



CONNECTING TO THE HEART OF CHAMBER MUSIC

By Louise Myers

A little bit of magic occurred one late spring day in a concert hall at the New England Conservatory.

The feeling was all too familiar—stiffness, anxiety, a desire to become invisible behind an equally invisible screen. Our quartet had spent a semester being coached by Gillian Rogell, Chair of the Chamber Music Department of the School of Continuing Education at New England Conservatory of Music and the founder and director of The Heart of Chamber Music Institute. We were on stage, about to perform the first movement of Mendelssohn's *String Quartet, Op. 12, No. 1*, and as first violin I was nervous, very nervous. The 'enemy' was not the audience or the challenges in the music but my own fear response, that quicksand shudder that could so quickly undo weeks of rehearsing. I had been there before.

"Tell the audience about the opening phrase," Rogell quickly prompted. I turned and explained that to set the tone and help us play expressively our quartet had made up 'lyrics' for the opening phrase: "I loved you so, but still you left me." The audience seemed amused. I added that Mendelssohn twice employed a tritone or 'devil's interval' in his opening statement. This time the audience stared back a little blankly. No matter; we had connected, I had put aside my own

preoccupations, and we went on to play, really play, the Mendelssohn.

That small miracle owes much to Rogell's coaching style, a set of beliefs and practices she outlines with clarity and elegance in her recently released DVD *At the Heart of Chamber Music: A Guide for the Player, Coach, and Music Lover*. Rogell is joined in her coaching and commentary by the award-winning Jupiter String Quartet and by Paul Katz, founding cellist of the Cleveland String Quartet, a much sought-after teacher, and founder of the String Quartet Professional Training Program at New England Conservatory. At once practical and profound, the DVD has already been aired on WGBH-TV, a member station of the Public Broadcasting Network. It was also selected from over 13,000 entrants to receive two coveted Telly Awards honouring outstanding achievements in the video, film, and TV industries.

The DVD opens with Brahms' *G Major Sextet* performed by the Jupiter Quartet with Paul Katz and Barry Shiffman. The performance is a professional model of musicianship, communication, and interpretive skill. Three other groups, comprised of amateur and pre-professional musicians then play and receive coaching. The result is riveting, an educational experience for both those who perform and those who coach this music and a carefully crafted window that allows anyone, including non-musicians to see into the diligence and nuanced decision-making that goes into the process of a coherent reading of a chamber music work.

Shortly after playing the Mendelssohn, I had to opportunity to sit down with Rogell and ask her a few questions, including that ultimate question: Just exactly what did she feel was at the heart of chamber music? Pausing for a moment, she settled on the single word, "connection." "People go through life looking for deep connection," she explained, "for the opportunity to be seen as they really are and to be able to connect with others." For Rogell the experience of playing chamber music offers a special kind of intensely active engagement with people, a drive for connection that dissolves private ego concerns in service to the music itself.

To elaborate on the idea of ego release, Rogell read from Steven Mithen's *The Singing*

Neandertals (Harvard University Press, 2006), a study of the anthropological basis for the music-making impulse. Here "boundary loss" is described as "the manner in which group music-making leads to a blurring of self-awareness and the heightening of fellow feeling with all who share in the dance." Rogell firmly believes that a chamber musician must leave behind his or her ego to be in the moment with everyone else in the ensemble and thereby enters into a unified understanding of the music.

This Zen-like conundrum of being and not being in order to find connection with others has musical parallels that are decidedly teachable. In coaching sessions Rogell will point out where a musical phrase begins in one instrument and then is handed on and perhaps embellished by subsequent instruments. Each musician in turn must be aware of the act of receiving the phrase and then passing it on to another instrument. The individual is important, to be sure, but what is of utmost significance is the compositional line as it is extended and supported by the entire ensemble.

At the very heart of *The Heart of Chamber Music* is the belief that all string players, even beginning-level students, can through good coaching techniques learn to play musically and expressively. Toward that end Rogell encourages students to learn how to move together, breathe together. She believes that music is another form of language, perhaps even the first form of language used for communication in a pre-verbal era. Consequently, in her coaching sessions she often asks the ensemble to come up with a phrase or descriptive narrative that helps characterize a particular passage. Katz supports this verbal grounding by stating, "When people convey something, they play better."

As Rogell readily admits however, music-making depends on much more than locating the right linguistic phrase or moving in synchrony with the other players. "It's not just a matter of playing your heart out," she muses. "I expect a lot of wood-shedding between sessions." Ensemble participants not only practice on their own but ideally rehearse at least once before the next coaching session. Each player brings a copy of the score to learn what voices lead and what voices support each other at any given



JUPITER STRING QUARTET

moment. The usual technical concerns that any group would be expected to address; rhythm, intonation, balance, dynamics, bowing style and consistency, all receive full attention in the sessions; and as I can well attest, nothing is left to chance.

I asked Rogell a final question: Did she feel that chamber music offered some kind of paradigm for human interaction? The question elicited a quick response. "If children grew up with this, the shootings at Columbine wouldn't have happened."

She went on to mention the joint project begun in 1999 between pianist/conductor Daniel Barenboim and the late Palestinian-Armenian scholar Edward Said which created an Arab-Israeli touring orchestra of young musicians. Music can forge connections between seemingly unbreachable entities.

Rogell sums up her ethos of chamber music by ticking off the values that comprise her self-coined acronym TREE: Trust, Respect, Empathy, Engagement. "We find them in

chamber music, but we also seek them out in our whole lives. The world would be a better place if we all played chamber music." So it would, and the DVD she has created will go a long way toward strengthening the insight and abilities of those who play, coach or simply listen to chamber music and who can thereby profit from its practical and philosophic guidance and wisdom.

To obtain a copy of Gillian Rogell's DVD *At the Heart of Chamber Music* visit the website www.MusicAlchemy.net



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