

How to Prepare for a Workshop or Master Class

By Wu Han and David Finckel

Dear Young Musician,

This letter is designed to help you get the most out of a chamber music workshop or master class.

There is perhaps nothing more necessary and basic in learning chamber music than arriving at your first rehearsal prepared. We are about to tell you what goes into that.

By taking care of the items below, you will allow your coaches to concentrate more exclusively and creatively on the music itself, rather than problems that could be solved by you in advance of the workshop or class.

We would like to add that every single suggestion below is part of our own regimens, as well as that of our professional colleagues. These suggestions are not applicable to students only: they are the requirements and habits of professional musicians, and adopting them will not only enable you to learn and rehearse more efficiently but will gain you the respect and appreciation of your colleagues and mentors.

PART 1: THE BASICS

YOUR MUSIC

1. **Edition:** Your music must be the best available (“Urtext”) or scholarly edition of the work(s) you are studying. For example, most works of Beethoven, Haydn, Mozart, Schubert, Mendelssohn and Schumann are available in either Henle or Bärenreiter editions. For most other composers, look for editions from the country of origin (Shostakovich=Sikorski, Debussy=Durand). For some works the International edition is still the only one available.
2. **Editing:** Most authentic and scholarly editions are unedited, or are edited in such a way that the editors’ markings are clearly shown as suggestions (parentheses, italics, dotted lines etc.). This is most helpful for you and for your coaches. If necessary, for instrumentalists in ensembles with piano, look at your part as it is printed above the piano line. This is usually unedited and shows the phrasings the composer intended.
3. **Markings:** Your part should contain only the bowings and fingerings you have chosen yourself. Everything that is marked in your music should be able to be erased or changed (no pen, and no photocopies with indelible markings).

4. **Condition:** Your music should be in good condition, not falling apart, no single or unattached pages, and with all bad page turns remedied by well-attached, workable photocopies.

YOUR INSTRUMENT (for strings only)

1. Violins and violas should have tuning pegs that are fitted correctly and which turn properly.
2. Cellos, violas or violins using steel strings must have tailpieces with built-in tuners.
3. All cello endpins should be pin-point sharp and able to make a usable hole in any floor.
4. Bows should be freshly re-haired.
5. Strings should be relatively new and in good shape (not unraveling, dirty, etc.)

YOUR MARKINGS

Violinists, violists and cellists: Your part should be edited by you to the extent that any concerto or sonata part is usually edited by someone.

1. **Fingerings** should be written in for a good 90% of your part and should be selected by you from among all conceivable options on the basis of reliability, efficiency, dynamic and sound color requirements, and general musical sense. Pianists: where necessary and where choices are few, good fingerings should be selected and written in.
2. **Bowings** should be as carefully thought out, in all possible cases respecting the phrasing of the composer, and serving the musical line and dynamic levels as faithfully as possible. Reverse bowings should be considered in addition to conventional, and crucial events (climax, crescendo, diminuendo, sforzando, etc.) given priority in terms of both fingerings and bowings.
3. **Cues:** You should indicate in your parts, based upon your study of the score, who is likely to lead or cue, or whom you should be following, in order to facilitate rehearsals. The standard abbreviations of vn (violin), va (viola), vc (cello) and pf (piano) are good to use. We use numerals after the initials when necessary to indicate, for example, second violin (vn2). Usually it is enough to indicate the instrument which you should pay attention to, but occasionally it is helpful, if the music is unfamiliar, to write in a bit of a musical cue above the notes in your part.
4. **Measure numbers:** It is most helpful if everyone has a numbered part. If your music only has large letters or numbers once in a while, it will be greatly appreciated by your colleagues and coaches if you take the trouble to count your measures and number the beginning of each line.

ACCESSORIES

1. String players must have a digital tuning machine which reads all pitches, generates tones, and can be calibrated to various pitches.
2. All players must carry a metronome with them.
3. String players must have rosin with them.
4. Violinists and violists who tune with the tuning pegs in the scroll must have peg compound.
5. All players must have sharp pencils with good erasers.

YOUR HABITS AND REHEARSAL TECHNIQUES

1. Show up on time, or better yet, early, for all rehearsals and coachings.
2. Tune up, warm up, and be ready.
3. Learn to tune your instrument quickly, quietly and without making others wait for you.
4. Be ready (think ahead) about what needs to be rehearsed, what might be covered in a rehearsal and in what order. Your colleagues will find you valuable.
5. Be flexible. Try anything anyone suggests, even if you don't agree. You will be grateful when your group tries your suggestions as well.
6. Make suggestions gracefully. Don't accuse people of slowing down or rushing or playing out of tune if you can phrase it another way ("this passage sounds out of tune" "maybe we could get a more beautiful sound here") and have a practical suggestion ready for how your wish might be achieved. Don't make suggestions without possible remedies unless you are truly mystified.
7. Watch the clock, know how much time you have left in a rehearsal and if you need to, politely nudge your colleagues along.
8. Practice slowly together for ensemble and intonation. Once it's right, speeding up is much easier and it will sound better. Take the time to really hear what the composer has written.
9. Be encouraging and sensitive: "This sounds awful!" is nowhere near as helpful as "This could sound much better!"
10. In case of disagreements or confusion about rhythm and intonation, defer to the metronome and tuner (or piano) as quickly as possible. Use the piano to find pitches for strings and winds. Practice difficult rhythms against a steady accompaniment if there is one, or make one up.

PART 2: THE MUSIC

KNOW THE COMPOSER

Familiarity with the composer as a human being within a cultural and historical context is essential for interpreting music with authority. Here are some basic questions which you should be able to answer:

1. What are the composers' nationalities?
2. When did they live?
3. In what style did they compose?
4. What were their major sources of influence and inspiration?
5. With whom did they study?
6. Whom did they succeed, and where did their music lead to after them?
7. For what are they famous? What makes them great composers?
8. What were their personalities? (At least one defining anecdote about a composer is good to know).
9. What contribution did their music make in the development of music as an art? How do they fit into music history?
10. What are the priorities in the interpretation of their music?

KNOW THE SCORE, KNOW THE WORK

It will accelerate and enhance your workshop experience if you have as much knowledge of the score and advance perspective on its interpretation as possible. For example:

1. What are the structures of the various movements?
2. What are a movement's principle themes?
3. Where do key events take place (recapitulation, etc?)
4. What keys are you playing in from moment to moment?
5. Who is playing the principle line? What role is your part playing from moment to moment?
6. With which part(s) is your part paired from moment to moment?
7. What are your colleagues playing? Who is doing what?
8. How has this work been interpreted before? (Listening to at least two reputable recordings is advisable).

TEMPOS

Your choice of tempo in preparation for working with your colleagues should be an extremely conscious and well-practiced decision. Here are the criteria:

1. **Metronome markings of the composer:** Since Beethoven, composers have indicated metronome markings. They may not all be practical, but you should know them, you should try them, and if you have issues with them, they should be discussed at the outset of your rehearsals: "I tried Beethoven's marking but it seems insanely fast!" is a perfectly acceptable way to begin a rehearsal. In the

case of later music – Bartok, for example – metronome markings, and especially the relationship between them, becomes much more crucial.

2. **Tempo markings of the composer:** The words used by the composer to indicate tempo are often the clearest cues not only to speed but to the character of the movement or section. Know what these words mean, often in Italian (*affetuoso*, *con brio*, *comodo*, *ma non troppo*, etc.) Use them to help determine if the tempo chosen is accurately conveying the spirit indicated.
3. **Phrasing and the singing line:** Often, especially in the absence of a specific metronome number, a good tempo can be determined by singing a movement's principle melody. In lyrical music, phrases clearly meant to be unbroken become impossible below a certain speed. Find the right tempo through your instincts based upon your own vocal rendition of the music (with feeling!).

RHYTHM

An accurate sense of rhythm is an essential skill of a good musician. Rhythm is the primal element in music that connects you immediately to your listeners. Set up a steady rhythm and you have the audience in the palm of your hand. Alter it even slightly, and are all powerfully affected.

Good rhythm is not just about playing accurately with a metronome. Often, the music produced by metronomic playing does not sound rhythmic, because the sensation of rhythm is influenced by many elements: the note patterns, the general tempo, the style of the music, the dynamics and the harmonies. In the end, your ear will tell you if your rhythm is right, either in real time, or by listening to a recording of yourself.

Musicians can always maintain and improve their rhythmic abilities just like their intonation and sound production. Here are some pointers:

1. **Metronome:** practice something every day with a metronome. It helps, and we promise you will not turn into a machine.
2. **Choose passages for rhythmic practice that are obviously tricky:** for example, passages with different note values.
3. **Check your perception:** make sure you are not slowing down in music with longer note values, or rushing the faster notes (common problems).
4. **Learn from recordings:** try to notice when a performance seems to have a compelling rhythmic quality, whether it is dance-like, hypnotic, elegant, driven, or patient. Try to figure out what makes it that way.
5. **Interpret:** Ultimately, you are in control. Choose the best rhythmic style for the music you are playing and work on it until you have it under control.

PHRASING

A natural sense of breathing and shaping is often a challenge for inexperienced ensembles. Without a conductor to control the pacing of our music making, and being very concerned to play together, we as chamber musicians are often caught creating run-on sentences and for giving the impression that we unmusically driven by an inaudible metronome. Very often, composers of the classical era did not mark phrase shapes with swells and crescendos, and never indicated time-taking, assuming the musicians will shape and delineate their phrases by instinct. Here are some questions that will help guide you:

1. **Length:** Where does a phrase begin and end?
2. **Construction:** Is it one long line, or is made up of sub-phrases?
3. **Destination:** Where is the moment that could be considered the highpoint, or culminating moment, and how are you going to achieve that?
4. **Timing:** Where are the moments in a phrase, and between phrases, where inserting either an infinitesimal or significant amount of time will make the music sound as natural as singing? If I were singing it (and you should always try), where would I naturally breathe, and how long would it take?
5. **Shape:** As I sing the phrase (to the best and most passionate of my ability) where does my intensity rise and fall? Where does my voice naturally crescendo or come to rest? How does my sound color change?

RESTS AND SILENCES

Less-experienced ensembles, very often, have the habit not honoring the full length of rests and silences. Perhaps it is a combination of anxiety over the next entrance, or discomfort with silence, that propels many groups through moments where the composer indicates an absence of sound, often creating suspense and drama, or simply the opportunity to breathe. It has been said by someone that they would rather hear a single rest in Beethoven than many notes of other composers, and we know what they mean. Silences and rests are golden opportunities in the performance of classical music, and should be observed and enjoyed to the fullest extent possible. Here are some ways to practice:

1. **Conduct:** Get the instrument out of your way and conduct as though you had a full orchestra in front of you. Imagine what you would have to do to get them to stay still for the right amount of time
2. **Sing:** Sing the passage and do what you feel the silence is all about, either breathing or maybe holding your breath.
3. **Exaggerate:** If you still sense trouble, just exaggerate until you train yourself to wait. But if a silence is for a single beat in tempo, don't get in the habit of counting two beats, because it's the wrong feeling. Better to feel and wait for an e-n-o-r-m-o-u-s single beat.

INTONATION

Perhaps nothing is more obvious than inaccurate intonation in string playing. Inexperienced listeners may not be able to identify the problem, but we know that the magic of music is severely compromised when it is out of tune, and very likely most listeners will be aware that something is wrong.

In chamber music, good intonation is as essential as being a decent human being. Playing out of tune in an ensemble will not only compromise the performance: it's an insult to those in a group who have prepared their parts more carefully. It only takes one person playing out of tune to undo the whole ensemble, especially when there's no piano to hold the pitch.

All good string players have spent much of their lives working continuously on maintaining and improving intonation in every piece of music that they play. Here are some pointers, drawn from our colleagues:

1. **Tune your instrument:** You cannot achieve consistent intonation without consistent tuning. Make sure the tuning mechanisms of your instrument works correctly, and tune often.
2. **Tune to something:** A piano or a digital tuner.
3. **Check every string:** With the digital tuner is best.
4. **Practice with the tuner:** Practice scales with the tuner set to play three different pitches, the tonic, the fifth and the third. Checking perfect intervals against these pitches will cover every step of the scale.
5. **Check passages against the open strings:** Quicker than using a tuner. Find the perfect intervals that may be formed between your passage and either neighboring open string. For keys with many sharps and flats, however, you'll have to resort to the digital tuner.
6. **Fingerings:** Make sure your fingerings are efficient and likely to produce consistency.
7. **Positions:** In tricky passages especially, know what positions you are in and practice moving between them.
8. **Hear in advance:** Try to hear every pitch accurately before you play it.
9. **Set your hand position:** In advance of playing, position your fingers directly over the four notes of that position.
10. **Non-vibrato:** Set your intonation carefully and slowly without vibrato, then add it gradually.
11. **Shifting:** Spend extra time on shifts – they are more likely to be insecure.
12. **Recording:** tape yourself often to check your pitch perception.
13. **Piano:** spend time playing with really-in-tune pianos whenever possible. Avoid rehearsing with really-out-of-tune pianos whenever possible.
14. **Tune to the same A:** It doesn't matter if it's 441 or 441 or 442. Don't practice lower than 440 as most pianos are tuned at least that and above. If you like

playing at 442 or above, be ready to compromise for lower pianos and wind players.

VIBRATO

Vibrato issues are an almost constant source of discussion during coachings. A beautiful vibrato will “give the music wings” (Arnold Steinhardt). Here are some things to watch out for and ways to prepare:

1. **Continuity:** A good vibrato never really stops – it slows, narrows, even vanishes for moment but is always alive. Use vibrato to get from one note to another and do not stop vibrating before you change notes.
2. **Speed:** You should be able to vary the speed of your vibrato to suit the music. Singers vibrate roughly in a range of 80-100 on the metronome, four upward oscillations to the beat. If you want a clear demonstration of this, look at Cello Talks under all the vibrato titles. Violinists often vibrate way too fast, and cellists often vibrate way too slow. Practice varying and controlling your vibrato speed with a metronome, every day.
3. **Width:** a too-tense, too-fast, out-of-control vibrato is usually always too narrow as well. Great singers can vibrate as much as a half step or more around the pitch, depending on moment. Cellists and violists especially, because the instruments are larger, need to develop richness of vibrato through width. A vibrato not heard in the hall is a vibrato which is usually too narrow, or too fast, or both.
4. **The fourth finger:** unless you can develop a vibrato on your fourth finger as rich as that on your third, don't use that finger for principle melodic or sustained notes unless absolutely necessary.
5. **The lower registers:** vibrato on the lower strings usually needs to be wider than that on upper strings.

HARMONY

Knowing the music beforehand, either through study or listening to recordings or performances, will prepare you as an instrumentalist for the harmonies you are helping to create, and which are supporting your solo lines. Being sensitive to these harmonies is an irreplaceable part of being a musician. For example: if the last note of your solo is a deceptive cadence, you may not know that until you rehearse (unless you are the pianist). But you should know, and prepare, because it will affect your timing, sound color, inflection, fingering, everything. Every harmony under a solo should affect the way the melody is treated, because the harmonies affect the very meaning of the pitches. We do mean every single one. Indeed, every step of the scale has a distinct

feeling, function and personality. Learn to be sensitive to them, and enjoy bringing out those personalities as a powerful tool of interpretation.

DYNAMICS

Achieving the dynamic markings in the score is often more difficult than one would expect. Here are some practical tips for both strings and piano:

1. **Bow speed:** If you are looking for a big sound, use more bow. If you are making a crescendo, increase bow speed. If you are looking for the softest sound, use very little bow.
2. **Bow contact point:** If you need maximum volume and brilliance, move the bow as close to the bridge or sounding point as possible without decreasing bow speed. If you are looking for a more hushed color, move away from the bridge towards the fingerboard.
3. **For pianists:** Bigger and healthier sound production usually means more weight into the keys, as well as calculated use of the pedal to increase resonance.
4. **Relative dynamics:** In all cases, the relative dynamics of the composer should be respected, and are in the end more meaningful than absolute dynamics. Make sure there are audible differences between *p* and *pp*, and between *f* and *ff*. Do not play *pp* when the music says *p*, etc.

CUES

More than in solo playing, and infinitely more than in symphonic playing, chamber musicians are required to give clear cues to their colleagues. Not just the first violin, either. Here are some pointers:

1. **Know when it's your turn:** You can tell from a quick study of the score (but often not without it) when you need to give the cue to begin something. Know that and prepare for it.
2. **Decide how many beats to give:** Usually, a one-beat upbeat in the proper tempo will suffice. Sometimes in faster music, two beats are helpful.
3. **Decide the character:** The character of your cue – even your facial expression – will influence the first sound that emerges. Is the music energetic or dreamy? Lighthearted or profound? Surprising or inevitable? Find your own words and translate them into action.
4. **Practice by conducting:** Actually try leading an imaginary ensemble by conducting, without your instrument. Your cue with your instrument will become more accurate and refined. A violin is not a natural thing to conduct with, so prepare without the impediment.

5. **Be clear and concise:** Before you give your cue, it's vitally important that you are absolutely still for a moment, and that it is very obvious exactly when you are beginning your upbeat. It is the combination of your upbeat and downbeat that sets the tempo. Your motion does not need to be big – it can be tiny, but has to be sharp and definite.
6. **Know who is following you:** Make eye contact with all those who will play with you to make sure they are ready and that you have their complete attention.
7. **Be consistent:** If your cue is clear, don't change it unless the others really can't follow you. Give them a chance – as long as you are consistent – to learn to follow your lead.
8. **Encourage the others to join you in the cue:** "Following" really does imply being behind, and the most accurate ensembles – especially wind ensembles – achieve their precision by breathing together. Imagine a wind quintet trying to play a chord together with four people inhaling *after* the leader has given a cue. Impossible. So moving bows and bodies together on the cue will not only be more accurate, but in the end, more fun and more in the true spirit of chamber music.

THE VISUAL ELEMENT: MESSAGING

Of course music is all about sound, but live performance is also about the visual. It is vitally important that integrated into our performance is awareness that how we look can detract from, or enhance, the audience's enjoyment of the concert, and to a certain extent, understanding of the music.

From the moment we walk on stage, the audience is watching our every move and following our lead. They will simply feel the way we look. If we look bored, they will feel bored. If we look terrified, they will be anxious too. If we look happy, they will be happy. This part is simple, but many, many performers do not realize it. Just see for yourself at the next concert you attend.

Even though we have chores to accomplish on stage – sitting down, fixing our music, tuning, etc. – we are obligated to keep the audience focused on why we are really out there. We have a musical mission ahead of us which is paramount, and everything else we do must remain subsidiary.

Musicians are not actors, nor are we trained to be, yet, what we do is remarkably like what actors do. We are given a script which we must prepare and interpret, and we must truly live in each moment of the musical narrative. If an actor loses focus, or breaks character, we know it right away. We cannot allow ourselves that mistake, and while it is what we do with our sound that is central to our art, we should not allow our work to be compromised by bad visual habits on stage.

In comparison to opera and symphonic performances, there is not much to watch in chamber music. Very little else besides the natural interaction of the group, and the individual absorption of its members, is necessary or even appropriate for a performance of artistic integrity. But since the recipe is simple, one or two bad ingredients can easily ruin the dish.

Often players may feel the music deeply but somehow it doesn't come across that way. Video tape yourself occasionally – even with simple equipment like a cell phone – to know what you are projecting. Make sure it matches how you really feel about the music.

Sometimes, as human beings, we fall short in the areas of sensitivity and communication – especially inter-personal communication in these days of text-messaging. We can always improve the way we say “thank you”, “I love you” or simply “this means a lot to me”. Often, that means simply trying harder, doing it more sincerely or vehemently or exaggeratedly than we think is needed. The composers – many of them hundreds of years before our time – were trying to communicate exactly those kinds of personal thoughts through their music. It's our responsibility to carry those messages, to interpret them with unmistakable accuracy and deliver them powerfully.

We need all the tools we can get. If you arrive at our workshops with as many of them as you can, all sharpened up, teachers can use their experience to help you use them more effectively in service of our art form, and for your own pleasure in making music together.

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