

A portrait of Adam Hockman, a man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a dark turtleneck and a grey blazer. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile.

Getting your act together: A step- by-step guide

Common sense advice for finding common purpose in chamber music collaborations.

BY Adam Hockman

Chamber groups of all sizes, from duos to nonets, bring people of different backgrounds and experiences together to make music. Players don't always have the luxury of choosing who they collaborate with, but even when that is the case, learning to communicate and find common purpose is an essential step in forming a successful collaboration.

A chamber group is an organization, "a group of people who work together in an organized way for a shared purpose" (according to the Cambridge Dictionary). Like any business or nonprofit, when members of the ensemble aren't aligned on what they're doing, why they're doing it, and how they're doing it, problems arise.

At times, the dynamics of chamber groups can be tricky to navigate and in the absence of productive ways to work together, relationships can erode, and those long hours spent in and outside of the rehearsal room might turn into arguing, sarcasm, and even giving fellow players the silent treatment. In those moments, the well-being of the group is in jeopardy.

How can a chamber ensemble find common purpose while making music together?

Common Purpose

Organizations often tackle the issue of common purpose by defining their mission, vision, and values. Clarity across these interlocking areas makes it possible to decide on goals and how to make them happen. But just as important in a chamber ensemble is understanding each member's background, current situation, and learning and musical preferences. Music making is an intimate experience — you bring your entire self to every rehearsal and

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performance. If you don't know much about the people in your group, their history, interests, what makes them tick, you could step on someone's toes during high stress moments.

Let's look at four areas, as a way of diving into this topic: personal background, and the group's mission, vision, and values. If you are a newly formed chamber ensemble, having a conversation about these should be easy since you are in the process of working through how to structure your rehearsals, select repertoire, make decisions, and so on. If you're already months or years into your collaboration, you can still benefit from these conversations.

You might encourage your chamber group to read this very article, and to use it as a discussion guide. Each member needs time, perhaps a few days, to consider what will be involved, and to self-reflect and observe each other so that they can make meaningful contributions. Then the conversation can begin, and focusing on personal background is an excellent way to get going.

Personal Background

We might believe that each ensemble member leaves their identity at the door, in service to the "whole" of collaboration, but that's simply not the case. People bring their identities to their profession, no matter the circumstances. Social identities like gender, race, ethnicity, culture, language, age, sexual orientation, and disability, among others, are all present. Understanding your identity and taking time to learn and appreciate the identities of others is a necessary step in generating good will and constructive dialog. The goal is to avoid unintentionally saying and doing things that might upset your fellow musicians, and leave them confused about what they can do about it. The goal is to create trust, dialogue, and a sense of belonging.

As an exercise in team-building, members might share stories that illustrate facts and characteristics of who they are and how those impact their identities as musicians. Through stories, you can build mutual respect and a stronger sense of purpose. These are some useful conversation prompts:

- How has my family, culture, and identity shaped who I am as a person and as a musician?
- How does my personal background (culture, history) affect the ways I collaborate with others in a musical context?
- What do I value most in life?
- What are my personal dreams and aspirations?
- How is my background similar to or different from others in this group?
- What is most important to me in a chamber collaboration?

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- **Describe past chamber experiences:** What made them positive? Did anything make them negative?
- **Describe my communication style and preferences for how others communicate with me.**
This could be about giving/receiving feedback (directly or as part of a general statement), how you express upset (in the moment or after cooling off), and whether you take in information best in writing or verbally. This could also be your preferred way for being contacted (email, text, voicemail).
- **Describe areas where I feel I might need feedback or support from the other group members.**

These questions are designed to foster understanding of each other, which will inform the mission, vision, and values of your group.

Mission

The mission of an organization describes why the group exists — what they do, and who they do it for. Your group may already have a sense of its mission, but maybe you haven't formally defined it. For some chamber groups, the mission might be to reach an audience through a specific genre or type of venue. For students, the group might have formed out of a conservatory or festival requirement, with the objectives of learning to collaborate with others and to master core chamber repertoire. Discover your group's mission by working through these questions:

- What do we do?
- Why do we do it?
- How do we do it?
- Whom do we serve?
- Why does what we do matter to the people we serve?
- What image do we wish to convey to our audience?
- What kinds of relationships will we have with our audience and other collaborators?
- What repertoire will we play?

Boil the answers down to clear statements everyone can easily repeat and adopt. If there is no consensus on the group's mission, keep going with this session or at a later date. Agreement on something this fundamental can take time. You might come up with a "working statement" that can be adjusted as members have more experiences together and acquire perspective. Once you have agreement, or are heading in that direction, people can start to align their behavior with the messages embedded in the mission. Here are a couple of examples:

- **Student ensemble's mission:**
Through performances and coaching events with expert teachers, build our musical and collaboration skills and learn music from the core chamber canon.
- **Professional ensemble's mission:**
Share classical music across socioeconomic divides in accessible formats, either for donation or completely free.

Vision

If mission is the what of your group, vision acts as the where, as in, where you wish to go in the future. A vision should be inspiring and ambitious, but also achievable. It provides something to strive for through the collective actions of your ensemble. Further, the vision speaks to what kind of world you wish to create through your contributions. Discovering your group's vision might be difficult at first, and take multiple drafts to get right, but start with these questions:

- **Where are we headed?**
- **Where do we want to be in three to five years?**
- **How might the world — within our area of focus — look different if we were to achieve this future state?**

Just as with your mission statement, clearly communicate where you're headed through a vision statement that might look something like this:

- **Student ensemble's vision:**
Share our craft with the local community to increase interest in and awareness of conservatory programming and inspire rising conservatory students.
- **Professional ensemble's vision:**
Reach every corner of the world with concert and educational programming that brings communities together and builds a lasting interest in classical music.

Values

Mission and vision articulate the goals you seek to achieve now and in the future. How you get there is through your daily actions: the ways members of the group treat each other and what they care about. Values help shape the culture of your group — the beliefs and principles that underlie actual behaviors. When you establish your values and live them out in your ongoing work, you attract audiences and potential collaborators who appreciate the culture you project, on stage and off. Values confer upon each member a responsibility to come together and engage in certain ways. When a chamber ensemble's values are clarified, its members can hold themselves and others accountable to them.

While conducting the personal background conversation of the Common Purpose process, you may have uncovered some of the personal values of each member. These can help determine the group-level values of your ensemble. With those in mind, consider the following:

- **What is important to us as a group?**
- **What is unique about how we work together?**
- **Think about people and organizations we admire: What do they do in rehearsal or when making decisions that make them admirable?**
- **Write down the words, phrases, and examples that members add to the conversation. Look for any overlap and pare down the list to three to seven values.**

Through this process of hearing what each member cares about most, and what they see as the principles that should drive culture and decision making, you can create your group's list of values. For example:

- **Student ensemble's values:**
Kind and honest communication; excellence in practice and performance; nurturing member growth; inclusion of ideas.
- **Professional ensemble's values:**
Perform at the highest level possible; favor long-term impact; commit to social responsibility; every performance matters; break down barriers to access.

Making Purpose

Capture everyone's ideas in a shared document or on your website. Then, the next-level work begins, as each ensemble member carries out the group's mission, vision, and values every day. One measure of success is getting to a place where you can regularly check on what each member, and the group as a whole, is doing to bring about what you've settled on. On occasion, pause to see if you need to adjust your behaviors or goals.

Conversations about personal background, mission, vision, and values can help a group become an organization, a community where each member can find their place and meaning. It takes time to explore and do justice to these four areas, but it's worth the work and necessary revision. You will create mechanisms for having open and honest conversations as you work together, and any moments of frustration or disagreement can be processed through the what, why, and how you do your work.

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