



Chamber Music a team sport

by Laura Usiskin

Imagine a basketball team: five players on the court, each with a designated position. The point guard leads the offense; the power forward controls the boards; and the center hovers over the rest. They have been honing their skills since childhood, moving from street ball to arenas, and have dreamt of life in the pros. Together they practice to form the strongest team possible so that, when it's time to play, they finish with a win.

Now replace "basketball team" with "chamber ensemble." Save for the sports terminology, the basic premise remains the same. Just like in basketball, chamber musicians each have assigned roles - e.g. clarinet, violin, piano - and they rehearse together to become a unified ensemble. They have been practicing their instruments almost their entire lives, some starting as early as age 3, and have fantasized about playing on a prestigious stage like Carnegie Hall. There is one big difference, however. For them, "winning" is not defeating another team. It is bringing to life some of the greatest music ever created.

What is chamber music? A theorist in the 17th century first coined the phrase to denote music played in a private home, as opposed to in a public space or church. “Chamber” means room and in this case the main room of a house such as our present-day living room. As such, it was amateurs - the people living in the house - who played the majority of early chamber music. In addition, most chamber ensembles were small due to house size constraints (hence the basketball analogy, as opposed to sports such as football or soccer that have larger teams). That being said, Beethoven’s 4th Symphony was premiered in a private residence, so it would have been considered chamber music at the time.

Over the centuries, chamber music has expanded beyond the confines of a house and into concert halls, museums, libraries, coffee shops, and more. Just think about where Orchestra Iowa presents its chamber concerts. Rather than location, today’s definition emphasizes the size of the ensemble: small, around 2 - 8 players, not needing a conductor, and each person being the only one on his/her part. Amateurs still enjoy playing chamber music, though many works from the 19th century on require professional skills. Another newer characteristic is the emergence of standard ensembles such as the string quartet, piano trio, woodwind quintet, and brass quintet. Composers often focus on writing pieces for these codified ensembles, and musicians can make their living as members of such a group.

Just as training with a basketball team can be more gratifying than shooting free throws by one’s self, for many musicians, the teamwork aspect of chamber music makes

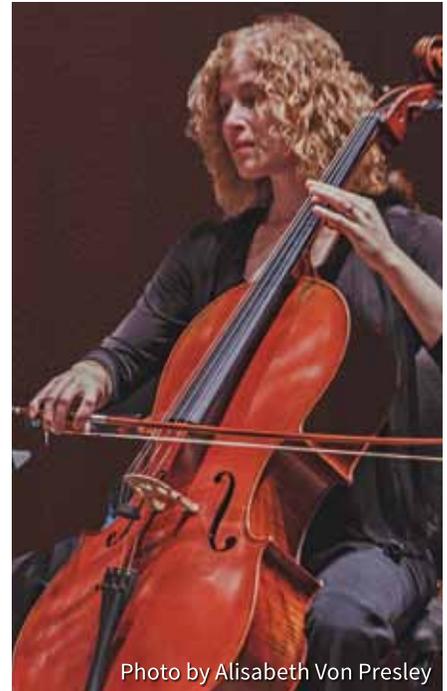


Photo by Alisabeth Von Presley

it the pinnacle of music making. It is a musical goldilocks, achieving the perfect balance between the individual and the ensemble. The strengths, ideas, and passions of each person combine with the coordination, blend, and intent of the group to provide unlimited potential and possibilities. It is a team sport, and many musicians can’t get enough. We’ve been known to organize parties that include food, drinks, our instruments, and a stack of trios and quartets.

Performers aren’t the only ones with a love affair for chamber music. Its intimacy has inspired composers to create some of the world’s greatest music. Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven all reserved some of their most profound writing for chamber music. Beethoven’s String Quartet Op. 132, which is on Orchestra Iowa’s Showcase Chamber Series in April, includes a song of thanks to God that Beethoven wrote as his own health declined. Johannes Brahms’ Piano Quintet Op. 34 is on January’s program and is described by Brahms scholar Malcolm MacDonald as “a work full of tension... magnificent in utterance but often somber or thunderous in its moods.”



Photo by Visions Photography

For audiences, chamber music gives them the opportunity to hear music up close and personal, like sitting courtside at a game (though unlike basketball, there's little danger of a player falling into the seats). The performers' beads of sweat, inhaled and exhaled, bobbing heads, and flying fingers are all front and center in a chamber concert. Chamber music also gives audiences the opportunity to hear musicians play individually, as opposed to the blend achieved in an orchestra. And, of course, audiences have the chance to hear these seminal works by the greatest composers brought to life.

Chamber music has become an indispensable part of my life. It has fed my soul, created fulfilling professional opportunities, and spurred lifelong personal connections. In the last few months alone, I have read Haydn quartets with friends for fun, played trio concerts in Alabama and Maine, and curated a chamber concert for a series I founded in 2015. Chamber music has also created wonderful memories for me. Once, while rehearsing Barber's Adagio for Strings - one of the most sublime works ever written - one of the players in my group made a mistake, and in the midst of all the passion, we couldn't help but to burst out laughing. Another time, I was playing an outdoor house concert with a clarinetist, and it started to rain. We scurried

inside, crammed the whole audience into the living room, and finished the program just as 17th century music lovers would have intended.

Most chamber venues aren't as grandiose as their orchestral counterparts: their stages smaller, chandeliers less glitzy, and audience capacity diminished. But what chamber music lacks in lavishness, it makes up for in personal connection and intimacy. Chamber music is about people - the composers, performers, and listeners - and the connections they make. It is about sharing experiences, emotions, and of course the love for music. Regardless of its definition or location, chamber music is an awe-inspiring medium that enchants all who experience it. And while chamber musicians may not make the same salaries as professional basketball players, for me chamber music is a slam dunk. ■

Article by Laura Usiskin

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Orchestra Iowa Brass Quintet with Tom Mackey on Percussion. Photo by Ed Karr.