

MUSIC FOR THE LOVE OF IT

AUGUST 2002

MEDIEVAL YET MODERN: THE DAZAIFU

RECORDER ENSEMBLE by Larry Retzack

It's a classic example of Japan's merging of traditional and modern. The Yuchi Sanso gallery is in Dazaifu, on Kyushu, the southernmost of Japan's four main islands. It was built in 1995, so by most standards it would be considered modern. But traditional design and the use of wooden structural components, some of which are up to 400 years old, have produced a towering edifice reminiscent of Japan's feudal past. The primary vertical element in the building, a single, black weathered beam towers some 8 meters and is about 30 centimeters square. What better place than Yuchi Sanso for one of Kyushu's few recorder consorts to rehearse and perform?



Director Chizuko Jinnai (standing)
plays Grand Bass at rehearsal in Yuchi Sanso Gallery

I was casting about for a group with which to pursue my first love: sight-reading serious repertoire. An internet search for "recorders" brought up the home page of Minoru Yoshizawa, a professional recorder player in Tokyo. An e-mail query to him resulted in a two-page listing of some fifteen amateur recorder groups in Japan, four located on Kyushu.

Closest to my home was the Dazaifu Recorder Ensemble, so I sent an e-mail to group leader Chizuko Jinnai. Another group close by was the recorder quartet Ensemble Boisgrase, so I also queried them by e-mail. I

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FOCUS

by Ted Rust

The ability of a group to concentrate its attention while making music is an essential performance skill, but often an elusive one for an amateur ensemble. With good focus, even the simplest music carries the performers and the audience along in a flow of musical experience.

But how easily the flow is disrupted! When one member is momentarily distracted, the group's intensity audibly slackens, and soon technical flaws erupt:

erratic rhythm, balance and intonation infect the performance like airborne anthrax, and even the most polished performance becomes an exercise in damage control. This article is about strategies for amateur musical ensembles to improve their focus in musical performance.

PERSONALITY DIFFERENCES

Some individuals are naturally endowed with a phenomenal ability to concentrate. They are avidly sought as quarterbacks, neurosurgeons, jet fighter pilots, first violinists. One extreme manifestation of this trait is Asperger syndrome, a neurobiological disorder that results in very narrow but intense interests and limited social skills. A team of highly focussed individuals may have problems getting along socially (or may choose not to), but its focus comes naturally.

On the other hand, many of us who are drawn to the performing arts as amateurs are constantly alert to new perceptions. We are highly distractible, sociable individuals, and happily exempt from the cruel realities that can bring a budding professional career to an abrupt halt. Unfocussed, distractible amateurs are free to make music year after year, spreading beauty and chaos as they go. Almost any amateur ensemble is likely to include one or several unrepentantly distractible personalities, and will need to consciously cultivate its focus as a group.

ENSEMBLE FOCUS

In a focussed performance, each member of the ensemble is constantly updating his or her

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Marcia Klebanow and Lucia Woodruff, focusing

THE IN BOX

ELDERHOSTEL FALL 2002 PERFORMANCE WORKSHOPS

4th Annual New Horizons/Elderhostel Concert Band
University at Albany/Troy, NY, October 20-26, 2002

Big Bands Practice and Perform in Zion National Park,
St. George, UT, November 4-9, 2002

Choral Voices: Learn and Perform Great Choral Music
Abingdon, VA, November 3-9, 2002

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CA, October 6-12, 2002

National Elderhostel Orchestra, Hidden Valley, Carmel,
CA, October 13-19, 2002

National Elderhostel Big Band, Hidden Valley, Carmel,
CA, October 27-November 2, 2002

National Elderhostel Recorder/Early Music Workshop,
Hidden Valley, Carmel, CA, November 3-8, 2002

Sing, Sing, Sing Choral workshop, Auburn University,
AL, October 13-18, 2002

For information and reservations consult the
Elderhostel web site at www.elderhostel.org or contact
Elderhostel, Inc., 11 Avenue de Lafayette, Boston, MA
02111-1746, 1-877/426-8056.

NEW HORIZONS INSTITUTE

The New Horizons Bands and Strings Institute for adult
amateur musicians will be held in Chautauqua, NY,
October 6-9, 2002. The offerings include:

- Classes and ensemble playing for beginning to
intermediate level string players.
- String chamber music for intermediate and advanced.
- Beginning to advanced fiddling instruction.
- Beginning and intermediate band and sectionals.
- An advanced level band.

Program fee, including lodging and meals, is \$275, with
reduced fees for non-players and commuters. The dead-
line for registration is September 1, 2002. Write to
Laurie Paterniti, PO Box 28, Chautauqua, NY 14722, or
send E-mail to her at Lpaterniti@chautauqua-inst.com.

NEW MUSIC DATABASE PROJECT NEEDS HELP

The New York Chapter of the American Composers
Forum (ACF-NY) proposes the development of an
Internet-based database that would provide amateur
musicians around the world with direct access to up-to-
date information about new chamber music works. It is
seeking matching fund donations from interested ama-
teurs. Contact Renita Kalhorn, Director, New York
Chapter, 71 W. 85th Street, Suite, 1A New York, New
York 10024 (212) 873-5315 Renita.Kalhorn@verizon.net.

PERFORMING ARTS MEDICINE

Amateur musicians who are practicing physicians or
therapists might be interested to learn about an organi-
zation which is dedicated to the study of medical prob-
lems in musicians: the *Performing Arts Medicine
Association*. Many of the members are musicians in
addition to being physicians and therapists. Their
annual meeting is in Aspen, CO in conjunction with the
Aspen Music Festival. They publish a journal, *Medical
Problems of Performing Artists*. For further information
consult their website: www.artsmed.org.

ADAMANT WORKSHOP SNAPSHOTS



2002 Raphael Trio Workshop in Adamant, VT
Clockwise from upper left: Joel Epstein, Lynda Gulley,
Suzanne Lubell, Barb Landt, Ted Rust, Janet Ault,
Nancy Gruber, Howard Osborn
(Nancy Dunetz photos)

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Cratoule, Provence, France	Sep. 16-23, 2002
Ripatransone, Marches, Italy	October 18-26, 2002
Jimena de la Frontera, Spain	December 27, 2002- January 4, 2003
Bridge Quartet in Cortona, Italy	March 25-April 1, 2003
Moulin d'Ande, Normandy, France	May 26-June 2, 2003



POSTCARDS FROM MOULIN D'ANDÉ

verse and photos by Hugh Rosenbaum

Moulin d'Andé



They asked, but what
could I say
of Jane's week at Moulin
d'Andé?
There were all kinds of
things
Like twenty-odd strings
And one wind — to spice
up the play!

Jane's Way

I have to admire Jane's way
When she's at the Moulin
d'Andé.
She runs all the flings
And pulls all the strings
From lands that are far far
away.



Bridge Quartet

The Bridge Quartet has,
in fine form
In Mozart, played up a
storm
Their Debussy sounded
Mature and well-rounded
But their Delius — sets a
new norm!



Singing for their Supper

Rowena Rosenbaum,
Cathy Schofield (of the
Bridge Quartet) and
Hugh Rosenbaum (all
from England)
(Jane Carhart photo)



Quartetto al fresco:

Louise Bigwood
(Switzerland), Ruth
Rattenbury (England),
Jerry Levy (USA),
Winnie Main (Scotland),
Massimo Cortini (Italy)



FAKE FOLK

by Alice Parker

I'm confused. Quite often, in my work, I use the phrase 'folk song' with what seems to me a very specific sense: the song of the people, that which has arisen from the collective life of a community in a certain place and time. But today, we are surrounded by 'folk' musics of many genres and places: country, western (I'm reminded of a friend who moved to the mid-west and told me "We have both kinds of music here: country AND western!"), acoustic. . .well, you know the list from recordings as well as I. And we're living in the midst of a culture that defines 'folk' as differentiated from 'classical' or 'jazz'. The new definition seems to be 1) unsophisticated in poetry and music; 2) simple and repetitive in harmonies and form; 3) performed by singers with untrained voices and self-taught instrumentalists playing on 'folk' instruments; 4) composed by performers largely unaware of their heritage.

Now, that definition could apply exactly to medieval minnesingers and troubadours; to the anonymous singers of ballads in the British Isles and their descendants in the Appalachian highlands, and to the slaves in the cotton fields of the deep south. What is the difference between then and now? The passage of time is the greatest — time, which winnows out the chaff. Only a few songs survive: why? Can we pin-point the qualities which lead to survival? (This is one of the great questions of my musical life.)

The unique time-difference in our age is the possibility of instant dissemination of every effort, no matter how paltry. Two hundred years ago a folk singer's audience was his own community, and he had to travel to build a wider influence for his songs. Everyone accepted the fact that music was transient, that it disappeared as it was played, and that even the writing down of the tune did not insure its permanence. Incompetence simply disappeared. Now, with home recording and internet publishing, the rankest beginners can inflict their offerings (sufferings?) on an unwary public, and gain instant fame and notoriety through canny marketing. Inundated is truly the word for us: we're drowning in undifferentiated sound, pumped up to a volume that actually damages our ears.

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How can we tell the difference between weak and strong, between ephemeral and lasting? In church, there are thousands of anthems published each year that are as disposable as Kleenex, and last about as long (one use). In schools there are new publications each year, supposedly attracting the students with that which is 'familiar' from daily hearing. With spirituals, we have a couple generations who have grown up with the present variety of 'gospel', and think that the two terms are synonymous: that 'black' music means to add gospel piano to any melody. And there seems to be a general belief that if the intent is good — if the song is 'about' God or love or peace or human struggle — then we shouldn't question its artistic qualities.

But that's just what I want to do, by exploring the question: what makes the good ones last? My favorite answer comes from Ralph Vaughan-Williams, himself an authority in the field. He quotes Gilbert Murray who in turn was referring to the Bible and works of Homer: "They have behind them not the imagination of one great poet, but the accumulated emotions, one may almost say, of the many successive generations who have read and learned and themselves fresh re-created the old majesty and loveliness. . . There is in them, as it were, the spiritual life-blood of a people." So it's not just one person, here and now: it's a 'carrier' who is steeped in the heritage, and feels it flowing through to the next generation.

My second line of defense comes from a wonderful book I've just been studying: *Orality and Literacy, The Technologizing of the Word*, by Walter J. Ong (Methuen & Co. Ltd. 1982; Routledge, London, 1988). He outlines in detail the changes in the way we think that have been occasioned by the invention of writing, then of printing, and now of electronic dissemination. Orality, the original state, is of the moment, here and now, communicating face to face with the listener. That first shift to writing was enormous: words could be stopped in their flow by writing them down, and then the result could be pored over, reworked, shorn of repetition, and directed reflexively back on itself. The one written copy itself was precious — think of those illuminated medieval manuscripts — and the 'word' itself became an object. Printing means that the individual copy is now devalued: hundreds of thousands can come from the same 'master'. The listener is far removed; face-to-face communication is gone; and the words themselves are devalued. (Mistakes are preserved as well as truths). Now our society has taken another step which is at least as far-reaching: this instantaneous transmission of words, pictures and sounds allowed by television and the internet has me, at least, gasping for breath and searching for stability in the midst of the flood.

Are there just a few of us who perceive the difference? Our society seems to have no idea what is happening.

These new media are seen as a great good, which can unify the world. They have this possibility — but we have already seen the enormous evil they can do, by disseminating and perpetuating half-baked, immature and harmful ideas. It's as if we've lost our collective conscience in being open to everyone, so that hatred, inanity and pornography go unchallenged in the name of equal access. It's as if each 'advance' noted above is accompanied by an equal descent into the lowest common denominator of human communication.

All the musings above apply even more to song, which should be primary orality: face to face, mouth to ear, heart and mind to mind and heart. The more genuine the songs, the more they nourish us in our common humanity. Can we take the time to ponder the difference? to teach and perform the best? to encourage each other to look for that-which-lasts, for the genuine rather than the spurious? Let us be the ones who resist the 'hype', and who offer an alternative to 'fake folk' (like 'fast food'). We can be the 'carriers' who stand against the flood, cherishing both our heritage and our descendants.

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MUSICAL TALENT: REAL OR A MYTH?

by Norman M. Weinberger

The belief in musical talent is widespread and powerful. Everyone has an extensive belief system about human behavior; this is often called “Folk Psychology.” We act on our beliefs, assuming that they are correct. But we act on them even if they are actually wrong. Folk Psychology very often does not give an accurate picture of human behavior, of our makeup or the reasons why we do certain things. Are beliefs about musical talent accurate? Should people drop out of music because they have been born without enough musical talent?

The entire concept of talent in general, including musical talent, is being seriously questioned by scientists. Three English workers have taken the position that talent is a “myth”. Richard Howe of the University of Exeter, Jane Davidson of the University of Sheffield and John Sloboda of Keele University have examined the evidence that talent exists and concluded that this concept does not explain high levels of achievement in music or anything else. If innate talent doesn’t exist, how can we explain high, even exceptional, levels of achievement in performing music? The authors cite studies showing that it is simply a matter of practice: the more practice, the higher level of musical competence.

Whether “musical talent” exists or is a convenient myth, all workers agree that achievement requires intensive and sustained study. Therefore, we can simply focus on this activity, ignoring claims of “musical talent” as a guide for music education and personal decisions. [source: Howe, M.J., Davidson, J.W. and Sloboda, J.A., (1998), “Innate talents: Reality or myth?” *Behavioral & Brain Sciences*, 21:399-442]

© 2001 Norman M. Weinberger and the Regents of the University of California. All Rights Reserved. This note first appeared in *Musica Research Notes*, Volume VIII, Issue 2, Summer 2001. A detailed review by Dr Weinberger of the Howe-Davidson-Sloboda study is available on line at www.musica.uci.edu/mrn/V8I2S01.html#talent

PRACTICE TIPS

by Laura Blum

There is absolutely no way for a musician to grow in skill without practice. Practicing is a common bond between the beginning student and the concertmaster of the New York Philharmonic: both have a wonderful sense of accomplishment after a good practice session. Here are practice tips that I have used with my students for years.

1. Choose your practice time wisely. Pick a time when you are fresh and alert. If you are tired it will be hard to concentrate. Turn off all radios and TV sets within earshot and let your family know that it is important to you not to be disturbed during your practice time. Tell them how long it will be so they don’t feel too put out. You will accomplish much more without distractions.

2. Warm up. Warming up is essential whether you are a beginner or a concert artist. I recommend using scales and technical exercises. Listen to what you are doing and make them beautiful: you need to warm up your ears and your mind as well as your fingers. If scales become tiresome try varying the rhythm. You will continue to get the benefit of the scales and will add rhythm practice as well.

3. Analyze the piece you are working on. You can save a lot of time by knowing that a section is repeated or elaborated in the same or a different key. Pencil in the form using traditional terms such as the AABA sections of popular songs, or the exposition, development and recapitulation sections of a classical sonata-allegro movement. This helps you learn the music faster by breaking it down into logical units.

4. Begin in various places. Don’t always start at the very beginning. When working with students on a particularly difficult piece, I often have them start with the last several measures, then start a few measures earlier, and so on. If you always start from the beginning you will learn that part really well, while the end will suffer from neglect because we are always tired when we get there.

5. Don’t bite off more than you can chew! You wouldn’t try to eat a steak in a single bite. Practice is the same. Working up a piece in small bites makes it seem less daunting and ultimately gets the job done faster. Use your analysis of the piece to help choose a small section to work on, and then concentrate on that section until it goes really well before going on to another.

6. Don’t play sections over and over that you already know. Skip to the sections, or small parts of sections, that actually need work. When you’ve fixed those you can play the whole piece, but struggling through it time and again without ever fixing the problem spots is a waste of time.

7. Whatever you do have fun! Music should always be fun, even practice time. If you approach practice correctly the satisfaction of truly learning new skills will be the most fun of all.

Even musicians of ancient Rome knew the importance of practicing. *Maxim 439* from Publius Syrus (44 b.c.e.) states: “Practice is the best of all instructors.”

Laura Blum teaches piano in Youngsville, LA.

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received replies from both groups. Yoshitaka Shiraishi invited me to a rehearsal by the latter group at a photography studio in Chikushino City. To my surprise, I met Ms. Jinnai there as well and we played a number of duets.

On the strength of our playing together, she invited me to visit Yuchi Sanso in late April when her group would be performing publicly. I took a taxi from Dazaifu train station. Some ten minutes of twisting ascents up a mountainside on roads too narrow for a bus found me at the correct site. I heard the melodious sounds of recorders coming from within a large building that was exhibiting pottery and fabrics. Interested onlookers and buyers could examine the wares on the second floor and then relax with a snack and drink on the first, all the while enjoying the music.

I seated myself on a floor cushion at a low table and ordered a lemon squash. There were a number of other spectators enjoying lunch while the group performed a varied repertoire from Renaissance standards to Japanese *animé* themes. Upon noticing my presence, Ms. Jinnai very graciously invited me to join the group then and there. Not expecting to play, I'd neglected to bring my glasses, so I declined. After taking in the relaxing scene for a couple hours, I paid my bill and returned to the turnaround site for the bus to the train station. Since there was plenty of time before the next bus, I walked back toward the station through Dazaifu, a beautiful city nestled amidst lofty mountains, their sides covered in evergreens and bamboo groves. It is the site of a famous Shinto shrine. Known nationwide for its orchards, the Dazaifu shrine sells a deliciously soft, sweet plum wine.

That evening I received another e-mail from Ms. Jinnai inviting me to the group's next rehearsal. I was delighted to accept. Armed with my bass, tenor, alto, soprano, and sopranino recorders, I drove back up the hillside, finding my way without too much trouble. The ensemble is composed of eight housewives. Only one of the members, Ms. Kimiko Kusaba, who plays *taiko* [small drum] and electronic keyboard in addition to recorder, has had any formal musical training. But although amateurs, these women are serious musicians. I asked Director Jinnai who was the best player. "That would be telling, wouldn't it?" she replied.

Amateur groups in Japan must normally pay at least a nominal fee for a rehearsal facility. Luckily, however, Chizuko saw a newspaper account of the Yuchi Sanso's

opening and approached Fumi with a proposition. If the recorder ensemble could use the building for a rehearsal site once a week, group members would clean the building and grounds as well as perform gratis for a special program each month. The arrangement has worked well for all parties involved.

In addition to director Jinnai, four group members — Ms. Noriko Murata, Ms. Yasuko Shimada, Ms. Sachiko Jyo and Ms. Minako Sudo — have been together for twenty years and it shows. The balance, precision, and nuance that come only with longevity are evident in their playing. Noriko lives in Kumamoto prefecture, a four-hour one-way drive, a strong commitment on her part. Almost all members are proficient with all recorders. We lack a contra-bass, but Chizuko plays a grand bass that provides a solid tonal foundation for the group. We rehearse every Monday from about 10 AM until around 3 PM after which we enjoy a potluck luncheon. Sometimes we play straight through the rehearsal, not even taking potty breaks.

Our repertoire varies widely, including serious compositions from J.S. Bach's *Gratias Missa in g minor* to Rossini's *Sonata per archi No. 1*. We've also played Japanese folk tunes, "Amazing Grace," and "Scarborough Fair." Director Jinnai and Ms. Junko Yamashita arrange all the literature for five or six voices, consequently sometimes we're playing two on a part. The director produces parts with a computer printer using Roland music software which turns out very clear, readable copy. Recently, we read Ms. Jinnai's challenging arrangement of Pachelbel's *Canon in d minor*. The whole effect is vintage Baroque in the best sense of the period.

I have since loaned the group copies of arrangements of "La Donna e Mobile" and "Theme from the Odd Couple" by Ms. Hanneke van Proosdij. (Hanneke is a professional recorder player and an instructor for the *National Elderhostel Recorder and Gamba Week* at Carmel, California's Hidden Valley Art Institute, which I attended last November. It will be offered again Nov. 3-9, 2002 [See *Music for the Love of It*, Feb. 2002, p. 12]. I can't overstate what a great week this was.)

My brief exposure to recorder ensembles in Japan has clearly demonstrated that despite a post-modern twenty-first century society, the ancient and valued tradition of consort playing is alive and well in the Dazaifu Recorder Ensemble. I look forward to the weekly sessions at the Yuchi Sanso Gallery.

Larry Retzack has lived in Japan since 1966.



Ms. Kusaba, Larry Retzak, Ms. Jyo

GINA TURNER, SONGWRITER

by Gene Coleman

Gina Turner has been playing music since she was old enough to crawl onto her grandmother's piano bench. Turner began writing songs at the age of fourteen, a rebellious teen creating music that Turner calls "sarcastic as hell." Turner has grown as an artist, expanding upon her punk style while maintaining the sarcastic overtones. At the age of twenty a dark nature is still prevalent in her lyrics and performances.

Dressed in black, she is soft spoken and playful as she addresses the audience. When a song begins Turner loses herself in the flow, riding the highs and lows as she strums her acoustic guitar. She shifts tempo to meet the emotion of the lyrics. Turner's true love is performance and it shows. It is what she calls the "soul food" of a musician's diet.

While many of Turner's songs have a bleak nature, there is always a glimmer of hope in the lyrics. Turner said her songs are like life, "You have to sift through the negative to find the good."

The emotions involved in her lyrics control the tempo and mood of her music. In her song "Playing God" Turner sings about a young boy who tries to do everything right, but meets with constant failure. The tempo rises for a chorus that Turner describes as "like opening Pandora's box" when the boy finds himself "Here again/Staring down the barrel of a loaded gun/You pointed at yourself." The lyrics are as sung by the world, placing all blame on the boy. A glimmer of hope comes in the break before the chorus when the boy shifts the blame for his current state from himself to the world around him. Turner does this by adding the words "You have brought me" before the last chorus.

Turner often finds inspiration in literature or poetry. One thing she has drawn from poetry is the practice of personifying and romanticizing ideals. "If you can, make beauty a person and maybe even without saying beauty, make beauty come alive; people connect more with people than inanimate objects," Turner said.

However, inanimate objects can serve as inspiration for bigger ideas. Turner drew from this to write the song "Table Salt" when she remembered that someone once said, "People are as ordinary as everyday table salt." The song became about someone who comes face to face with how ordinary she is and is completely deflated by it.

Turner also draws inspiration from observing others. She finds a poetic nature in their mannerisms. One of her favorite things to watch is people on cellular phones. Turner said that as people lose themselves in their conversation their true characteristics show.

Turner writes with various types of rhyme scheme, always concentrating on word connotation and lyrical flow. She said she never writes with hooks in mind because it detracts from writing from the heart. For Turner an ideal song is one that takes on at least three meanings, asking listeners to sort out the details and draw their own conclusions about her meaning.

Turner related something her piano teacher once passed on to her about songwriting, "You know you're a good songwriter when you can take a picture, put it on the piano, and play that picture."

Turner has taken this to heart and become a good songwriter by learning to draw creativity from all aspects of daily life. Inanimate objects, strangers, and the writings of others are all seeds of a song.

At an age when most musicians are concerned about being signed or recording a CD, Turner is content with playing to intimate crowds and continuing to sharpen her craft through lessons and performing. Turner feels an "innate need to enlighten" and hopes to teach music one day while continuing her career as a performer. She feels there is a great need to pass along some of the things she has learned as a performer to anyone considering a career as a musician. For now her goal is to reach as many people as she can through her music and give them a new insight on the world around them.

Gene Coleman is a free-lance journalist, songwriter and musician in Biloxi, Mississippi. He performs with the band "One-Eyed Monkey."



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FOCUS!

continued from page 1

intentions, basing the next note and phrase on a rehearsed version of the performance, but also on what the rest of the ensemble is actually doing at the moment. The group achieves expressive unanimity despite the inevitable variability of human performance by correcting and compensating on the fly for deviations in pitch, rhythm and volume. These compensations are best made quickly, matter-of-factly, without blame or upset, and indeed without conscious thought.

How fast can people really do all that? As Burke Schuchmann pointed out in the first issue of this publication (March, 1988) the Blue Angels (the US Navy precision flying team) can do it very fast indeed: you focus really well when the alternative is sudden death. The first step towards a focussed performance is to care about doing it well.

And how do you focus when you really want to? Simply by limiting your attention field, and then practicing repeatedly what you do within that field. Far from imposing a rigid approach, this repeated, focussed ensemble practice hones the skills that permit freer, more fluent performance.

How limited is a focussed attention field? The time becomes now, on a scale of microseconds to moments, no more. The space becomes here, the space occupied by the performing group. The subject matter becomes the sound of every part being played.

You can only afford to maintain such a limited field of attention when you can assume that nothing of importance outside the selected frame of reference is going to change enough to need your attention. The Blue Angels set out radio beacons marking the precise boundaries of their performance space, and that space becomes their world for the few minutes of a performance. Musicians learn beforehand the structure of a piece, its mood, tonalities, its rhythmic and melodic idioms. They tune their instruments and agree on tempos. Whether playing from a score or improvising a free solo, the frame of reference has to be in place before the playing starts. And everyone has to agree on its details: nothing saps the collective energy of an ensemble like an unscheduled stop to decide whether to take a repeat.

The experience of making ensemble music in a stable frame of reference is a wonderfully compelling experience, for which the popular term is “groove”.

GETTING A GROOVE

Grooving needs groundwork. Even if the ensemble has an acknowledged leader with a clear vision of “how it ought to go,” it won’t go that way until the essential frame of reference is communicated. And in more collegial styles of ensemble the groundwork can involve lengthy discussion and experimentation. This is not

wasted time. It is only completed when the members understand and agree on the musical structure so well that they can concentrate completely on one passage, note or phrase at a time, and can trust their colleagues to be there with them.

Nobody’s perfect, so it is important to accept and adjust for errors within the frame of reference as a matter of course, fostering an atmosphere of trust. Members need to suspend blame of self and others, and trust their colleagues even after things go badly. Trust yourself, not to avoid mistakes, but to learn something from every one.

Ensemble members need to be aware of each others’ moods. The best way to find out is to ask, by politely checking with each other on arrival (“How are you?” need not be an empty formula). People have bad days when they need extra encouragement or a minimum of stress. There will be days when it is better not to rehearse at all, or just to play for fun. A brief check-in can be a valuable part of the rehearsal routine. Check-in is a good time to acknowledge and put aside for an hour or two while any personal problems that might otherwise interfere with one’s ability to focus.

A good group warmup routine can help cultivate ensemble cohesion. Group warmups can be scripted, using simple music such as Bach chorales, or can be improvised, matching, echoing or harmonizing with each others’ sounds. Once the habit of matching sounds is in place, tuning becomes easy. A good group warmup will foster continued group-awareness in matters of balance, tone color and intonation.

Agreeing on procedure is a necessary prelude to rehearsing. To avoid being jerked out of a groove unexpectedly, plan in advance how far the group intends to go, whether it will stop to correct errors or polish sections, and whether it will pause and relax between movements.

Setting the pulse is the crucial moment. The pulse may be communicated quickly — sometimes a unison breath on an upbeat is sufficient — but it must be communicated, and there is no shame in counting a full bar together if it gets the job done. The rhythmic cue must be received and acknowledged by everyone in the group, even (especially!) those counting rests. Giving

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David Darling, Artistic Director

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and taking cues are equal halves of the same process. In a tight ensemble, cues are often acknowledged by mirroring the same gesture that was given.

Rests are the devil's playground. Don't just count rests, groove with them! And don't assume your next entrance will be in tune. Feel the prevailing pitch level and pulse of the ensemble throughout a rest, and your entrance will be in the groove.

A grooving ensemble may appear to be moving or even dancing in place with the pulse. These rhythmic movements are not cues: once the pulse is established it becomes part of the frame of reference and needs no conscious attention except when it changes. But every beat does need to receive energy from every performer, and the output of energy is usually visible.

In Western art music the pulse is traditionally very flexible. Expressive playing, singing or conducting creates expectations, making it easy to follow, but variations in the speed of the pulse do need to be communicated.

This is where reciprocal cues become essential for focussed ensemble expression.

When an ensemble focuses together on a shared musical goal, they not only stay together accurately, they give meaning to the music.

LOSING IT

How do we lose our ensemble groove? Too many ways! We allow ourselves to be distracted by personal troubles outside the hall, by problems with the seating, lighting, sound or microclimate, by our individual needs to feel competent and appreciated. We create distractions for others with inappropriate chatter or by becoming annoyed with other members' shortcomings. We become self-absorbed in exposed or difficult passages and fall into private bobbing or foot-tapping — a sure sign that cues are being rejected.

A skilled group of colleagues may be able to follow a distracted colleague accurately, but it can not provide any reciprocal cues, energy or support. This is not a focussed ensemble, even if it is technically "together."

With luck, most unfocussed episodes can pass unnoticed, so long as the group carries on calmly, maintaining a stable frame of reference.

But during these episodes the ensemble loses cohesion. If anyone then misplays their part — a small error that would be harmless when the group is focussed — the distracted or self-absorbed member(s) will be confused by the lapse, and the combined result will be an error that disrupts the music's broader frame of reference. These things happen. Someone is out of place, and the groove is lost. Knowing how to restore the flow at this point can make the difference between a pothole and a dead end.

GETTING IT BACK

The big question is whether to

1. keep going in the original frame of reference,
2. keep going, but shift the frame of reference, to fit the error, or
3. stop and regroup and a convenient point.

I suggest a guiding principle: do what will best restore the flow of the piece.

In most instances, Strategy 1, maintaining the original frame of reference, is the best choice, even if it requires visual or spoken cues to bring the errant parts back in line. It is only worth doing, however, if it can be done coolly, without blame or upset. In the best case the errant performers will find their way back with no more help than a stable accompaniment, at which point what might have been an error is transformed into an extended syncopation, and the frame of reference remains intact.

If one or more voices have strayed from the meter, skipped a repeat or the like, it can be tempting for the player with the strongest rhythmic line, often the bass, to go along with the error, as in Strategy 2, and force the rest of the group to adjust. This strategy has several disadvantages. First, it feels bad: the players and listeners still focussed within the original groove will know they have been party to a cover-up. Second, it is a setup for a "double-fault catastrophe", in which one culprit corrects an error just as a colleague shifts the frame of reference. Strategy 2 is always costly: it undermines confidence all around. And since it deprives the culprit of feedback, it should be used only in performance, never in working rehearsals.

To stop and regroup as in Strategy 3 can be disappointing to all, but there is a good chance it will be less disruptive than Strategy 2 since it permits a clean, safe restart. Measure numbers or rehearsal letters at convenient re-starting points in everyone's part can greatly facilitate this strategy. And at least in the U.S., most audiences are very forgiving of this strategy: they have a long tradition of rooting for the underdog.

SUMMARY

In a focussed ensemble, the performers can afford to be very free with notes, rhythms and phrases that lie within the group's established frame of reference — the structure, pulse and style of the piece — knowing that their colleagues will notice variations and respond with nuances of their own. By the same token, however, the performers must strive to preserve the integrity of the stable frame of reference, which is what makes this freedom possible.

Oboist Ted Rust is a regional planner and the publisher of Music for the Love of It.

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