they wanted to play. He mimed professional string players who took a few strokes of the bow and then looked at their watches, waiting for the rehearsal to be over. Amateurs are more likely to want to keep playing after the scheduled time. (It's only fair to note that some professionals are keen to play even in their leisure time.)

Promoting chamber music

Let me now turn to the five methods for promoting good things outlined in chapter 1 — the same methods relevant for a variety of good things, such as happiness and health — and see how they apply to amateur chamber music. I will start with methods at the individual level.

Awareness Amateur musicians are certainly aware of chamber music. They have to take some initiative to be involved.

Valuing Adult amateur musicians believe chamber music is a good thing. If they don't, they can easily stop playing and drop out of engagements. On the other hand, children who are learning instruments often do so only because their parents insist. Some of them don't like it and do little practice. Music teachers are frustrated by these reluctant learners.

Understanding Amateur musicians know why they value chamber music: they enjoy the music, have the satisfaction of engaging in a challenging activity, and usually like being with other musicians.

Endorsement This is the weakest element. Amateur music-makers seldom receive a ringing endorsement from wider society. Some professional musicians ignore amateurs or even denigrate them. Endorsement mainly comes from other amateur musicians. Within the scene, reinforcement is powerful, but outside classical music circles the very existence of amateur chamber music is little known.

Action The most powerful promoter of amateur chamber music is actually playing. It provides both the incentive and the practice necessary to maintain one's skills.

Overall, a person voluntarily engaging in chamber music is likely to be reinforced in the behaviour. The biggest obstacle is at the action level. *If* you are regularly practising and playing, it's easy to keep going. But chamber music requires more than one person, and this is where problems can arise. What if there's no one around who plays a suitable instrument at a similar standard and who also wants to play with you? It then becomes very easy to stop practising — what's the use if you never get to play? — and, after a while, you become less proficient and hence less attractive as a playing partner. Getting out of practice is a big hazard; it is both the cause and consequence of not playing regularly.

To address the action level more completely, we need to look at the wider picture. If there is a supportive culture of chamber music, it's far easier to keep practising and playing. This can occur within a family, as I experienced myself, or in a school or local community. Organisations such as the ACMP and ACMS institutionalise the support. Consider how the ACMS promotes chamber music.

Awareness The ACMS puts out newsletters and sends emails about playing days and other events. By encouraging musicians to make music, it serves as a node for fostering individual awareness of chamber music.

Valuing The existence of the ACMS is testimony to the value of chamber music. Those who join already value it; by being in touch with others, this is reinforced.

Understanding For the most part, members of the ACMS already understand what chamber music is all about. The main role of the organisation is enabling members to be in touch with each other; when they are together, members share stories and experiences and thus gain a greater understanding of the role of chamber music in people's lives.

Endorsement The very existence of the ACMS serves as an endorsement of chamber music, demonstrating that others care enough about it to put energy into establishing and maintaining the organisation and its activities. Some generous professional musicians serve as tutors at playing days and the Wollongong music camp, providing validation for amateur efforts through their encouragement and enthusiasm. The ACMS organises a monthly public performance by its members, attended by families and friends of the performers, plus a few members of the public. Despite its limited profile, these concerts provide a degree of wider endorsement to amateur players.

Action The ACMS, by organising playing days and the music camp, fosters the playing of chamber music. Those who perform at one of the monthly concerts have a great incentive to rehearse. That's certainly my experience: there's nothing like an upcoming performance to motivate personal practice and rehearsals.

I've talked about the ACMS, as an organisation, as if it operates with some sort of collective agency. In reality, relatively few members take active roles in the support functions such as preparing the newsletter, organising the playing days and music camp, arranging playing groups for these events, maintaining the website, handling the finances and much else. So what helps

these key ACMS members maintain their commitment and thus enable many others to benefit?

At an individual level, key ACMS workers obtain satisfaction from their unpaid efforts: they see what a good time others are having and feel good they are able to contribute. Furthermore, these ACMS individuals work as a team, towards a collective goal, and there is satisfaction in working with others. Because there is no boss at the top to lord over others, some of the negatives of many conventional workplaces are avoided. No one is required to do the ACMS work; some individuals help for a year or two and then pass the baton to others.

To go a bit deeper into the success of the ACMS, we need to look at what enables the key workers to continue their efforts and seek continual improvement. One factor is awareness of what works well. Every year at the annual music camp, participants are encouraged to fill out a questionnaire about different facets of the camp: the pre-arranged sessions, the self-arranged sessions, the library, the concerts, food, accommodation and so forth. Results are tallied and sent to all members and used to help plan the next year's event. Informal feedback from members supplements the questionnaires. This learning process has become institutionalised — it is a tradition.

Another factor is the high professional skill level of many amateur musicians. A surprising proportion are doctors, scientists, engineers or teachers, while a good number are musicians by trade, especially music teachers. The median age of participants is definitely over 50 — some keep playing into their 80s and 90s — so these are people with a lot of experience of life and working relationships. They take pride in applying their skills and experience to organising chamber music.

In summary, the ACMS is an example of how to promote a good thing — amateur chamber music — at the collective level.

The Wollongong music camp has become so successful that it attracts players from other parts of Australia, some of which do not have a local organisation to organise events. When there is no supporting organisation, then much more depends on individual initiative — and that usually means there's not as much chamber music.

Conclusion

To promote amateur chamber music, it's worth addressing both individual and collective levels. For individuals, the five methods of awareness, valuing, understanding, endorsement and action are important. Action is the key: musicians need to keep playing, otherwise they soon get out of practice.

The habit of practising is much easier to maintain if there is a supportive environment. If others want to play music with you and expect you to play at a suitable standard, it is a powerful incentive to maintain personal playing habits. But it's not always easy to find the right sort of people to play with, at a similar standard. Organisations like the ACMS facilitate the process.

The ACMS operates at the collective level. Again, action is the key. Regular events — playing days, concerts and the annual music camps — structure the organisation's efforts. The ACMS, as a voluntary organisation, relies on a fairly small number of individuals to keep things going. The example of the ACMS illustrates how efforts at the individual and collective levels reinforce each other.