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Ensemble Skills: Dynamics and Balance

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The essence of interpreting dynamic markings is memory. While tempo and pitch can be [and often are] quantified precisely, no groups I'm aware of employ electronic means to distinguish dynamic levels - although the technology exists. This means that dynamics, however minutely indicated, remain relative.

In reading a score for the first time it is illuminating to examine the range of dynamics, taking note of how many parts are playing any given dynamic and for how many bars the dynamic applies. A broader examination includes the dynamics in all the quartets by a composer. Haydn calls for pp to ff Mozart the same, although ff is less frequent; Beethoven extends to ppp, but not to fff; Schubert has ppp - fff. It is clear that they imagined dynamics below the quietest ones they wrote, with diminuendos and morendos proceeding from pp or ppp; similarly, accents, sforzandos and character markings imply sounds above ff and fff. Subsequent generations of composers widen the range further, but not by much.

The score also reveals the degree to which the composer trusts performers. No composer could mark every detail of how he wants a piece played - and even if that were possible it would result in rigid, fussy, and unmusical performances. So to some degree, the partnership of creator and recreator recognizes the need for instinct, imagination, training, taste, and experience.

Haydn's scores reveal a few [very few] instances of different simultaneous dynamics among the four parts, but in general he must have counted on the performers' knowing what to do. Beethoven's markings become yet more elaborate over his output: by Op. 130 we find a 4/4 measure [in III.] with five separate dynamic indications. Schubert's scores, by contrast, were written in such haste that the errors and omissions call out to the players for help. And all four composers wrote movements which begin with no dynamics whatsoever. So the burden [and the freedom] rests with the player.

Within a hundred years, works of Debussy, Ravel, Schönberg, Berg, Webern, and Bartok arrive with far more information in the scores. But even this does not remove trust from the equation. Because the language is new, and the techniques more complex, greater care in notation is called for, and while the performer may take longer to develop sound instincts about how the music is to be played, those instincts remain vital.



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So in rehearsal, a group plays the opening of Mozart's Eb, K. 428, a unison marked p. A piano dynamic is chosen based upon several observations: since all four parts have the same notes, no single player needs to strive to be heard, so each could in theory play 1/4 of what a solo p might be; at the same time, if Mozart wanted it to be a small p, he would not have had four people playing it together. Knowledge of the range of markings in all his quartets reminds us that he did sometimes use pp, so this present p should not approach pp. Next, by reading ahead we find a one bar crescendo [m. 11] to f, a reiteration of the opening, again played by all four but in harmony rather than unison. Imagining skipping two notches - mp and mf - the group finds a f which is full and joyous yet does not cross the sound-border into Beethoven, Brahms or Bartok.

Before addressing the challenges of balance, we should identify the kinds of memory which dynamics require. Once the group has discussed and generally agreed upon what a p will sound like in Mozart, each player stores that sound as an aural memory, ideally. But if the next rehearsal is in a different acoustic, or one player has put on steel strings, or another has had twice as much coffee, the sound will be different even if everyone is playing exactly as they did yesterday. Thus an auxiliary memory is needed: muscle memory. As long as your arms and hands and bows and instruments are the same as they were, you can store the memory of how it feels to play the agreed-upon p. And once mastered, this skill pays great dividends in preparing diminuendos, crescendos, accelerandos, ritards, and any gradual changes of sound or character. Very simply, you play and memorize the feeling and sound of the new tempo, dynamic, etc., and then start from the beginning of the change which leads to the memorized item, and go precisely to it. If you can see the summit, you can hike there.

Balance is not only about dynamic, and striving to be the loudest in the group is not a mature goal. Nevertheless, even veteran players can regress, which is why each of us counts on the three professional critics with whom we work. A far more sophisticated aim, and one which will enrich the quartet's sound-palette, is to discover all possible varieties of color, vibrato, bow-speed, sounding-point, and articulation which can distinguish one voice from the others. One of the many magical things about a string quartet is that all four voices can be heard even at four different dynamic levels if they choose and maintain distinct sounds. Naturally, except in contrapuntal music it is not often that all four parts would need to be fully differentiated for any length of time, and indeed equal care is regularly



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devoted to blending, as the piece or good taste might demand. But both skills must be mastered.

QUESTIONS

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

- Perfect pitch exists and perfect [or at least very good relative] tempo does also; do you think that Perfect Dynamic exists? Why or why not?
- What are some faults of a performance where instinct ignores what the composer has written?
- What are some faults of one where strict adherence to the notation stifles instinct?
- Are dynamic markings in any way a reflection of the period in which the music was written? If so, how should that affect the way we play them?
- How might body language affect dynamic balance in performance?
- What was Ludwig Spohr's most important contribution to the violin?