

Focus, effort, and enjoyment in chamber music: Rehearsal strategies of successful and “failed” student ensembles

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Different chamber ensembles take different approaches to individual practice and ensemble rehearsal; in this study, we investigated the approaches of three student groups who could be described as successful and “failed.” The members of two string quartets, one newly-formed and one established, and a newly-formed wind quintet kept practice and rehearsal diaries for six months. There were significant differences between what and how they practiced and rehearsed and between their ratings of their own and their colleagues’ focus, effort, and enjoyment, although these three dimensions were correlated in several ways. The members of the successful established ensemble enjoyed practicing more than rehearsing, while the reverse was true for the members of the successful new ensemble. It is also clear from the ratings that participants were realistic about the efficacy of their practice and rehearsal strategies. These findings have implications for theories of motivation and practical applications for the teaching of chamber music.

Keywords: effective; group; rehearsal; practice; students

Strategies for ensemble rehearsal have been explored via studies of duos (e.g. Williamon and Davidson 2002, Ginsborg and King 2007), string quartets (e.g. Davidson and Good 2002), and wind quintets (Ford and Davidson 2003, Burt-Perkins and Mills 2008), suggesting the importance of clarity as to ensemble members’ roles in order to reduce potential conflicts and effective verbal and non-verbal communication in relation to social as well as musical issues. Ericsson *et al.* (1993) and Lehmann (2002) found that positive correlations exist between concentration and effort, and concentration and enjoyment, but negative correlations between effort and enjoyment. The present study investigated the extent to which successful ensemble rehearsal (defined

by the relative success of the ensemble over time) is influenced by performers' ratings of their own and their colleagues' focus, effort, and enjoyment.

METHOD

Participants

Three student ensembles were recruited: one newly-formed (SQ1) and one established string quartet (SQ3) and a newly-formed first-year wind quintet (WQ1). SQ1 comprised two male and two female first year students "matched" on the basis of their performance in college entrance auditions. SQ3 was formed by its members—three male third year students and one female student—two years before the present study began. WQ1 comprised a "mixed" group of four first year students and one second year female student, selected on the basis of the instruments they played.

Materials and procedure

Printed diary templates were devised for ensemble rehearsals and practice sessions in which music for ensemble rehearsals was prepared. The ensemble rehearsal diaries requested information including date, place, time, overall duration, and content/duration of each activity within the rehearsal; with reference to up to five activities, what participants thought their ensemble's goal was, how they went about achieving it, to what extent their strategy was effective, using a rating scale (1="useless" to 10="achieved goal 100%") and what their goal would be next time they engaged in this activity; ratings of their own and their peers' focus (1="very distracted" to 10="completely focused"), effort (1="just went through the motions" to 10="worked really hard"), and enjoyment (1="not at all" to 10="had a great time"). Finally, participants were asked to describe any performance they had given that day and nominate "one thing [they] were really happy about" and "one thing [they] would like to do better in [their] next performance." The practice diaries used similar wording, adapted for individuals, and rating scales but did not ask about performance. During the first two terms of the academic year participants were asked to complete diaries whenever they had undertaken individual practice on material for ensemble rehearsals and, as individuals, after each rehearsal.

RESULTS

At the end of the academic year, WQ1 won a major prize. At the time of writing, its members are still performing together: it can be considered a "suc-

successful” ensemble. SQ1 agreed to disband after their end-of-year assessment and can therefore be considered to have “failed,” in comparison with WQ1. SQ3 had been extremely successful for three years although ultimately it split up, and its members formed new ensembles.

Each of the participants’ reports, in the form of diary entries relating to practice session or rehearsal content, goals/strategies/plans for each activity within the practice session or rehearsal, and comments on performance, was numbered. As shown in Table 1, SQ3 provided more than twice as many reports as SQ1 and WQ1. They reported preparing five quartets, while SQ1 spent nearly two terms on one quartet and learned a new work. In comparison, WQ1 reported preparing and performing three substantial quintets. SQ3 reported more than twice as much individual practice on quartet repertoire as WQ1, and half as much again as SQ1. SQ3 reported 22 quartet rehearsals, including one coaching session, and four performances. They rehearsed three times as long as SQ1, who reported ten rehearsals, including two coaching sessions, and two performances; by contrast, WQ1 reported 17 rehearsals of which more than half were coaching sessions, and two performances.

Examples of practice strategies rated high by members of each ensemble include: “Slow practice of solo passage for intonation (keeping as many fingers down for accuracy); focusing and right arm/wrist/hand for string crossing and building up tempo to play up to speed” (SQ3); “played through music putting fingerings and bowings in” (SQ1); “thought about sound and where to breathe” (WQ1). Examples of highly-rated rehearsal strategies include: “Repetition of phrases (maybe only a couple of bars) gradually elongating the passage until we could confidently play through the section” (SQ3); “stricter, stronger feel for pulse, simpler approach, more effect” (SQ1); “We worked out who we play the scales with. We realised the timing was out because of a semiquaver rest at the beginning of each scale. So we played a note on the rest and then did the scales until they were perfectly in time. Then we took out the extra note” (WQ1).

Numbers of and mean ratings for practice and rehearsal strategies are shown in Table 2. ANOVA revealed a main effect of ensemble on practice strategy rating ($F_{2,79}=4.78$, $p=0.011$); post-hoc tests showed significant differences between SQ1 and WQ3. There was also a main effect of ensemble on rehearsal strategy rating ($F_{2,237}=31.42$, $p<0.0001$); post-hoc tests showed significant differences between all ensembles.

Mean ratings for focus, effort, and enjoyment are shown in Table 3. The correlation between participants’ ratings of focus and effort in individual practice ($r_{42}=0.62$, $p<0.0001$) was stronger than that between focus and

Table 1. Practice and rehearsal reports.

	WQ1	SQ1	SQ3
Repertoire	Nielsen, Reicha, Verdi	Mozart, Dance Project	Schumann, Mozart, Matthews, Schubert, Brahms
Reports	278	274	587
Individual practice (hrs)	6.5	9.25	14+
Rehearsal hrs (sessions)	23.3 (17)	11.3 (10)	38 (22)

Table 2. Practice and rehearsal strategies

	WQ1	SQ1	SQ3
Practice strategies rated (reported)	26 (26)	26 (26)	30 (30)
Practice strategy mean ratings (SD)	7.12 (2)	7.54 (1.2)	8.25 (.81)
Rehearsal strategies rated (reported)	44 (50)	49 (50)	147 (150)
Rehearsal strategy mean ratings (SD)	8.57 (1.28)	6.6 (1.52)	7.98 (1.17)

Table 3. Mean ratings (and SD) of focus, effort, and enjoyment.

			WQ1	SQ1	SQ3
Practice	Self	Focus	7.07 (1.86)	7.86 (1.10)	8.78 (0.70)
		Effort	6.64 (2.21)	7.64 (1.22)	8.43 (0.85)
		Enjoyment	5.64 (1.95)	5.86 (2.14)	7.64 (0.93)
Ensemble	Self	Focus	8.77 (1.33)	6.92 (1.52)	8.12 (0.90)
		Effort	8.71 (1.38)	7.05 (1.76)	8.43 (0.96)
		Enjoyment	9.31 (0.90)	6.26 (2.37)	7.50 (1.04)
Ensemble	Other	Focus	8.54 (1.72)	6.76 (1.76)	8.02 (1.00)
		Effort	8.80 (1.32)	6.96 (1.56)	8.24 (0.95)
		Enjoyment	9.17 (0.92)	6.76 (2.26)	7.79 (1.03)

Table 4. Ratings of own focus, effort and enjoyment in ensemble rehearsals.

N=135	Focus	Effort
Effort	0.83	
Enjoyment	0.57	0.55

Table 5. Ratings of others' focus, effort, and enjoyment in ensemble rehearsals.

N=135	Focus	Effort
Effort	0.83	
Enjoyment	0.41	0.46

enjoyment ($r_{42}=0.39$, $p=0.01$). There was no correlation between effort and enjoyment.

The correlations between ratings of participants' own and others' focus, effort, and enjoyment in ensemble rehearsal are shown in Tables 4 and 5. There were also significant correlations between participants' ratings of their own and their colleagues' focus ($r_{134}=0.67$), effort ($r_{134}=0.70$), and enjoyment ($r_{133}=0.74$), all significant at $p<0.0001$.

There were main effects of ensemble on focus ($F_{2,39}=6.00$, $p=0.005$), effort ($F_{2,39}=4.76$, $p=0.014$), and enjoyment in individual practice ($F_{2,39}=5.48$, $p=0.008$) such that the ratings of SQ3 were the highest; post-hoc tests showed significant differences between SQ3 and WQ1 on all three dimensions, and between all three ensembles on enjoyment. The main effects of ensemble on self-ratings were all significant at $p<0.0001$ —focus ($F_{2,131}=22.1$), effort ($F_{2,131}=17.04$), and enjoyment ($F_{2,131}=37.44$)—as were their ratings of their colleagues' focus ($F_{2,132}=15.02$), effort ($F_{2,132}=21.61$), and enjoyment ($F_{2,132}=24.76$). There were significant differences between all ensembles' self-ratings on all three dimensions, except SQ3 and WQ1 on effort, and on ratings of others between WQ1 and SQ1 on focus, SQ3 and SQ1 on effort, and all three ensembles on enjoyment.

DISCUSSION

Lehmann's (2002) findings were confirmed for individual practice by positive correlations between focus and effort, and focus and enjoyment. No negative correlation was found, however, between effort and enjoyment, and all three dimensions were correlated for rehearsals; there were also positive correlations between participants' rating of their own and their colleagues' focus, effort, and enjoyment. The members of the successful string quartet (SQ3) both practiced and rehearsed considerably more than their younger colleagues, although this is not surprising given that they had much more repertoire to perform. On the other hand, they enjoyed their individual practice more than did the other groups and more than their ensemble rehearsals, although they attributed higher levels of enjoyment to their colleagues. They also identified more sophisticated practice and rehearsal strategies, rating their own practice strategies higher than did the less advanced students. Although the members of WQ1 carried out the fewest individual practice hours—and indeed both WQ1 and SQ1 reported least enjoyment from practicing—they had a great deal of coaching from a range of tutors, and this, together with their ratings of their rehearsal strategies as even higher than SQ3 and the “failed” SQ1, may in part account for their success; SQ1 took part in

just two rather unsuccessful coaching sessions early in the first term. Furthermore, WQ1 reported the highest levels of focus, effort, and enjoyment in rehearsal both for themselves and their colleagues. It may thus be possible for student musicians to do less individual practice if they have plenty of, and enjoy, ensemble rehearsal, although this is, of course, dependent on their role within the group. A final contrast is between SQ1, who rated focus, effort, and enjoyment for individual practice higher than WQ1 but provided the lowest ratings on all three dimensions for ensemble rehearsal—it was perhaps inevitable that they would “fail” as a group.

Further analyses of the participants’ goals, strategies, and plans remain to be carried out; nevertheless, the findings of the present study have implications for theories of motivation in relation to practice versus rehearsal, as well as practical applications for those engaged in the teaching and coaching of chamber musicians.

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