

Eric Berlin's Workshop

Chamber Music Rehearsing - No Horns Needed

One of the primary tenets of my teaching is that we gain skill more quickly by isolating components of our technique and dealing with them individually. Freed from the pressure to "produce" and judge what is coming out of the bell, the mind can deal with these components in a more focused way. Chamber music is an ideal way to reinforce these concepts. From the most fundamental issues of rhythm and pitch to airflow and articulation, using these techniques rapidly achieves better ensemble without using the instruments.

Rhythm

In any ensemble setting, good rhythm is a complex composite of many factors. We must take into consideration the time we feel (internal sense of pulse), the time we see (conductor, concertmaster bow, colleagues' physical movement) and the time we hear (in an orchestra, we can have many multiples of this!) to come up with a synthesis of all of the above which helps to coalesce the ensemble. Especially for a principal trumpet in a large orchestra, this is a complex calculation that can make or break the performance. Chamber music throws fewer variables into the equation and develops confidence to use these same skills in larger ensembles.

One of the things I remember being extremely helpful from the wonderful solfège training I received at New England Conservatory was an insistence on conducting while doing anything in class. Not only was it important to conduct the pattern, but to snap on each ictus. The definite placement of each pulse within a bar becomes a predictable mile marker on which to ground rhythmic activity. Instead of a series of frantic events from left to right, we are able to relax into the inevitability of time.

Regardless of the repertoire, this exercise is invaluable in creating a group consensus about time. Multiple people singing rhythms while snap conducting illustrates differences in each person's sense of pulse and helps to unify them into one. Singing attacks only in this manner is also a wonderful way to understand the composite rhythms we create as an ensemble and clarify them for the listener.

Snap conducting is especially helpful when dealing with transitions. With rubato and any tempo fluctuation, making sure everyone is on the same



Eric Berlin.

page is critical. Vocalize and then snap smaller subdivisions to feel how these smaller units are the drivers of any tempo change. Making eye contact and keeping the radar on to feel the subtle shifts of subdivisions around the group, allow one person to change the intensity of the time change while everyone continues to sing and conduct. Once this feels comfortable, internalize the subdivisions and sing the actual music. No longer crashing into these transitions as moments of insecurity and panic, they become moments where magic can happen.

Establishing a Groove

With the UMass Graduate Brass Quintet, I experimented with a new technique to establish a groove in the first movement of Jan Bach's *Rounds and Dances*. With the complex rhythms and lots of small rests it is easy to become anxious and rush. Calling on the knowledge and preferences of the players themselves, we used their favorite hip-hop tunes. Finding one with a similar tempo, I had the group sing their rhythms along with the music blaring on the stereo. In this exercise, the amazing realization is how much more time there is. With the constant subdivisions in the drum track, the rhythms snapped into place like Lego bricks onto a baseplate. Again, as with snap conducting, this allows players to relax into the inevitability of time. More complex meter does not lend itself easily to this approach, but a loud metronome or drum machine set on fast subdivisions can help in a similar, but less visceral way.

Pitch

Once behind the plumbing, we all can become overwhelmed with the physical aspects of playing and forget that the whole purpose is to get a song from our heads through our instruments into

someone else's head! Our audience does not hear a series of fingerings! It seems cliché, but the old adage "if you can sing it, you can play it" does hold true.

As an ensemble, pitch is a complex organism. Individually playing to the needle of a tuner does not assure an ability to play with others. Being receptive to and quickly reacting to the subtle changes within the group is the greatest joy of good chamber music! Singing removes the last barrier between us and allows us to deal with pitch in a very organic way. Singing everything in a chamber group's repertoire is important, no matter how difficult. Keeping connected with the song in our heads away from the instrument also encourages better phrase shaping and a sense of flow in addition to realizing where we are imprecise in our aural concept. Tuning one chord after another can fix individual chords out of context and achieve some improvement, but again, pitch is fluid in any ensemble. Adjustments while singing are realized in a fraction of a second without conscious thought just as professional musicians do while playing.

I recently had the opportunity to coach the Boston Philharmonic Youth Symphony brass section for an upcoming performance of Strauss' *Ein Heldenleben*. I was very impressed with these high school students on their first attempts, but pitch was an issue and chords did not line up vertically. On their instruments after just one time singing the opening scene, the unisons became absolute, the harmonies gelled and they sounded like a full-time professional orchestra section. By singing, these players realized the capacity for great intonation which they already possessed!

Buzzing

After singing, switching to mouthpiece buzzing of the same material is a natural next step to put a more precise vibration into the amplifier. While buzzing, eliminate any articulation and buzz a constant glissando. Repeated notes should become a sustained pitch and small rests are sustained through. On first attempt, I often hear students buzzing only a basic narrow contour of a line without detail. These pitch discrepancies we hear on the mouthpiece are a good indication of what is being put into the instrument. Insistence on precise pitch placement on the mouthpiece without the crutch of the instrument reinforces the vocal approach to playing and yields

dramatically more centered sound and ease of production. It is amazing how much easier playing feels after a good group buzzing session!

Airflow and Articulation

Chamber music is another opportunity to address other fundamental issues in technique such as articulation. Simple "wind patterns" done as a group encourage proper airflow, definite articulation and precise rhythm. Without the instrument, simply take big breaths and articulate through any ensemble piece. One should not hear the pitch contour, just a simple consistent vowel with clear articulation in good rhythm. Use snap conducting to insist on definite time. The idea is to use a lot of air and simplify the articulation. Breathe as often as needed. Hearing the vowel sound and clarity of articulation diagnoses many problems of restricted airflow.

Without the resistance of the instrument, everyone will use more air. Doing this as a group defines articulation to assure quick, definite response that also provides better time. In addition, the benefits to airflow and open resonant sound are astounding.

The other added side effect is building the habit of "releasing" the air instead of controlling it. Picking up the instruments and playing directly after this exercise

shows dramatic results in overall quality of sound, blend, intonation and precision of time from defined articulation.

Group intensity and dynamic shaping

Using snap conducting and singing rhythm on a single pitch or using wind patterns indicate with volume and intensity the peaks and valleys of intensity within the music. Removed from the difficulties of producing pitch on our instruments, this allows us to make what is the correct decision musically, not what is habitual. Use eye contact and collectively land that final cadence with a smile!

One last very interesting group exercise involves the greatest creative force we have - the imagination. This will truly help to build a unified sense of musical line and shaping. Using only eye contact and conducting, take any piece of music and play it in your heads making no audible sounds. Be aware of each other's conducting patterns and allow the person with the melody to move the group through time. This powerful exercise establishes an incredible sense of cohesion within the ensemble.

All of these exercises add depth to our understanding of the music and help refine one or more aspects of our technique. Using the instruments after any of these will show dramatic

improvement. Devoting large portions of rehearsal time to these exercises refines the artistic product and reinforces that the true nature of what we do is something artistic and much more powerful than the physical act of hitting the right buttons.

Yamaha Performing Artist Eric Berlin is Principal Trumpet of the Albany Symphony Orchestra, Associate Principal Trumpet of the Colorado Music Festival Orchestra, a member of the Boston Modern Orchestra Project and the Empire Brass Quintet. In addition, he has performed with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, New York Philharmonic and Los Angeles Philharmonic.

A champion of music of our time, he has commissioned, premièred and recorded numerous new works for trumpet. Stephen Paulus' Concerto for Two Trumpets on his release of all commissioned works with the UMass Wind Ensemble received a Grammy nomination for Best Contemporary Classical Composition. His recording of George Tsontakis' True Colors for Trumpet and Orchestra, commissioned by the ASO for Mr. Berlin, was honoured as one of National Public Radio's top ten classical recordings of 2017. He is a lifetime member and served as Director of the International Trumpet Guild. Berlin lives with Reuben the wonder dog in Western Massachusetts.



Willson

State-of-the-art techniques

combined with precision craftsmanship guarantee the highest quality

Willson - Superior Quality

For instrument trial availability and direct-sales, contact:
Willson UK Consultant
Howard J Evans on 07776 302072
or howard@hevans.free-online.co.uk

www.willson-europe.com