

Developing Independent Musical Thought:  
A Study of Baroque Practice to Apply to Modern-Day Large Ensembles

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A question many large ensemble directors are left pondering is how to develop independent musical thought in their students. For example, in the alleluia section in *Chorale and Alleluia* by Howard Hanson, the ostinato players may not be together, they may play over the low melody line when it enters, and they may not play in a staccato style to help invigorate the music.<sup>1</sup> In a perfectly ideal world, none of this would happen in the first place, but in the least, the students should be able to identify these large-scale problems and potentially even fix them on their own. However, this is not always the case. As many directors have experienced, students often become absorbed in the intricacies of their own parts and ignore the complete piece of aural art in which they are shaping. The conductor must at the very least point out the musical issue and will often have to rehearse the section a few times to help correct each issue. Meanwhile, students do as they are told or wait for further instruction.

Now imagine this: The band sight-reads the quicker section of Hanson's piece.<sup>2</sup> As the band progresses, the ostinato players recognize they are not together, and while they may not correctly play all of the notes, they begin to align what they are playing with what they are hearing. The director models the style they wish for the part to be played in through a smaller, light, and bouncy stick movement, and the students pick up on the guidance. A measure after the low melody line is cued in, the students adjust their volume so that it can be heard as the primary focus. In this melody line, experimentation with phrasing and articulation can be heard in the effort to make the music more interesting. When the timpanist enters, she slightly emphasizes the last beat of each measure to help drive the music forward.

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<sup>1</sup> Howard Hanson, *Chorale and Alleluia*, (New York: Carl Fischer, 1955), accessed Dec 12, 2018, JW Pepper, <https://www.jwpepper.com/Chorale-and-Alleluia/236976.item#/submit>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

In this band, students are making their own decisions about the music they are playing. They are not void of guidance; the conductor is still communicative, but they do not have to stop for every mistake or less agreeable musical interpretation either, knowing many will be addressed by the students themselves. This may sound like a fantasy, but when students have received specific instruction and are in an environment in which they have been inspired to work together to achieve meaningful goals, they will begin taking ownership of what they are producing. The question for us simply becomes how they are able to do this. To find the answer to this question, we can look back a few hundred years to the Baroque era.

Some decades before the beginning of the era, a treatise by the name of *The Book of the Courtier* was written by Baldassarre Castiglione, giving us insight into how music was viewed at the time.<sup>3</sup> Among other general behavioral expectations, the treatise discusses the ways a musician should conduct himself while performing as well as what else could be expected from someone in the profession. For example, Castiglione states that a musician should only play in front of familiar people and not a large crowd, indicating music is seen as a highly personal experience. Strengthening this implication is Castiglione's statement that in private, musicians are free to play more complex music for more complex dances, but in larger settings, they must play simpler music that everyone can successfully dance to. The only other place a musician can play more complex music is while masquerading because the activity in itself is not a personal experience. Another expectation for musicians was that they could not play when their listeners were preoccupied. Music appears to have been seen as a gift given from one person directly to another, so it would have been highly disrespectful for the receiver to ignore what is being

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<sup>3</sup> Baldassarre Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. Charles S. Singleton (New York: Garden City, 1959). Information in rest of paragraph derived from this source.

shared with them. Also, the treatise states that solo vocalists were preferred over ensembles because this allowed the musician's ornamentation to be more easily heard and enjoyed. It is important to note that composers of the time did not add ornaments into their music because they expected performers to add their own. Therefore, in order to have an entertaining performance, the performer needed to express their creativity and add their own to the piece. There were rules to follow while adding embellishments, and these were communicated by teachers through other treatises as we will soon see, but this practice helped give the music a more personal touch since every performer will play or sing each piece differently.

In order to properly add this ornamentation and personalize the music, musicians had to understand music theory. After discussing how to play the viol, Christopher Simpson's *The Division Viol* spends the rest of the treatise discussing music theory and how to divide the ground bass by dividing the line rhythmically into a more complex passage.<sup>4</sup> To summarize, Simpson believes that in order to create an interesting and satisfying musical performance, the ground bass should become more elaborate as the piece progresses and should not be played the same way twice. This helps give each repetition its own personality as well as helps show off the musician's skills, knowledge, and creativity. Through this practice, music is not only personal, but it is personalized; each performer will present a different version of the same piece based on their musical background and personality.

This personal and personalized style of music was enjoyed for some time, but eventually composers began writing for larger ensembles, and a new style of playing was added to the

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<sup>4</sup> Christopher Simpson, *The Division-Viol: The Art of Playing ex Tempore Upon a Ground* (London: J. Curwen & Sons LTD, 1965). Information in rest of paragraph derived from this source.

musicians' tool belt. In this larger setting, music could not be as personal; larger ensembles often have larger audiences. Additionally, the music could not be as personalized; if every musician added their own ornamentations to the music, mass chaos would ensue. Georg Muffat, a Baroque composer and performer, describes what it takes to be a reliable ensemble player in his treatise *Georg Muffat on Performance Practice*.<sup>5</sup> He states that in order to play well together, musicians must first tune to each other. We often take this for granted today, but at the time, a standard tuning system had not yet been established, so it was important musicians compromised on a pitch center instead of playing wherever they would like. Second, Muffat instructs musicians to tap their foot to the beat while they play. This will ensure they stay together as an ensemble since conductors had not yet evolved. Third, musicians are instructed to use the same bowings on certain important beats in the measure and phrase. This is also something that is always expected of musicians today, but it was not at this time. Conformity in this way inherently reduces personalization, but it opens the door to successful large ensemble performances.

While this large ensemble style of playing is evolving, ornamentation and personalization are still expected of musicians. By this time, composers were notating some ornamentation in their music; however, as Johann Quantz states in his treatise *On Playing the Flute*, "It is not enough to be able to play the different types of appoggiaturas with their proper values when they are marked. You must also know how to add them at the appropriate places when they are not indicated."<sup>6</sup> An entire chapter in his book is dedicated to learning how to properly play

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<sup>5</sup> Georg Muffat, *Georg Muffat on Performance Practice*, ed. and trans. by David K. Wilson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001). Information in rest of paragraph derived from this source.

<sup>6</sup> Johann Quantz, *On Playing the Flute* (New York: The Free Press, 1966), 96-97. Information in rest of paragraph derived from full source.

appoggiaturas as well as when it is appropriate for the performer to add ornaments of his own. However, a large part of the book is also dedicated to the art of ensemble playing. He states that if a performer is adding ornamentation, the group must decide whether they will all do it or if none will for the sake of uniformity. Many other ensemble expectations and common practices are presented. Through this treatise, we see the musician as a flexible being; someone who is able to properly perform in an ensemble as well as someone who possesses the skills necessary to present a personalized and interesting solo performance that is in good taste.

These Baroque players seem to be nearly exactly what we would want in a performer today: someone versatile and expressive. We typically succeed at teaching large ensemble skills today; tuning to one pitch is a given, and so are the expectations that we match bow strokes, articulations, style, tone color, and many other aspects of ensemble playing. However, we often lack the independence that can lead to a better ensemble performance. As we saw in Quantz' treatise, ensemble performers could add a musical idea of their own and then the ensemble decided what to do with it.<sup>7</sup> The independence developed through solo playing helped make the ensemble performance more interesting, expressive, and responsive. How do we guide our young performers to a point where they can be independently expressive as well? Using Baroque treatises arguably may not be the most applicable way since many of the pieces we will play will not require us to add ornamentation. Therefore, it seems that the most logical solution is an instructional process that eventually evolves into the creation of student-led chamber groups.

In this process, the first step must be proper instruction on standard performance practice, just like it is in the many treatises of the Baroque. This process can easily happen in the large

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<sup>7</sup> Quantz, *On Playing the Flute*, 210.

ensemble. Warm-ups with goals related to the repertoire to be rehearsed that day provide the perfect lab setting to develop musical skills. For example, students can be asked to brainstorm how to make a basic scale sound more joyful and exciting. Ideas they develop can be tried and evaluated for effectiveness, and near the end of the process, the director can introduce well-tested ideas of their own for the students to experience. Students can briefly discuss why the methods used were successful or not, and then repertoire can be rehearsed. Any time ideas from the warm-up apply, the director can guide their students through questions such as “this music is lacking energy. Is there anything we did in the warm-ups that could help us here?” As time progresses and students’ knowledge base begins to grow, the conductor can ask more open-ended questions such as “what is this piece lacking?” Eventually, students will begin developing the skills necessary to ask themselves these questions without prompting. Once students have a knowledge base started, this practice will prove to be fruitful.

However, the conductor is still a guide, so while the music is becoming much more personal, students do not yet completely own their work like the soloists of the Baroque did. In order for complete independent musical thought to be developed, student-led settings must emerge. After students are successful in the above setting, the director can split students into chamber groups. A range of repertoire should be provided in order for students to select their own, and while the director should often observe the groups to become informed on which musical concepts should be retaught or reinforced in the large ensemble, they should only become involved if the students have asked for help or if it is absolutely necessary. The goal for these groups is not a perfect performance, which can be a hard reality to accept in the

contest-driven world we live in today, but it is to discover how to apply the concepts they have learned in the full ensemble on their own in order to personalize a piece.

Logistically, it would be ideal for these groups to meet at least once per week. If before or after school is not feasible or desired, full ensemble rehearsal time can be utilized. If there is not enough space for several separate groups to rehearse at once, the director can hold a sectional with half the band as the other half breaks into chamber groups. A student leader can be selected to rehearse the sectional for a few minutes when the director would like to check in on the small groups, or if a student or team teacher is present, duties can be split accordingly. While we may initially lament lost rehearsal time, this practice will prove to be much more effective than trying to achieve musical independence in a large ensemble alone. Students will quickly gain skills and experience from the small setting that they can apply to the large ensemble, saving countless minutes and even hours because the students will be addressing what the conductor used to. Additionally, focus in the large group can be directed to higher-level skills and concepts because there will be more time available. During the chamber group phase, discussions and guidance by the director should still continue in the full ensemble, and over time they may find the level of discussion elevating.

Our young musicians will not always have an instructor telling them how to play. There will come a day when they are released from our presence and will have to make musical decisions of their own. If we do not give them this skill while they are with us, they will never possess it to its full potential, and we will therefore be doing them a great disservice. We must fully dedicate ourselves to the process of developing musical independence and personalization



and be willing to sacrifice our repertoire rehearsal time for the development of our young musicians. Focusing on this larger goal will pay off in full, but only if we allow it.

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