

Basic strategies for teaching Chamber Music to String Quartets: Training Young Musicians

Estrategias básicas para la enseñanza de la música de cámara para cuartetos de cuerdas: el entrenamiento de músicos jóvenes

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Abstract

String quartets at the undergraduate level are not very developed musically or technically. Moreover, string players at this stage have not reached the individual technical maturity that they usually have at the graduate level. As the director of the only string quartet in residence at Texas A&M University, Corpus Christi, I have been teaching this kind of students. I have struggled, trying to find literature on the subject of teaching chamber music at a basic level. To date, I have not yet found an outline similar to the one presented here. Concepts such as group tuning, usage of Tartini Tones, sound blend, group pulse and concert preparation are explored and discussed. Other topics include choosing the right repertoire for a young string quartet, recommendations to improve sight-reading and a discussion on how to perform with little preparation. Finally, I present a brief comment on how to guide students to become successful free lancers as chamber musicians. The theoretical framework for this article is based on the book *Strategies for Teaching Strings* by Hamann and Gilliespie (2009).

Key words:

Teaching, chamber music, String quartets.

Resumen

Los cuartetos de cuerda a nivel de licenciatura no están muy desarrollados técnicamente ni musicalmente debido a que individualmente, los instrumentistas no han alcanzado la madurez musical ni técnica de un estudiante de post grado. Como director del único cuarteto de cuerdas de estudiantes becado en Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, este es el tipo de estudiantes que he estado enseñando. Es difícil conseguir literatura que explique cómo enseñar música de cámara a un nivel básico. Los conceptos estudiados son: afinación en grupo, el uso del *tercer sonido* (Tartini Tones), amalgamamiento del sonido en el cuarteto de cuerdas, pulso del grupo y preparación antes de los conciertos. Otros tópicos incluyen la selección del repertorio para cuartetos de este nivel, así como también recomendaciones para mejorar la lectura a primera vista y para tocar en público con poca preparación. Al final se hace un corto comentario de cómo los estudiantes pueden aprender a ganarse la vida trabajando a destajo bajo esta modalidad de música de cámara. La sustentación teórica de este artículo se basa en el libro *Strategies for Teaching Strings* de Hamann y Gillespie (2009).

Palabras clave:

Enseñanza, música de cámara, cuartetos de cuerdas.

I. Introduction

Students of string Music Education at the undergraduate level in the United States are not very developed musically or technically in chamber music or otherwise if compared to music students pursuing degrees in Performance. The music program at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi and similar universities focused on students enrolled in Music Education. These kinds of students are the ones I have been teaching for the last four years at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi and the main subject of this article.

Concepts like sound blend and group intonation could be foreign for undergraduate students in the university setting that I have been teaching. In most public schools in the United States of America (middle school, and high school), chamber music experience is limited to a one time participation at a regional or solo and ensemble contest. Most of the time students attend these contests without getting proper guidance from an experienced chamber music player.

As the director of the only undergraduate string quartet in residence at this University, I have been presented with the challenge of teaching chamber music to a student group that changes members quite often. In the last three years, the quartet has used six different violinists, two violists, and two cellists. The change in personnel and the limitations presented above, forced me to develop an empirical method to teach the most important aspects of quartet playing. The purpose of this paper is to share these experiences hoping that these ideas will benefit college professors, school music directors, or anybody with the responsibility of mentoring young chamber music players. This is my own creative way of teaching chamber music at this level. It is the result of close interaction between my students and me during the past three years (2006-2009). The points expressed here are very basic and can serve as a starting point. I am including technical, musical, and artistic aspects, as well as some logistical ones that I believe are most relevant for training a young string quartet.

II. Group Tuning and Group Intonation

A) Introducing the Concept

Group tuning is a new concept for many young musicians. Most string players do not understand that a small group such as a string quartet they have to find a way to be in tune with each other, even if this means being melodically out of tune. The process is similar as tuning double-stops. A quartet is a living organism that is in constant change. If the members of the ensemble do not have this kind of awareness at all times, they will not be able to achieve proficiency in group intonation. Willingness to adjust the pitch depending on the moment in the music, is vital to achieve this objective. Mr. Dalley from the Guarmeri String Quartet says: "intonation is something infinitely flexible and not a fixed entity" (Blum, 1986, p. 34). Awareness at all times will be the only way to achieve a good group intonation. I like to introduce the concept that intonation is a movable target by using exercises and examples that I will explain bellow.

B) Creating Awareness

I introduce the concept of group intonation by using very easy tonal music. Gig¹ music is very useful because it substitutes the common practice of using chorales while at the same time getting the group ready for more practical situations such as university functions or, weddings and private parties.

Wedding albums are good for this purpose. Most of them have good voice leading and the chords are simple. This allows students to start working on tuning as a group. Different tuning problems will come across the quartet in different instances and different pieces. The instructor should address these problems while playing through a tonal, easy piece of music at a very slow speed. In this way and with consistent teaching, the members of the ensemble will start developing awareness of group intonation. Eventually they will do it automatically in the same way a trained string player tunes double-stops. I will now present some easy ways to show students how variable and adjustable group intonation can be. The examples bellow will serve to explain the principles of group in-

1 The term "gig" is used here to describe any performance in which the quartet plays for a private party of any kind. It excludes formal concerts and includes any other informal performance.

tonation and, in some cases, introduce or reinforce double-stop studies. I believe that the study of double-stops and group intonation are intrinsically connected.

Thirds, Sixths, and Open Strings

Most double-stop books for beginners teach simple things such as placement of the first finger when tuning it to the upper string or the lower string.² The two intervals produced by this action are fourths and sixths. I illustrate this by making the students compare an E in first position on the D string to the A string (this is a perfect 4th). This E will be higher if tuned to that A than if tuned to the G string (major 6th) (Fig. 1). This example is ideal because violists and cellists can do the same exercise using the same notes.

Once this concept has been presented, the instructor can move on to other basic tuning problems. I like to introduce the minor third at this point. Minor thirds, when tuned harmonically, are more spaced (wider) than when tuned melodically. To demonstrate this, make the students play their F#s with their A strings. After that, make them listen to how far the F# is from G when played melodically (Fig. 2).

Major thirds on the other hand, should be tuned a little closer when played harmonically. For instance F tuned to the A string. This F will have to be tuned a little higher than an F played melodically in a C major scale. Another proof of this is the old custom of tuning the C string on the viola and cello to the E string of the violins. Although the interval is greater than a major third because of the separation of register, this is still considered a major third for tuning purposes. Some professional cellists and violists tune the C string a bit higher than usual to achieve a better intonation in the ensemble. David Soyler from the Guarneri String Quartet recommends this kind of tuning. He points out in *The Art of Quartet Playing* that the viola and the cello should have their fifths closer together (Blum, 1984, p. 27). An article in the *Strad Magazine* written by Simon Fischer in 1995 could support this point. Fischer writes: "B flat as the third of G minor is lower than B flat as the tonic of B flat major" (Fischer, 1995, p. 881). For the most part Simon Fischer is presenting a case in melodic intonation. I still think his concept is valid in harmonic tuning because B flat, as the root of a Bb major chord, has to be tuned to a D, which is an open string in the violin, viola, and cello. This is similar to the F being tuned to an A in the situation I presented above.



Figure 1

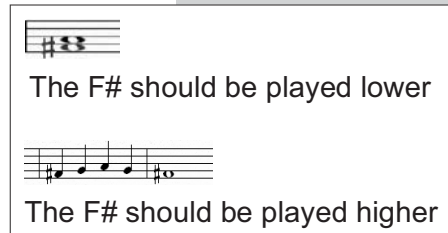


Figure 2

Tuning Unisons and Octaves

When tuning unisons and octaves the approach is different than for other intervals and this is why I considered it as a special item. When tuning an octave/unison everybody should be melodically in tune to begin with. It is wise to hear each player separately to check the accuracy of his/her tuning. The other aspect that we should consider is the careful use of vibrato. Particularly in octaves and unisons, the excessive use of vibrato deteriorates the quality of the intonation of the group. I personally teach my students to stay away from the vibrato as much as possible when tuning octaves or unisons. Finally, I recommend that the lower instruments play a little louder than the higher ones. This by itself improves the quality of the intonation when playing unisons in a quartet (Blum, 1986, p. 35). The sound blends better this way and the higher-pitch instruments find it easier to play in tune with everybody else.

Explaining all of this to a young quartet will help them have a good frame work on how to start listening to group intonation. It will make them realize how flexible and how aware they have to be at all times. The first few pages of chapter 2 in the book *The Art of Quartet Playing* illustrate how important it is to be aware of the phenomena of group intonation (Blum, 1986, p. 26). I highly recommend students read it so that they start to understand the importance of this kind of work. It is likely they will feel overwhelm with such new and complicated concept.

2 See Josephine Trott, *Melodious Double Stops*. Book 1.

Nevertheless, the instructor has to present young quartets with these challenges at an early stage.

C) The Tartini Tones: Improving Intonation

It is beneficial to talk about Tartini Tones to students in a string quartet. The Tartini Tones (terzo suono) is something that is intrinsically connected to string playing. It was introduced or discovered by Giuseppe Tartini (1692-1770) during the baroque period (Gearhart, 2007, p. 32). It is a concept that has not lost validity in modern era. It is a wonderful teaching tool for intonation, and sound production, among other things.

The Tartini Tones are produced in a string instrument when a double-stop is very in tune and the contact point is in a place in which the instrument finds the core of the sound. At this point a third sound is heard. Practically speaking this is what Tartini Tones are, a third sound that emerges from a double-stop.³ A controversial remark by Carl Flesch in his book *The Art of the Violin*, questions the validity of Tartini Tones as a teaching tool. He writes: “[The Tartini Tones] do not constitute a direct but rather only an indirect means for achieving pure intervals” (Flesch, 2000, p. 9). But others, like Fritz Gearhart, think differently. I support Fritz Gearhart who believes it is a wonderful teaching tool. Gearhart writes: “(...) for those of you already familiar with [Tartini Tones], you might not realize the exciting teaching tool you have in your grasp and how it can inspire a deeper understanding of intonation, tone color, and bow control” (Gearhart, 2007, p. 32). Gearhart elaborates on the benefits of the study of TTs.

Pointing out these TTs only increases the student’s perception of sound, leading to greater ear-training skills. On a single pitch, students will find easier to hear, for example, the ring of the open string, or the subtle changes in tone color as they move the finger sharp or flat.

In addition, awareness of TTs promotes excellent bow control. In this aspect they are self-correcting. In order to hear TTs at all, you must play with specific bow weight, speed, and placement combination, maintain that “recipe” throughout the bow stroke (Gearhart, 2007, p. 33).

I believe that Tartini Tones are a good way to present harmonic listening to young musicians. Especially those who have done no group-intonation work, or have not a mature double-stop technique.

Although it is hard to find the Tartini Tones between two or more different instrument as would be the case in a string quartet, the Tartini-Tone concept will develop a tuning awareness and sensitivity that will be useful when tuning as a group. Most people are not aware of the third pitch that is originated from the other two pitches in a Tartini-Tone situation. They usually hear a richness of character in the sound (Gearhart, 2007, p. 32). In a quartet one should concentrate in this feeling of richness in the sound that will ultimately improve bow control, tone color sensitivity and the overall sound quality of the string quartet.

III. Blending the Sound

Blending the sound in a string quartet involves articulation, contact point, bow speed, intonation, and dynamics, to name a few. Other aspects could be the quality of the instrument being used, the player’s personal sound (personal way of using vibrato and bow weight, etc.), and the musician’s intuition to use all of the aspects mentioned above to participate in a good blended sound.

The best way to start working on blend is to get everybody to have a good core sound. After that is achieved, the instructor can work further on the sound blend by improving other aspects such as amount and vibrato speed, bow speed, etc.

Explain to the students that a good blended sound has a good centered tone. I usually illustrate this with my own instrument by showing them what a centered sound is. This can be reinforced by presenting the concept of the Tartini Tones as explained previously. My idea of a centered sound is the kind that has resonance, uses good hair contact and is usually produced near the bridge resulting in a straight forward tone. Even on soft passages with long notes or long slurs, the sound should have a good centered tone. The core of the sound should always be there. As an exercise I make each individual produce a well centered tone in forte dynamic and in piano. In piano (or soft) I insist that very little or no rosin

3 For an expanded definition of the Tartini-Tones see the article: Gearhart, Fritz. (2007, August). The use of “Tartini Tones.” *American String Teacher*, vol. 57, no. 3, pp. 32-34.

noise be heard. In forte, the sound should not be forced beyond the capabilities of the equipment (instrument). The sound should be resonant and clear at all times. The rosin noise is proof of poor hair contact or excessive pressure. As a result the over all blend of the quartet sound will suffer. After I am satisfied with the individual results in tone production, the group proceeds to play a simple scale in unison or in thirds and apply the new knowledge. At this point the sound blend should be satisfactory and the instructor is in the position to reinforce the production of this kind of sound throughout lessons and concert preparation.

IV. How to Create a Group Pulse

The most basic and old fashion way to work on group pulse is to use the metronome to play through a piece of music. It corrects basic rhythm and pulse problems. This is useful to an extent. What we really need to develop is a rhythmic pulse in the group that is independent from all other aspects in the music. It is important that all members in the quartet feel at ease when performing together. They should feel that the general pulse of the ensemble is always there.

In some instances, keeping the pulse of the group is not difficult. If the music is very rhythmical in a 4/4 bar, it is unlikely that rhythmic problems will arise. If the music becomes rhythmically complex, even in a 4/4 time signature (Antonín Dvořák. American String Quartet. Op. 96), the pulse of the ensemble becomes compromised.

To develop group pulse I use a few exercises that I consider very effective. Some of them are common knowledge among professional chamber music players. I make the whole quartet play a section in the music that is rhythmically challenging. I request they all tap one foot. By doing this I make sure that all of them are having the same tempo at all times. This can be done with the metronome on at first and without the metronome at a later stage. By doing this I can easily find out the player that has more rhythmic problems. This foot-tapping exercise is accompanied by some rhythmic body language. This is a good way to show students that they can connect visually in order to maintain a good group pulse. To make sure that the body language is unified in the group, I make them swing their bodies from side to side as if they were dancing together. I suggest they all swing in the same direction. If one of them gets off the groove, it will immediately tell the others who is out of the group pulse.

In order to create a more artistic body language among the players in the quartet, I make the students perform the piece trying to make their clumsy movements more musical. I explain to them that once they have developed a good group pulse, their body language should be discrete and accurate and outline the phrasing of the music. Moving the body to the phrasing of the music while keeping the general pulse of the ensemble will give the group the necessary rhythmic cohesiveness and final artistry. When they learn how to swing together, they will develop a visual awareness that will connect to their aural one. Every movement we make with our bodies when performing should have pulse and phrasing at the same time. We are our own conductors!

V. Developing Sight-Reading: Learning how to Perform with little Preparation

Sight-reading is an attitude. If we strive for perfection when reading music for the first time we will be good sight-readers. If we do not care about the amount of mistakes we make when sight-reading, we will always be poor sight readers.

When training young players in acquiring this skill we have to make students realize its importance. They have to believe in it intrinsically in order to become proficient. While it is true that some people have a natural ability to sight-read, over the years I have noticed that improvement *only* occurs when students become interested in learning this skill.

When sight-reading, I advise students to look ahead in their music. Scanning a measure or two from where they are on the page is very helpful. Once everybody in the quartet has a basic level of expertise, the instructor has to take it to the next level. Making the students read music under a mild performance pressure helps to achieve this. In a pressured situation they will try their best and the accuracy will improve because of the added focus. To generate real pressure I use gigs (private parties or university functions) as a teaching ground for sight-reading. I tell my students to get music that they can read or almost read at sight in these so called gigs. Sometimes they have time to look at it once or twice. This does not give them enough time to learn it. This pressure is enough to enhance their concentration. I find this very effective because in the classroom they will never have the same awareness they have when performing in public with little preparation.

Part of this training includes telling them what to do in case they get lost in the music during a performance. It is always useful to listen to what is going on around you to find your way back into the music. For this I encourage students to listen for the harmony changes, melodic patterns, or form structure among other things. As a practical advise in a live situation I advise them that if one of the players seem to be unable to get back into the music, whispering a rehearsal number to that player maybe her/his only way out of the situation. This same approach is also useful when rehearsing new music for the first time. In order to get an idea of the over all difficulty of the new piece, it is useful to read the whole piece without stopping. Using this technique helps to save rehearsal time and develop mental awareness in the quartet.

The techniques presented above may bring up ethical questions about performing in public. The reader should take into consideration that these techniques are no substitute for a well prepared performance. They are teaching tools that I have used successfully in training young groups of chamber music players. It is very important that the instructor guides the process of sight-reading and performing with little preparation in the way described above so that it becomes a skill to be acquired and not a bad attitude to be developed. I firmly believe that sight-reading in a performance situation in the way just described enhances aural memory and takes Ear Training skills to the next level. Learning how to play music with little preparation is an excellent skill that young musicians should master in order to have careers as chamber music artists, orchestra players, and free lancers of any kind.

VI. Performing Chamber Music: Planning a Concert

A) Choosing a Program

The preparation process for a quartet concert is guided by the level of expertise of the players and the difficulty of the pieces. It is very important that the instructor does not overprogram but at the same time presents to the quartet pieces that are challenging enough for the students to grow technically and artistically (Hamann and Gillespie, 2009, p. 212). On this topic Hamann and Gillespie write:

When selecting music for [the quartet], you need to consider your [group's] ability, the technique and skills you want your student to learn, and the musical concepts you want

your students to learn. All are presented through the music you select for them regardless of the style of music or the period in which it was written (Hamann and Gillespie, 2009, p. 54).

It is best to chose pieces that we as instructors are most familiar with. In the case that you have to teach a piece that is not very familiar to you, try to become acquainted with it as much as possible before presenting the project to the students. I recommend using a score and a recording of the work, in order to become aurally familiar with the music. If a recording is unavailable, play it with some friends and get feedback from them.

Complete knowledge of the string quartet repertoire is difficult. Remember that we are looking at an extensive repertoire that spans from Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, etc, as well as arrangements of popular tunes. Research on the part of the instructor is a must in order to select the repertoire for the group. You may be very knowledgeable of a certain genre but deficient in another. If your experience in chamber music has been mostly performing the great quartet composers from the classical period to the middle of the 20th century, your knowledge of standard quartet literature will be excellent. If you have played a very limited amount of quartet arrangements of popular music or transcriptions for quartet, you will have to research that repertoire.

I usually choose one difficult quartet for the semester and fill out the program with short pieces of lesser difficulty and lighter in character. Popular pieces are included towards the end of the performance. Fig. 3 is an example of a concert program.

B) Preparation for the Stage

As teachers we know that the success of a performance relies on how much technical preparation is involved in the process. In quartet playing this aspect is more comprehensive than in a solo performance because the players have to know their individual parts but they also have to be able to deal with all the technical and logistic aspect of performing in a string quartet. Individual practice, rehearsing, and a lot of guidance from the instructor are crucial factors for the success of the ensemble.

During a regular weekly lesson we have the luxury of stopping and redoing things if they do not work out. What do we do when the concert day approaches? How do we get the ensemble to build up its concentration, and mental stamina? How would any member of the group get back on track if something goes wrong during

<i>The Lichtenstein String Quartet</i>	
Anna Powell, violin	
Eugene Alfaro, violin	
Angel Dominguez, viola	
Dody Brooks, cello	
String Quartet in D Major Op. 64 No. 5 "The Lark"	Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)
-Allegro Moderato	
-Adagio Cantabile	
-Menuetto	
-Finale	
Habanera from the Opera "Carmen"	Georges Bizet (1838-1875)
Songs from West Side Story	
Tonight	Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990)
One Hand One Heart	
Por Una Cabeza (tango)	Carlos Gardel (1887/1890-1935)
From the motion picture "Scent of a Woman"	
Begin the Beguine	Cole Porter (1891-1964)
Night and Day	

Figure 3

the performance? The instructor should take full responsibility in addressing these questions.

Scheduling some informal performances before the concert is always very helpful. A low pressure situation helps the group consolidate its performance in order to take the quartet to an optimum level. Playing for local schools and string master classes is useful and advisable. It builds up students' confidence and also allows them to find out weaknesses in their performance. In this way the group takes notes on the specific things that it needs to work on and give the final touches to the concert preparation.

These trial performances are also useful for the instructor. The teacher will find out how each student reacts to a pressure situation. If somebody in the group has an excessive amount of concert anxiety, the instructor will try to help this student to overcome her/his weaknesses advising the student to think more as a team player rather than as an individual. The support system of the other members of the group is important in these kinds of situations. Peers can be more effective giving moral support than the actual teacher. The other members of the quartet should get involved in the process of helping a team mate overcome her/his anxieties and fears. The instructor should take full advantage of this peer collaboration.

None of these problems will come up during a regular lesson. It is only when a performer is put under the pressure of a real performance that we can find out more about her/his capabilities and weakness. Building up the confidence of the group and correcting flaws is only possible by exposing a young quartet, or any performer for that matter, concert situation. This is what I

consider the last stretch in the getting-ready-for-a-performance journey.

VII. Booking Gigs

People call universities and schools of music to hire students for weddings or other different private events. Students should learn to negotiate with the person that is hiring them directly. Even at this stage they should feel as the professionals they will be. I let them do the booking if they are mature enough to do so. In case they have no experience at all, I will guide them through the process until they understand how things work in the "gig" world. Playing weddings and cocktail hours are part of having a string quartet. I know that this is not the highest form of artistry for somebody with formal musical training. Nevertheless, is a reality and the instructor should train young players to make practical use of their knowledge as musicians.

VIII. Conclusions

This paper addresses what I consider the most basic skills that a young string quartet should learn in its first stages. Although it is not absolutely comprehensive and may be affected by involuntary exclusions, it is well intended. When I started teaching at Texas A&M-Corpus Christi and was given the responsibility of directing and mentoring a group of young, eager, and not very experienced players, I struggled trying to find literature on the subject of teaching chamber music at a basic level. I have not found, to this date, an outline similar to the one presented in this paper that refers to teaching chamber music for strings at an early stage. My inspiration for this paper were the books *The Art of Quartet Playing* by David Blum (1986) and *Strategies for Teaching Strings* by Dr. Donald Hamann and Dr. Robert Gilliespie (2009). In the book by Blum (1986) I found a lot of practical advise in quartet playing. In the one by Hamann and Gilliespie (2009) the authors present a very comprehensive outline in all aspects of string pedagogy in an orchestra setting from beginners to intermediate-advance players that served me as a model of organization for this article. Although this paper does not cover the gap that Hamann and Gillespie have covered in the field of orchestral string pedagogy, it has the intension and the purpose to start developing literature in the field of pedagogy of chamber music for strings hoping that others will join me enthusiastically in this endeavor.

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