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CHAMBER MUSIC CONNECTION

MARC REESE, COLUMN EDITOR

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CHAMBER MUSIC CONNECTION

MARC REESE, COLUMN EDITOR

Chamber Music Connection is a forum for ideas concerning the trumpet's role in the expanding literature in all types of chamber music. Ideas and suggestions should be directed to: Marc Reese, Assistant Dean and Brass Department Head, Lynn University Conservatory of Music, 3601 North Military Trail, Boca Raton, FL 33066 USA; chamber@trumpetguild.org

WHY CHAMBER MUSIC?

BY ANTHONY PLOG

One of my favorite musicians and people is Ray Mase, who has had an extremely varied and active career as a performer and teacher. I was lucky enough to hear a masterclass he gave many years ago at the Summit Brass Institute in Cincinnati. In his masterclass, Ray emphasized three points that he thought were necessary for students to improve their skills:

1. Always go back to the basics.
2. Attack your weaknesses.
3. Play with other musicians as much as possible.

Most serious and successful students in Europe, like their counterparts in the US, are well grounded in the basics and also work diligently to turn weaknesses into strengths. But, especially in Europe, there is very little emphasis on playing with other people in various chamber music settings. I recently wrote a three-part blog post on my website about musical illiteracy among today's students and how it is increasingly prevalent in Europe, where I have lived and taught for the past 25 years. In my second post, I drew my material from a masterclass given by Katherina Kegler, a wonderful musician and pianist who has worked with brass, woodwinds, strings, and voice. The premise of her masterclass was that during rests in the music, brass and wind players tend to count, whereas strings and vocalists listen. Obviously, there are many exceptions, but it is a trend she has noticed. When I ask other pianists who accompany trumpet players during masterclasses, they agree with Katherina's contention. At the deepest level, I think this means that brass and wind players learn their parts, while singers and string players learn the music. The difference, of course, is huge.

My belief is that this difference in approach to learning comes from involvement with chamber music. Vocalists and string players have the advantage of consistently playing chamber works written by master composers. Although we brass players know such composers as Brahms, Beethoven, Bartók, and Shostakovich, to name a few, we encounter them mainly through their orchestral writing, even though they also are highly regarded for their chamber music. There have been some wonderful works written for brass quintet, but I can't think of any major composers whose reputations are at

least in part based on their chamber music for brass. In contrast, major composers have produced many substantial and important works for other chamber groups, especially string quartets. So, the lack of a substantial amount of great brass chamber repertoire is one problem.

Another problem is that there are very few brass chamber groups that are able to have a career playing serious and substantial music. The American Brass Quintet is perhaps the most stellar American example of a group that has played quality chamber music over a period of many years (more than fifty!), but even *they* are not a full-time group. It seems that if one wants to have success as a chamber music group, a large portion of the repertoire must be slanted toward entertainment. In sum, I have observed that it is difficult for brass players to find substantial repertoire, and brass quintets often do not play the type of music that enables them to grow musically.

To help remedy this situation, I have two recommendations. Whether these suggestions are adopted or not, my hope is that they will at least generate discussion. In both the US and Europe, the final diploma concert for brass players in universities and conservatories has the student playing a recital based largely on works with piano. But how often after graduation will a brass player perform with piano? Not often at all. On the other hand, even students lucky enough to get orchestra jobs are likely to do some brass quintet playing. So here is my first recommendation—when students give their final exam concert, a large percentage of it should be chamber music, instead of works with piano. I realize that works with piano are also chamber music, but intonation is fixed, and the player is working with only one other musician, rather than several. Chamber music will not only give the student more experience dealing with balance and intonation, it will also give the student valuable experience with an aspect of the business that

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is rapidly becoming more important than ever before: organization and entrepreneurship.

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arrangements, but the actual excerpts taken from orchestral works. During these concerts, one of the music history professors at the school, Wolfgang Plagge, speaks with the audience about the excerpts and their relevance to the piece and to the composer's overall work. For example, in a recent US tour, we featured excerpts from Mahler's Second Symphony in a joint concert with the Northwestern University Brass Ensemble. Interestingly, the ensemble performs the excerpts without a conductor. This means that the students must listen to each another, make compromises, and truly "own" the performance, rather than just follow a conductor. Further, the students' mindset should not be that they are playing the pieces as orchestral excerpts, but rather as some of the greatest chamber music ever written for brass. (Think of the brass chorales from Brahms symphonies, for example.) So, my second recommendation is that brass ensembles at universities and conservatories should consider, in addition to normal concert repertoire, working on orchestral excerpts without a conductor and with the mindset of playing chamber music.

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These two recommendations may not be practical to follow in all settings, but I am hopeful they will at least stimulate discussion regarding a topic that is vitally important for all musicians—how to learn music, not just parts.

About the author: Anthony Plog currently teaches at the Norwegian Music Academy in Oslo. As a former trumpet player and teacher, he has performed and taught around the world. As a composer, he has written for a wide range of ensembles and performers and has five operas to his credit.



A second recommendation comes from an original idea put into practice by Aline Nistad, principal trombone with the Oslo Philharmonic and a faculty colleague of mine at the Norwegian Music Academy. As I write this article, Aline and I are at the end of our second year of coaching two brass ensembles at the Academy. On Aline's suggestion, we have included orchestral excerpts on all our brass ensemble concerts—not