



The Silo and the String Quartet

Mark Singer has been waking recently to feelings of unspecified dread. On these mornings, he follows a routine he established long ago. His clock radio goes off, he has coffee and breakfast, skims the sports section of the paper, and then practices his violin for an hour. He's preparing to rehearse with his string quartet later on. Unfortunately, they've been struggling lately. His anxiety rises as he warms up on scales and arpeggios before settling down to his music. This morning, Singer has the score to all four parts on his music stand, trying to figure out how his part fits with the others.

Singer is the second violinist of the Tanzer string quartet. The quartet was recently engaged to perform a difficult contemporary piece for a new exhibition at the city's art museum. They were hired by one of the museum's board members who had seen the Tanzer quartet's performance of music by Haydn and Vivaldi. The board member was immediately smitten by the soulful playing of Isabella Chapman, the Tanzer quartet's first violinist. He knew he wanted this group for the art opening.

New Territory

There is a problem: The Tanzer quartet's repertoire is limited to baroque and early classics — music easily put together and popular with audiences. This contemporary piece wasn't in their comfort zone, but the quartet agreed to play it because it was a prestigious opportunity, and their manager said it was good for the quartet's career. The piece starts with a melody that unfolds in complicated rhythmic variations as it is passed around the group. The melody requires virtuosic technique, and the accompanying lines need deft listening skills. This music is like a complex puzzle; everyone must understand how each part fits into the big picture, and how they can utilize each other's diverse talents.

Players have become set in their own roles:

Prior to this piece, the first violinist would lead the creative interpretation of melody; the cellist would assert the rhythm, and the second violinist and viola would fill in the harmony. The violist, Brent Fallowsworth, has a dark brooding sound that provides a lush background to Chapman's melody. He'd like express himself more within the music, but his lack of confidence limits him to an accompanying role. George Harklerode, the group's cellist, is used to being the rhythm section of the group. Since they normally play music that is not challenging in this regard, the others don't know that rhythm is his weakest skill. His virtuosic technique goes unnoticed. These were not issues for Chapman; she was happy to have everyone accompany her lovely melodies.

Confusion

After rehearsing this piece far more than usual, they still sound like four players playing four different pieces of music at the same time. Chapman, the first violinist, is not used to playing rhythm for the cellist. Singer, the second violinist, plays his melody so discretely it sounds as if it were the harmony: nobody hears it. Fallowsworth, the violist, is disoriented from not hearing the first violinist play the melody and gets lost. Before playing with the quartet, Singer played a lot of contemporary music. His experience in this repertoire gave him the perspective that this piece would fit together quite easily if they all better understood each other's parts. In his role with this quartet, however, he was reluctant to step on anyone's toes. As the rehearsals progress, they feel more pressure than usual. At the latest rehearsal, they get lost in the middle of the piece while trying to play it from beginning to end. The concert is 3 days away.

Back in Singer's practice studio, with all four parts of music staring back at him, he deliberates over a plan to address his colleagues at their rehearsal this afternoon.

He knows they are challenged with these problems:

- The players don't see how each other's roles fit the big picture, especially complicated by their changing roles over the course of the piece.
- Chapman isn't sure the other players are capable of playing the other melodies to her satisfaction. Does she want to share the spotlight?
- Harklerode loses control of the tempo, and nobody feels permission to challenge him, because he has always been the authority on rhythm.
- Fallowsworth lacks the confidence to play out after years in a supporting role.
- The group doesn't have an appropriate work structure to deal with the complexity of the new challenge.
- They don't have enough trust to engage each other about their problems.

The show must go on.

As Mark sees it, their problems can be divided into two categories:

1. Structural: How can they solve the work/music puzzle?
2. Interpersonal: How can they engage each other to work openly and productively?

Singer knows that Isabella needs to listen to George when he has a solo melody, and play her accompanying parts with sensitivity to George's line. Brent needs to find the confidence to play his viola part more boldly, and lead the quartet in certain passages when his role calls for it.

He needs to point out to Chapman that her part is not always the solo melody, heard to the exclusion of others. She knows this, but is unsure how to play any other role.

Mark wonders if George Harklerode has practiced his part with a metronome. Does he know where his rhythms fit with the other parts? How can he get Brent Fallowsworth to feel confident in his part?

They must identify their new roles, how they change, and then they must understand how their roles compliment each other.

Singer also worries about trust. How will each colleague respond when he addresses these issues? Their channels of communication have been limited, as normal repertoire did not require them to work out many problems in rehearsal. Will they be able to speak openly about their problems? How will his colleagues react? Will they be able to change how they work together?

Singer knows he must say something. Does he address the quartet all at once? Or does he talk with each colleague privately, not to embarrass anyone in front of his or her colleagues? Knowing solutions to put the music together is one thing; achieving buy in from his colleagues is another. He doesn't want to step on toes, but doesn't want collective egg on their faces at the concert, either.

Finding harmony in the big picture

Singer puts down the music, and decides to email his colleagues.

Dear Tanzers,

Can we meet at the Welles Park Coffeehouse to start our rehearsal? Leave your instruments at home. Please trust my judgment on this. –Mark

Perplexed, his colleagues warily agreed to do so, but not without remarks about the serious lack of time before the imminent concert.

When they all arrived, Singer asked them all how they were feeling about the rehearsals and the upcoming concert. Isabella answered first, commenting about how much she didn't like the obtuse nature of this contemporary piece.

Brent, the violist, seconded the sentiment. He started to say something about his dissatisfaction with the rehearsals, but was interrupted by George Harklerode remarking that this conversation was eating into their rehearsal time, and demanded to know why they were all here, instead of playing?

Mark gently answered with a question, "I wanted to know if you guys were as disoriented with this piece as me? I've been thinking about how we can get this together and sound our best, but wanted to discuss it away from our instruments, so we could think more clearly about it all."

Nodding agreement from the others.

Mark continued his inquiry. “George, I’ve been feeling a little anxious to play out more when I suspect I have an important melody. Do you think I should assert myself more?”

Isabella answered for him.

“Mark, you have always been so deferential to me. Let’s face it – my playing the Vivaldi melodies puts people in the seats. I’m comfortable with that. I’m off balance with this piece because my normal role as the leader with the melody is not very apparent to me. I’m trying to lead, but don’t have the normal cues that allow me to do my job.”

Everyone was stunned by this outburst of emotional honesty. Everyone thought Isabella to be a bit self-occupied. George caught the spirit of Isabella’s remark by admitting to his apprehensions about the intricate rhythms, and how they fit.

Brent nodded. “Mark, I appreciate your candor about our working process, and thank Isabella for her honesty. My problem is that I’m not sure where I fit in with any of this. I know I can play expressively with a lovely sound in our normal repertoire, but here, I don’t know where to put it. The melody and accompanying rhythms move around so much, I’m just lost.

Mark gets out the score, containing all four parts. He’s outlined in red pencil where the melody goes, from part to part. It lines up on the score. They hadn’t bothered, as a group, to look at it from this perspective. The quartet was feeling a bit sheepish for not seeing this bigger picture before. They had all been entrenched in the difficulty of their own parts, figuring that many of the problems stemmed from the inadequacies of their colleagues. It had never occurred to them to have a conversation about how they all fit the bigger picture.

All four players collectively studied the score together, for the first time seeing the parts as a whole. This immediately clarified which problems they needed to work on. Finding a structure to rehearse was easy after this. They all read off the score to know which melody followed which, until they knew all the parts in their heads. At Isabella’s request, Mark led them on a separate rehearsal to iron out the details of the complex rhythms.

By initiating an open-ended inquiry (over coffee) about how their roles had changed with this new piece, Mark Singer’s leap of faith in his colleagues was rewarded by a session of collective thinking. Brent Fallowsworth noted the irony of how their success as chamber musicians came without their instruments. As soon as they broke down their silos, they were able to think together about the music and solve their previously intractable problems.

Mark Singer’s alarm clock has just awakened him this morning. He makes his coffee and breakfast, and reaches for the newspaper. This morning, he bypasses the sports scores for the Arts section. “The Tanzer string quartet performed at the museum last night in connection with... In a departure from their trademark Haydn, they performed a contemporary piece by... it was electrifying. The breadth of each player’s range of virtuoso technique and rigorously intellectual interpretation left this listener at the edge of his seat.”