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Ensemble Skills: Tempo and Character Choices

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Recognizing and fulfilling the composer's intention

It is a paradox that tempo determines character and character determines tempo. Yet no matter how much information a composer includes, the responsibility for choosing, preparing, and performing music in the right tempo rests with the players.

Metronome markings, when provided, should limit debate - but this is not always the case. Those given by Beethoven for the first eleven quartets continue to stimulate discussion (and contention), and Brahms provided and then withdrew numbers for some works, while a composer as discriminating as Bartok can be heard to deviate from his own numbers in performance. Indeed, we experience adjustments even when working with living composers.

In practice, the first step is clear: before any discussion begins (and ideally before listening to any other group's interpretation), the quartet should try out the numbers given by the composer. If the result does not fit with the players' instincts, the first suspect ought not to be the person who conceived the work. As one distinguished artist has said: "If you find a piece in F# Minor to be inconvenient, do you transpose it to F Minor?" The metronome marking is information from the source, and as such requires respect.

At the same time, some of the fastest tempi may prove unplayable at first. The group must then determine whether this is a matter of [1] resistance, [2] need for more practice/rehearsal, or in fact [3] simply being beyond the group's current ability to execute or control. If [1], remember that the composer (Beethoven, say) is more important than you; if [2], as is often the case, invest the time before deciding, bearing in mind that a given number does not apply equally to every single measure of the movement, and also that the technical standard of quartet-playing has always risen. If [3], consider two options: if you can recognize the character that the number theoretically produces, strive to establish that same feeling within a notch or two of the number; if after your best efforts, you cannot come anywhere near the right character, choose a different piece.



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Character markings, while less precise, often lend insight which bare numbers cannot. Mozart used sixteen different movement headings in his mature quartets, while Haydn had at least forty, and Beethoven's list expanded dramatically. In addition to the speed of the chosen note values (metronome) and words indicating character, several other factors come to bear: time signature and pulse (not always the same thing), key signature, harmonic density - even the acoustics of the performance space - all of these will shape interpretive decisions.

Dynamics, accents, and articulations also alter the perception of speed: at the same tempo, a version with many events-per-second will sound faster than one which is smooth and less inflected. Driving 100 mph. on gravel versus the same speed on glass.

Once the group has made at least temporary decisions on tempo and character, rehearsals must produce the chosen outcomes. We are taught from childhood that the way to master technical passages is to perfect them slowly, then at moderate speed or speeds, and finally at the desired one. Time-tested - but it's good to remember that much practice and rehearsal mostly trains the player in how to practice. In fact, however busy your concert schedule becomes, you will retire with far more hours of preparation than of performance under your belt.

Consider the alternative of playing a few measures in tempo; once these are solid, address the next few, and then stitch the segments together. True, the starting-and-stopping will no more be a part of your performance than the slow work, but the combination of methods yields results that no single one can.

As to the metronome itself: use it wisely. Like intonation work, spend a finite part of any given rehearsal with the metronome, and do not leave it ticking while you discuss what it has revealed. The machine is not your rhythm - it simply alerts you to where and when you are not playing metronomically, and after that the responsibility still lies with you to decide what parts of the movement must be regular and where (and how much) to play with freedom. The device will not be on stage with you - it's just the mirror which tells you (before you go on stage) whether there's spinach in your teeth.



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QUESTIONS [to ponder]

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- If you lose an argument in rehearsal, will you be able to perform the *other* tempo with conviction? How to proceed if the quartet is split evenly over a particular tempo?
- Is there a sense of Perfect Tempo? Relative Tempo? [compare with Perfect Pitch]
How might one improve Relative Tempo?
- Is it productive to compare two very different tempi in the same rehearsal? Why or why not?
- Spohr metronomized his quartets the same year Beethoven did, and the numbers were quite predictable - but then so was the music. Does this surprise you?