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Ensemble Skills: Essays on the Fundamentals

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1. Introduction, Seating, & Tuning

These are guidelines rather than a comprehensive method. Each section will be followed by relevant questions and suggestions for further study, and participants are urged to offer questions and suggestions of their own. For simplicity, we refer to the ensemble as a string quartet - obviously the guidelines can be adapted for other groupings.

Choose a Seating Arrangement

Over the decades, quartets have sat in a variety of (but not all possible) configurations. There are advantages and disadvantages to each, which you will discover through research and experimentation.

B C
A D

[audience]

Early groups often sat with violins facing each other: V1 @ A, V2 @ D, as classical-era orchestras did, and some present-day groups continue this arrangement. More European quartets have adopted V1 @A, V2 @B, VA @C, and VC @ D, while the majority of American (or American-trained) groups reverse VA and VC.

Whichever seating is chosen, the group should use it consistently in rehearsal and performance. Chairs (straight-backed, flat-seated) should be positioned so that all four players can see each other at least peripherally and so that all four are visible to the audience. Stands (small folding ones preferred) should be as low as possible without adversely affecting playing posture, so that all four players can see each others' hands and bows. As Budapest Quartet violinist



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Sasha Schneider said: "You have to eat up the other person's fingers with your eyes."

Consistency of set-up pays dividends in standardizing the players' sight-lines and the information to be gleaned there.

Choose an A (or D)

With a device (metronome, App, tuning fork) choose an A which feels right to all four, acknowledging (but not necessarily yielding to) the preferences of any players with perfect pitch. As with seating, always tune to the same A unless a quintet involves a piano which cannot be brought to your group's A. Over time, the group's intonation will benefit.

Some quartets tune to a D so that each instrument tunes at least one string a fifth up from the note. With an A, only the violins will do so, and some research suggests that we hear upward and downward intervals differently.

Next, choose who will give the A (or D); VC or VA are preferred because their top strings are often metal and thus less subject to change from humidity and temperature. Of the two, VC is most commonly elected, as most players hear an octave up more accurately. The cellist takes the A (= to VC's open string) from the device and tunes all four strings before giving the A to each colleague in turn. Do not give the harmonic A; do not find approximate fifths by playing a 1st harmonic on one string and a 2nd harmonic on the adjacent string; this flashy little habit doesn't produce good fifths - it simply demonstrates inexperience with the overtone series. A final proscription: if you haven't got the fifth you want, do not press on the string in the pegbox to raise the pitch, because it won't hold - use your peg or tuner.

If perfect fifths are tuned around the entire circle of fifths, trouble results. Most quartet violists and cellists tune the G one hair high, and the C perhaps two hairs high. If the violinists can tolerate tuning the E less than a whole fifth above the A, peace and prosperity will follow.

Tuning on stage is an abomination and is rarely actually necessary. If it is needed, become better at it: like everything done on stage, tuning can be improved in rehearsal - make it a gentle competition to see who can tune the fastest and most quietly. Then seek to break that player's record.



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Working on Intonation

For a group to play in tune, all four players must play in tune individually. Work hard to improve your own intonation, isolating and concentrating on habits you have discovered in lessons and rehearsals. Agree in advance on what part of the subsequent rehearsal will be devoted to intonation. This is important because improving intonation is a life-long task, not a trick you suddenly acquire, like down-bow staccato. At the end of the agreed session, stop - and work on something else, even if the passage doesn't yet sound better. This helps prevent screaming. Often the progress is reflected at the next rehearsal.

Tune passages slowly and without vibrato - you don't vibrate when you tune open strings. Begin with the perfect intervals: unisons, octaves, fifths and fourths - either they are perfect or they are not yet in tune. Then address the other intervals, which are negotiable to some degree.

Long-range goals: [1] prepare as well as you can and then be ready to change what you so carefully practiced; your colleagues aren't criticizing your pitch because they don't like you - they're only telling you what they hear. [2] discover each player's appetite for expressive intonation - who likes really low thirds in minor keys? Who loves leading tones which beg for resolution? Remember to consider the speed of the passage, its key, and the balance. [3] Isolate three or two parts - those not playing should be listening intently and offering detailed feedback. As long as it is accurate and reasonably polite, any observation contributes to the group's progress. And besides, the other two will be criticizing when you are playing.

Wrap up the session by playing the passage for real: in tempo and dynamics, with vibrato, and with music in mind - not technique.

QUESTIONS

Click [HERE](#) to answer the questions and/or leave comments

- How did the following quartets sit: Joachim, Busch, Flonzaley, Kneisel, Rose, Budapest, Kolisch, Beethoven, Smetana, Juilliard, Jack Benny? {Hint: one of these had V1 @ D]

Extra credit: what was Ludwig Spohr's solution?

- Pick one seating arrangement and discuss its advantages and disadvantages for each player.



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- The best sight-line shows you your colleagues' [1] eyes [2] hands [3] music.
(Choose one)
- Why is it better to tune to an open string than to a harmonic?
- If perfect fifths are tuned around the entire circle of fifths, what is the result for the third C-E?
- Why should intonation rehearsing be done in finite periods?