

Chamber Music — My Femme Fatale

by Anton Kuerti

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Anton Kuerti is a pianist who has immersed himself in solo and chamber music performance. He has performed over 35 different concerti with some of the world's finest orchestras and conductors. Among the artists with whom he has performed chamber music are violinists Shmuel Ashkenasi, Lorand Fenyves, Mark Kaplan, Joseph Silverstein, and Charles Treger; cellists Yo-Yo Ma and Janos Starker; violist Walter Trampler; french hornist Barry Tuckwell, and the Cleveland, Guarneri, Oxford, Tokyo and Vermeer String Quartets. Mr. Kuerti's numerous recordings include sonatas, chamber music and concerti.

A common cliché of interviewers is to ask a pianist: "Which do you prefer, recitals, or concertos?" (My usual answering cliché is that I would be sorry to be deprived of either one.) The idea that chamber music might be the medium of choice usually does not even enter the arena, perhaps because of the historical misunderstanding (particularly in North America) of the pianist's role in an ensemble. His image has been that of an "accompanist," a secondary adjunct whose purpose is just to support the real action, the saucer under the cup. He may play a bit of an intro, but then should slip into the background, remaining just audible enough to prevent his companions from slipping too far off pitch.

Some of our great "super-star" violinists and cellists bear much responsibility for this attitude, because they have distorted and exploited chamber music for their own glory. Typifying their attitude is the true story of a famous violinist who asked "his" pianist to play the Mozart violin sonata, "you know, the one that goes dee-dah-dee-dah-dee-dah-dee." He meant of course the fresh, beautiful Sonata in B Flat K. 378, whose main theme however soars forth in the piano, not in the accompanying see-saw figure he was humming. This mentality had its origin during the romantic era, when even the greatest musician-violinists like Joachim and Spohr stood when playing first violin in a quartet!

But similar nonsense continues to this day. Programs are often printed proportional, no doubt, to the cockeyed (or, rather, *cockeared*) balance between the two parts. Pianists are chosen who can at least be bullied into providing an innocuous wall-paper background of bland, faint tinkling; and a futile attempt is made to create a coherent interpretation by concentrating artistic inspiration on one part alone. These practices — and the fear of being typed forever as an accompanist — have discouraged many distinguished pianists from performing chamber music, especially sonatas.

In recent years, however, the love for chamber music, which most musicians avow, seems to be prevailing, and more and

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more soloists are taking chamber music out of the closet (where in any case even violin duets could be hazardous to bows and eyes) and into the concert hall. How does it feel for someone accustomed to being an unfettered soloist to join what amounts to a committee for making music?

It would make me happiest to report that music is music, and that playing chamber music, once minor adjustments and agreements have been made amongst the performers, is not different from performing as a soloist. But this would be an outrageous lie, for the obstacles to enjoyment and high achievement in chamber music are immense; almost as great, in fact, as the rewards on the rare occasions when a "committee" is able to file a report that is not only unanimous and harmonious, but inspired.

There are, of course, some rewards at all levels, and amateurs as well as professionals can have a wonderful time reading through pieces; the player is intoxicated by the spirit of the music, which he is mercifully spared from hearing objectively, and he is also awed by the sensation that the whole is far more than the sum of the individual parts. Never mind if it is not together, out of tune, and full of wrong notes; playing even approximately together is a highly fulfilling social activity, combining the physical, emotional and intellectual domains; requiring much skill, cooperation and instant response, and providing a very basic human gratification: the satisfaction of feeling and perceiving how diverse parts can fit together perfectly, be they parts of a mechanism, a puzzle or a piece of music. This simple pleasure, which is both sensual and intellectual, of being able to say, "Gee, doesn't that fit together marvelously" is one of the more underrated charms of music. (In other realms it is perhaps better appreciated...)

Even for the listener, an amateur massacre of a work can occasionally have an innocent, unspoiled soulful quality, much like a child's drawing: intense, straightforward and naive. The quintessence of many Mozart string quartets that still haunts my inner ear goes back to childhood, when my father, an amateur violist, sawed through quartets



Anton Kuerti in a chamber music coaching session with young artists from the Banff Centre School of Fine Arts Winter Cycle Music Program.

at home once a week, with very little vibrato and even less finesse. Still, the earnest devotion of four humble players making contact with genius left a deep impression.

But when one seeks, however remotely, to match the perfection of a chamber music masterpiece in its performance, very great problems arise. When performing as a soloist, I like to imagine the music as alive, displaying a will of its own, so that the precise lengths of notes, the dynamics, tensions and shapes are creating themselves at the instant they are heard, rather than being churned out in a pre-ordained way. How could this attitude ever be reconciled with the necessity of two or more musicians playing precisely together, and creating a performance which makes sense as a whole?

Performers struggle for years to free the mind from having consciously to direct every motion, from having to count beats or in any other way allow inspiration and imagination to be subjugated by rigid predeter-

mined concepts (except of course for a general understanding of the style and respect for the authentic text). We learn to relinquish control of many details to the subconscious, trying to think mainly of the character of each phrase, and eventually even to become immersed in the spiritual essence of the whole work (or at least a large section of it).

It would seem that much of this hard-earned artistic and mental freedom must be sacrificed to the demands of ensemble playing. What a descent it represents from the above trance-like state (more often aspired to than achieved) into one where constant vigilance must be focused on every detail of one's partners' performance: each instant is like a railroad crossing, where one must "stop, look and listen" (except that there is no time to stop or even hesitate), and where the peril is not collision, but failure of the notes to collide properly. One must listen incessantly and respond to every nuance of the

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others, not just in timing, but in balance, quality of sound, and character; and one must try to remember all the conscious agreements made during rehearsal, and strive also to incorporate the far greater number of unspoken details one can absorb from listening. What a challenge!

And even if one succeeds in meeting this challenge, it does not end there, or the performance will sound contrived and static. Within distinctly narrower limits, some of the soloist's freedom must be recaptured. Here I hesitate to chart the precise course, for we enter a complex, precarious area of human relations, personality, musical instinct, and sensitive, instant judgment. How far dare one go beyond or even change the rehearsal agreements? Are all players able and willing to give and take subtle hints of impending nuances and agogics? At what point does individual inspiration become irresponsible — antagonizing or even destabilizing the partners rather than encouraging them? How much precision may be sacrificed to flexibility? How diverse may the same theme sound when played by different instruments, without creating interpretative anarchy? The answers to these questions will be as varied as the performers, the composers, and the individual compositions, but one thing is certain: to propel performances beyond a safe and decent competence, the questions must be confronted and probed, though they may often best be left un verbalized.

If on occasion a happy resolution is reached, the rewards are magnificent. Even on the smallest scale, I feel thrilled when just a single difficult to synchronize chord (as for example in a ritard, after a long rest) is absolutely perfectly together, not because of precise planning, or by signal, but blind, just by being felt together. Frankly, it does not happen all that often! Good players can usually play well enough together that no one would complain of poor ensemble, even if they never feel this uncanny, seemingly extra-sensory unity.

So far I have made the tacit assumption that the players were generally of similar mind about the basic interpretation. But the greatest challenge — and when met, the greatest satisfaction — accompanies the interaction of two or more strong musical minds with sharply differing interpretative ideas. Some of my happiest memories are

performances of sonatas, at which my partner and I were ready to give up after the first rehearsal, for our ideas about tempos, and nearly every other imaginable detail, conflicted wildly. We both taxed our musicianship to the utmost, arguing, demonstrating, singing, caricaturing the other, and were thereby also forced to reconsider our own ideas most critically. By the next rehearsal, both of us had changed our views on certain issues, and the arguments started anew from opposite sides! When we finished, something had been forged that was stronger than both of us, with real tension, meaning and conviction.

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The possibility of such a collaboration depends very much on the psychology of the individuals concerned, and the way they are accustomed to rehearsing, and it requires that they play at comparable levels, both instrumentally and artistically. And just as in human relations, the problems are magnified exponentially when it is not just two, but three or more individuals trying to cohabit musically. With larger ensembles, especially permanent ones, terrible things can, and often do happen: cliques are formed, struggles for dominance occur, some individuals are made to feel inferior, personality conflicts emerge, and everyone starts to feel badly. Pressure to remain in — or leave — the group can become intolerable. Even

worse, as a defense against these and other threats, a situation may evolve in which everything is treated superficially and couched in jokes (incorporating varying degrees of hostility); seriousness and sincerity become anathema, rehearsal time is minimized and the atmosphere becomes permanently anti-musical.

Often, I am told, when some of our star string players lower themselves (and their inflated fees) to play chamber music, they seek to prove they are so good that they do not really need to rehearse, and spend most of the session telling jokes and stories. It is astounding what they can in fact achieve with minimal rehearsal, and perhaps one should not blame them too much for their attitudes, in view of the almost insurmountable psychological and musical difficulties of an open, democratic approach, especially among those accustomed to being dictators!

My own preference is for partners who are willing to criticize and make numerous suggestions, openly and frankly, yet without an aggressive, domineering attitude. I feel inhibited if I am making many comments and others are not; and I find that exaggerated politeness, or an obsequious willingness to adopt every suggestion, creates a very uninspiring atmosphere. It is the same as in teaching — and rehearsing is a form of teaching each other: if a student just sits and devours what is fed to him, no matter how efficiently, one tires of always being the feeder and despairs of the student's ability ever to develop his own ideas. Only the student who can question, discuss, and even challenge, will stimulate me to strain my resources and give my best.

Much as I adore chamber music and its incomparable literature, I cannot honestly say that I prefer it to solo playing. It is too difficult and unpredictable, and only rarely does the mixture of personalities allow one to approach the summit, with great effort and risk. But I will keep returning to it, for the ecstasy of those rare occasions is different from any other musical experience; and whether or not one achieves it, one learns enormously by trying, and comes to appreciate much more gratefully the incredible privilege and autonomy of the solo pianist, whose freedom is limited only by his daring and imagination. □