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Playing together: A chamber music guide

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Playing Together: A Chamber Music Guide

A Project Presented to
the Faculty of the Undergraduate
College of Visual and Performing Arts
James Madison University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Bachelor of Music

by Nicholas Scott Matherne

May 2015

Accepted by the faculty of the School of Music, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Music.

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Table of Contents

List of Figures	3
Acknowledgements	4
Text (Reflection)	5
Creative Work	9
Bibliography	10

List of Figures

Creative Work

1	Bb Clarinet, Bb Trumpet	9.1
2	Alto Saxophone, Baritone Saxophone	9.2
3	Flute, Oboe	9.3
4	Horn in F	9.4
5	Bassoon, Euphonium, Trombone	9.5
6	Tuba	9.6

Recital Materials

1	Recital Video	9.7
2	Recital Program	9.8

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Reflection

The nature of my project was a fulfillment of a need I observed in my field during my ten years in music. Although this project is what would be considered, for the purposes of the degree requirements for the Honors Program, a *creative* project, it is based in research and a curricular development. Therefore, the bulk of the text required is constituted in the method books themselves. Chamber music is an essential part of the overall music curriculum and I created a concrete product that can be used to teach concepts in an area seldom explored due to lack of materials. In beginning this project I reflected on the countless musicians, teachers, and peers who all extolled the values of chamber music because “it makes you a better musician.” This statement, while vague, hints at the fundamental benefits of this style of music and led me to my research.

I explored the literature in search of a book that both taught chamber music in an easy to understand way and provided quality literature for performance. I did not want to begin work on a project, only to create a work that essentially existed already. I discovered a book by Dr. Jay Zorn on brass chamber music, which was incredibly informative, but it was formatted like a textbook and much of the information was brass-specific and would be difficult to remove for a non-brass instrumentalist trying to sift through the material for information. From this point, I focused on creating a foundation for need of this product within my field. It would be unnecessary to write a method for something that isn't helpful in the way that people believe it to be, so I researched the benefits of chamber music as verified by research-based studies. Several studies link chamber music to improved musicianship as well as improved communication and modern workplace skills due to the nature of working on a product collaboratively and each player being solely responsible for an entire segment of the work by themselves.

Together the studies and apparent lack of a published method indicated the need for a comprehensive method that can be used across the field to teach musicianship within the context of chamber music techniques. To begin work on the method I searched for quality pieces of music within the public domain that I could arrange to suit my needs. I needed reasonable melodic ranges and textures that could harmonically condense to a five-part arrangement. While I started with about twenty tunes and slowly paired it down, I got rid of many and added in new ones to arrive at the eleven in the current version of the book. I arranged for a quintet of a single instrument to make sure that all five parts are playable on any given instrument; then I transposed the parts to other instruments and adapted each arrangement slightly for the technical considerations of each instrument.

To create the material for the methodology and sequencing, I began by returning to my research and identifying the fundamental benefits of chamber music. Then I extrapolated these concepts into exercises that could be applied throughout the book in a systematic format for development. I included duplicate exercises even within the selected exercises in the program to emphasize the fact that each of the skills exercised with each piece can be applied to other pieces and ultimately to almost any facet of music. Each repeated exercise is varied by specific instruction so that the different ways in which the concepts apply is more apparent and understandable by a developing musician.

I sought to teach music as well as *chamber* music throughout the method, creating exercises that are central to music as a whole as well as the chamber-specific techniques.

I sought to encompass all of the National Standards for Music Education as prescribed by the National Association for Music Education (NAfME). I believe that if the book is to teach music, it should fulfill all of the goals set forth for teaching music as indicated by our national professional

organization. To give breadth of style, I chose pieces from the late eighteenth century up until the early twentieth century, including styles from folk songs, to jazz.

To create an effective methodology I put careful consideration into the sequencing of the material. In order to make the book accessible and easy to follow, I began with organizing the pieces by range and technical considerations. The first three arrangements are accessible to younger players because they are not as complex or as taxing. In accordance with this idea, the more complex arrangements and pieces with higher ranges are found in the back of the book. I strove to put variety in the order as well, generally not putting two similar pieces next to each other for the sake of players just reading through the book. I also placed the fundamental concepts and exercises within the first three to four pieces and then reprised those exercises later in the book, mixed in with exercises aimed at fulfilling other musical goals. In this way students gradually learn each concept and can build on them as they progress.

As with any musical endeavor, it is important to create musical and even non-musical transfers across pieces of music and exercises. Part of the reason that chamber music is so effective at creating transfers is that there is no conductor. The lack of a conductor/director forces students to actually make musical decisions and to think about how they are playing the piece, both at an individual level and as well as in a group. Each player is given more responsibility in a chamber group because they are the only player on their part. Because no concept in this book is 100% unique to chamber music, it can all be transferred to other musical settings. Chamber music just isolates the concepts so that it is easier to apply them back to music in other settings.

The book is designed to facilitate musical growth in the developing musician in late middle school or early high school, playing music graded at Virginia State Levels 2 or 3. In my recital I created an ensemble of my peers playing instruments we learned in our techniques classes to model

this concept. The first half of the recital was designed in a rehearsal type format where we played music and worked on the concepts together.

During the second half we all played on our primary instruments at a collegiate level and therefore I explained the method preliminarily and then we performed, showing the application of the technique.

This portion of the recital highlighted two major components that I strove to achieve with this project: (1) flexible instrumentation and (2) a method for all age and experience levels. Being able to play with any group of musicians is a blessing especially in the public schools, where instrumentation may not be “typical.” I personally gained a lot from playing music with my friends, but not everyone happens to have the friends who play the traditional chamber ensemble instruments. Therefore, a book that allowed for any instruments to play together was essential in my mind. Creating a book that could be used at all age levels was not a difficult task though. The techniques in this book are fundamental to music and can always help a musician improve. One does not grow out of breathing together or thinking about musical decisions. The fundamental components of chamber music (breathing, communication, phrasing, and balance) improve musicality as well as tone production and technique. In this way, the book teaches music and chamber music and fulfills all of my fundamental initial goals for the project.

Creative Work

This page marks the beginning of the creative material for the project. This includes the set of chamber method books created in during my work, both the music and the method material.

These works are found as figures in the accompanying binders.

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