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# Chambering Music

J. Murphy McCaleb

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## 1. Introduction

In 2008, Leon Botstein published an article in *The Musical Quarterly* entitled “The State of the Business: Chamber Music America after Thirty Years”. In exploring the magazine’s anniversary issue, he focused on the range of advertising woven throughout, covering artists, venues, concert series, universities, and festivals. Initially noting the “air of superiority and command [that] suffuses many ads” (Botstein 2008, p. 2), Botstein was sceptical of the stability of this musical ecosystem. For all of the special events planned, all of the excellent music being made, and the plethora of up-and-coming ensembles and composers being featured, he noted that “a sense of desperation lurks beneath the surface of this anniversary issue” (ibid., p. 3). Thirteen years later, this analysis still feels apt; Botstein could have been easily describing issues of *Chamber Music* from 2019, 2020, or 2021. These issues contain not only a significant number of advertisements, but also a number of feature articles that elaborate on the particular unique selling points of an ensemble, artist, composer, or venue. There is a lingering sense that this economy is made up of far more producers than consumers, and that chamber music—both the repertoire and the act of playing it—is fighting to maintain traction within wider society. Although the qualifying features of the phenomenon that Botstein refers to as “chamber music” are not directly articulated, several parameters become apparent. The range of ensembles referred to is broad, including everything from “string quartets to trios, brass and wind ensembles, and from percussion ensembles to odd duos and jazz groups” (ibid., p. 2). In contrast, the social context for these ensembles is perceived to be narrow, where “making a living as a performing musician” is intrinsically tied to “audiences and financial support” (ibid., p. 3). Thus, the chamber music Botstein is concerned with is rooted in professional performance to an audience, a presumption which bears unravelling in order to make sense of the practice within 21st century society.

Through exploring the recent issues of this magazine, two features become apparent. First, the chamber music economy, at least in the United States, where the journal *Chamber Music* is centred, is heavily reliant on governmental grants and philanthropy. Performers are not only being advertised within its pages, but they are also targeted by advertising for competitions promising monetary reward and public acclaim. Additionally, there are standing items in the magazine concerning grants and other funding, which have been awarded to aspiring artists. Most notably, Chamber Music America provided USD 1.2 million to chamber

musicians and organisations in 2020 through its six grant programmes (Chamber Music America 2020). Reports such as the UK Live Music Census demonstrate similar reliance on non-commercial funding for classical musicians in the United Kingdom, where “49% of all respondents . . . who identify as classical musicians have applied for funding or support programmes for the purpose of supporting live music performance in the past [compared with] 10% of respondents to the musician survey who identify as rock musicians” (Webster et al. 2018, p. 77). Given that chamber music is a subclassification within classical music, it is likely to be subject to similar financial models.

Second, chamber music as a genre is less popular than others as a form of live entertainment. In 2015–2016, 7.6% of British adults attended a classical music event at least once, compared to 30.7% who attended another genre (not including opera or jazz) (Arts Council England 2016). Participation rates of American adults were similar, with 8.8% of adults attending at least one classical music concert in 2012 (ICPSR 2013, p. 12). Although these surveys do not provide granular distinction between the sizes of ensembles, chamber music, as a smaller unit of classical music, would, therefore, only achieve a proportion of that audience. Chamber music features more infrequently in the provision of music venues across the UK, of which less than 20% regularly host chamber music ensembles in comparison with 70% hosting original bands and 42% hosting cover bands (Webster et al. 2018, p. 53). Although a number of organisations support amateur chamber music ensembles globally, little data exist to gain an accurate understanding of how many people play chamber music in private settings. Furthermore, 10.1% of British adults played a musical instrument for pleasure in 2015–2016, although the Taking Part Survey that collected this data did not specify the instruments or genres that people were engaging with (*ibid.*). Similar research reports that 12% of American adults played a musical instrument in 2012, and only 2% performed or practised classical music (ICPSR 2013, p. 10). Although certainly not a precise indicator of popularity, it is perhaps telling that the 2017 *Oxford Handbook of Music Making and Leisure* includes scant reference to chamber music in deference to a number of other genres and music making-contexts (Mantie and Smith 2017). More research is needed to gain an accurate picture of the incidence of chamber music in daily life, but available information suggests that it is neither a large feature of musical events across anglophone cultures nor a common form of recreational activity.

At the end of his article, Botstein proposes that the future of chamber music should lie more firmly within academia:

The marginal and impractical and yet prestigious in culture is protected within the college or university and is funded by patrons who often have no personal interest in the subject matter. Philanthropists of higher education rely on the scholarly community and its expertise and believe that the

preservation and extension of the traditions they uphold are important goals in themselves. The culture of musical performance can benefit from taking greater refuge within campus walls, particularly in urban areas. (Botstein 2008, p. 5)

The first sentence is a particularly telling assessment: chamber music is marginal and impractical, yet culturally prestigious. As highlighted previously, chamber music may well have become marginal in economic or cultural capacities at this point in time. The label of “impracticality”, however, could bear further critique. Given Botstein’s focus on the financial details of the chamber music ecosystem, perhaps he is arguing that its production is not as economically viable as other forms of music making. Within a capitalist framework, however, chamber music is surely *more* economically viable than many other forms of art music, particularly symphony orchestras.

In several ways, Botstein’s article echoes Susan McClary’s critique of avant-garde composition (“difficult music”) more than thirty years ago (McClary 1989). In contrast to McClary, however, Botstein concludes that a way of rectifying this situation is to further cloister chamber music within academia—*not* address its supposed marginality or impracticality. Botstein’s recommendation that chamber music would benefit most from “taking greater refuge within campus walls, particularly in urban areas” (Botstein 2008, p. 5) prompts a number of questions about the musical heritage he is seeking to preserve. What makes up the “culture of musical performance” within chamber music? Is this culture significantly distinct from other forms of joint music making? To what extent is this culture linked to a certain demographic? Additionally, and most importantly, what is this culture being preserved in light of? Botstein’s clarification that urban areas may present a greater risk to the culture of chamber music performance is problematic in that it aligns perceived cultural value (“prestigious in culture”) with demographics, belying an underlying assumption that chamber music is at odds with urban musical life.

This chapter endeavours to expand on the conversation started by Botstein, providing a state of play of chamber music within the 21st century. The first part of the chapter situates chamber music in 21st century society, investigating the extent to which it may be considered simultaneously culturally valuable and anachronistic. This will primarily entail establishing a more nuanced definition of the phenomenon and identifying the greater narratives it is woven into. In Botstein’s article, and thus far in this chapter, chamber music has been primarily considered as an activity; this does not account for the vast array of repertoire that is also referred to as “chamber music”. Untangling the dual nature of this term provides insight into the nuanced ways that this phenomenon is encountered within society. The second part of the chapter proposes how chamber music may be considered as a dialogue between an

activity and a repertoire, allowing it to be repositioned within 21st century society in order to address its potential marginality, impracticality, and even prestige.

There are two factors to note about the framing of the material presented in this chapter. First, this work has emerged from a distinctly anglophone perspective, and thus the extent to which it may be extrapolated to other social, cultural, and economic contexts may be limited. Second, and more importantly, the aim of this chapter is not to address chamber music in relation to a society which presupposes that chamber music is inherently valuable or necessary. It could be argued that a significant amount of writing about chamber music is produced by and for those people who already assign cultural value to it. Rather, this chapter attempts to more objectively evaluate chamber music as a form of interpersonal musicking within the 21st century.

## 2. The Noun

Mark Radice's (2012) *Chamber Music: An Essential History* is a fascinating musicological document, but perhaps not for reasons the author would have intended. Woven through numerous descriptions of works and historical anecdotes about composers are allusions to the nature of "authentic" chamber music. At times, this authenticity is grounded in historical concepts, such as situating Scacchi's *musica cubicularis* exclusively within private residences (Radice 2012, p. 1). As the book progresses, however, this attachment to historical precedent becomes restrictive in oddly specific ways. According to Radice, chamber music is not authentic, real, or good if it displays any of the following characteristics:

- Takes place outdoors (p. 55);
- Has a conductor (p. 215);
- Does not balance musical interest across all performers (p. 105);
- Is written for two violins, a viola, and a cello, but the ensemble is called something other than a string quartet (p. 106);
- Calls for more than one piano (p. 92);
- Does not have "nuance, complexity, and delicacy" (p. 273);
- Is not representative of the core musical heritage in western art music (p. 210).

The vast amount of semantic baggage that accompanies Radice's concept of chamber music is evident in this document. That a book that proclaims to have an essential history of the practice has such a precise view as to what counts as chamber music suggests that the phenomenon could fall afoul of rather stringent gatekeeping. Whilst such exclusionary views about what is and is not chamber music is common in the literature written a century ago (e.g., Boughton 1912; and Pierce 1925), it is somewhat surprising that it is present in a 21st century textbook.

This prompts two observations about modern understandings of chamber music:

- 1 Definitions of chamber music are often heavily dictated by historical precedent;
- 2 Although the historical contexts that engendered chamber music may no longer exist, modern impressions of those contexts maintain some imagined level of measuring authenticity.

For all the evident passion for chamber music, there is a level of criticality missing from Radice's text, particularly around the use of language. Throughout the book, the term "chamber music" is used to refer both to a specific repertoire of musical works and a type of performance, with the overall emphasis far in favour of discussing musical works (and, oddly, their tonal features) than practice. This is common across academia, where "chamber music" appears to overwhelmingly refer to chamber repertoire. Books such as Melvin Berger's (1985) *Guide to Chamber Music*, James McCalla's (1996) *Twentieth-Century Chamber Music*, and Paul Jeffery's (2017) *Player's Guide to Chamber Music* are primarily catalogues of repertoire, with some passing comments on performance. This is perhaps more indicative of musicological trends than anything else; musical performance started to gain traction as an object of research only at the turn of the 21st century. However, as has become widely recognised within musicological discourse, musical practice and musical repertoire exist in tandem with each other, and thus there is a need for *both* versions of the term "chamber music" to be investigated.

The distinction between music as an activity and an object has been explored from a sociological perspective by Roy and Dowd (2010). According to them, these different conceptions of music prompt different means of engagement. Music as an activity is "something always becoming that never achieves full object status, something unbounded and open, something that is a verb (musicking) rather than a noun" (Roy and Dowd 2010, p. 186). Music as an object, however, "has a moment of creation, a stability of characteristics across time and place, and potential for use and effects . . . [and thus] can be abstracted from its time and place and put into new contexts" (ibid., p. 184). This ontological duality provides a useful starting point to understand chamber music. Thus, for the purposes of this chapter, I use the terms "chamber musicking" (activity) and "chamber repertoire" (object) to help clarify which meaning of "chamber music" I am referring to at any given time.

### 2.1. *Chamber Musicking*

In its broadest capacity, the activity of chamber music is a form of musicking that involves a small number of performers, each playing their own part (Chamber Music America 2021). Although generally disregarded, a key caveat to this definition is that chamber musicking adheres to a large number of implicit conventions in western art music. The instruments used are primarily orchestral, and the musicians are generally expected to be performing from notation. In an even broader sense, chamber musicking exists in a worldview which distinguishes between composer,

performer, and audience. Whilst contextualising chamber musicking explicitly within western art music might appear pedantic, not doing so suggests that the activity includes *any* small ensemble musicking from around the world (see Griffiths 2003; and Harrison 2006). From this perspective, the umbrella of western art music is a useful demarcation.

Central to many definitions of chamber musicking is location. As composer John Luther Adams notes, chamber music speaks “directly to the importance of the places in which we make and listen to music. It also implies an intimacy and immediacy we don’t usually experience in a large concert hall, theater or opera house” (Adams 2001). Historically, chamber musicking was often rooted in private residences, and served as a means of entertainment for those participating or observing. However, as concert halls and other public venues became the cultural sites for western art music, chamber musicking itself became both less private and more formal. Its social function pivoted; rather than being a recreational activity for the performers, placing the practice on stage distanced the performers from the audience, reinforcing that they were more spectators than active participants. This pivot illustrates a transition between two of Thomas Turino’s fields of music making practice: “participatory musicking”, where “there are no artist-audience distinctions, only participants and potential participants” (Turino 2008, p. 28), and “presentational musicking”, which centres around performances that are “prepared by musicians for others to listen to” (ibid., p. 52). Chamber musicking’s shift from a participatory activity to a presentational one is not unique, as similar transitions in music making in general have happened throughout the 20th century. As the practice of chamber musicking moved from homes to other performance spaces, the resulting void in the recreational ecosystem was filled by other forms of music making, particularly with garage bands and other home-grown ensembles. In the 21st century, technological advancements have encouraged new forms of private recreational musicking to emerge, including karaoke; bedroom music production; or video games, such as Rock Band or Guitar Hero. In a way, whilst people could historically engage with music that required multiple parts within their homes through chamber musicking, karaoke machines, computers, and games consoles have obviated the need for other people to be present to allow a form of private musicking to take place. None of this is to say that chamber musicking, in its traditional sense, cannot be found in modern homes, but that for the most part it has been supplanted by other activities.

Although it has moved away from its participatory roots, chamber musicking is consistently characterised as an exemplar society rooted in equality, with Chamber Music America going so far as to highlight its “potential to exemplify democracy, mutual respect, and empathy” as a core value (Chamber Music America 2013, p. 5). This democratic environment requires each player to demonstrate a high level of independence (Neidlinger 2011, p. 22). Christopher Small writes that chamber

musicking “is much more sociable and even intimate [than other forms of classical musicking]; it affords greater autonomy, more self-direction, to the individual performer and the opportunity for more spontaneous interaction with others” (Small 2001, p. 354). This independence—and the resulting democratic musicking that follows—does not come without prerequisites. As Susan Bradshaw argues, chamber musicians not only need to understand their parts, but also need to be responsible for the workings of the whole piece (Bradshaw 1977, p. 8).

As a by-product of this egalitarian approach, chamber musicking does not traditionally require a conductor (Chamber Music America 2021). However, this restriction has eased as the complexity of pieces has increased, a move which has not been without contention. Bradshaw bemoans *Pierrot Lunaire* as a watershed moment that shifted the nature of chamber ensembles towards mini-orchestras, where performers could effectively relinquish their own global understanding of how pieces worked (Bradshaw 1977, p. 7). More recently, the use of a conductor may *still* be perceived to sully chamber music; in his aforementioned textbook, Radice is careful to distinguish Arnold Schönberg’s *Ode* from his “authentic chamber scores” as it relies on a conductor (Radice 2012, p. 215).

Chamber musicking may well be emblematic of an equal society, but participation in that society has preconditions—mainly that performers are well-versed enough in the conventions and theory of western art music to navigate their part independently and have the technical prowess on their instruments to execute it. Having such a participation threshold is not uncommon across other activities in society—consider other types of musicking, sport, etc.—but clarifying these preconditions is important in understanding how chamber musicking has shifted in relation to other activities. Although the threshold for participation in chamber musicking may not have changed dramatically, there has been a transition from a notation-centric music literacy towards a digital music literacy over the 20th century, meaning that potentially fewer people are in a position to engage with the preconditions inherent in many forms of chamber music (cf. Dahl 2009). Pauline Griffiths cautions against presuming that barriers to entry are financial; instead, noting that “for most of the population, the barriers of entry to the arts . . . such as knowledge and skill, mean that choice is not even possible” (Griffiths 2003, p. 30). Thus, although it is still a recreational activity for some, perceived barriers to entry might limit the extent to which the wider population engages in chamber musicking in their own homes.

## 2.2. Chamber Repertoire

The content performed in chamber musicking is “chamber music” as an object: chamber repertoire. The existence of a canon of chamber repertoire is perhaps an outgrowth of one of the overarching narratives of western art music in the last two



centuries related to the rise (and critique) of the “work” concept, or the idea that musical works may exist as objects that transcend their individual manifestations in performance (Goehr 1994). Whilst there are certainly long-standing philosophical debates as to the primacy of the work-concept, its cultural presence is certainly felt through the creation and maintenance of the canon (Talbot 2000).

The common characteristics of chamber repertoire are intimately linked to the process of chamber musicking, resulting in numerous parallels. Designed for a small number of performers, chamber repertoire features musical lines which generally move independently of each other. The balance of complication and importance across the parts within a piece of chamber repertoire is particularly important, as this interplay provides the template upon which the purported intimate social relationships are founded. Reframing the relationship between chamber musicking and chamber repertoire in terms of sport is useful in summarising the characteristics of this repertoire. The rules of a sport are designed to encourage specific sorts of behaviour and interaction. In non-competitive sport, in particular, the chief priority is presumably to create the context by which people can share a specific kind of interaction with each other. In the “sport” of chamber musicking, pieces are generally designed to encourage performers to interact in such a way as to generate egalitarian relationships. Thus, chamber repertoire is generally noted to balance parts in terms of musical interest, technical challenge, and complexity (Radice 2012, p. 106).

More abstractly, chamber repertoire has been described as being particularly valuable within western art music and western society in general. Christopher Small captures what he perceives to be a prevailing view of chamber repertoire by its fans as “such rich musical treasures, some of the most refined and beautiful, most intimate and satisfying, and above all most spiritually elevating and intellectually stimulating of all works of music” (Small 2001, p. 340). Janet Levy similarly points out how describing a non-chamber work as chamber music has been “something to achieve—an ultimate status” (Levy 1987, p. 12). To Radice, this body of work goes so far as to represent the core musical heritage in western art music (Radice 2012, p. 210), containing “nuance, complexity, and delicacy” (ibid., p. 273). Although the extent to which these statements are true is subjective, it is important to recognise that chamber repertoire—and, as a by-product, chamber musicking—is imbued with a large amount of cultural importance by different groups in western society. Within this canon of western art music, William Weber notes that chamber music was deemed the “pinnacle” of 19th century classical genres (Weber 1999, p. 354). Thus, in this context, Berger’s (1985) *Guide to Chamber Music*, Keller’s (2010) *Chamber Music: A Listener’s Guide*, McCalla’s (1996) *Twentieth-Century Chamber Music*, and Radice’s (2012) *Chamber Music: An Essential History* reinforce not only the content of this canon, but also that this canon exists in a somewhat linear and modernist fashion.

### 2.3. *Narratives of Exclusion*

Exploring the shift of chamber musicking from the private to the public sphere and the enshrinement of chamber repertoire within canon may provide insights into how chamber music's role within society may have changed. This broad narrative was highlighted by Christopher Small at the turn of the century:

When chamber musicking becomes professionalised . . . there is introduced into the encounter a further distancing [between participants]. Under the day-to-day pressures of professional performance the little society can become less and less egalitarian and may fall increasingly under the command of one strong member of the group. As that happens, relationships with listeners become also more distanced, and the larger the setting the more distancing there will be, until finally, however wonderful the musical works may be that are being played, however superb the performers, the conviviality that gave birth in the first place to that mode of musicking has fled. Maybe we are prepared to pay that price, in the interest of greater refinement of playing, but we should be aware that there *is* a price. It's something we might remember when we use the word "professional" as a term of approval and "amateur" as one of abuse. (Small 2001, p. 354)

The trajectory that Small outlines has become apparent when considering chamber music's accessibility to general audiences. In their work on young adult listeners' perspectives towards chamber music concerts, Lucy Dearn and Stephanie Pitts note that such events are generally perceived as requiring a certain degree of knowledge to appreciate, find meaning in, or engage with (Dearn and Pitts 2017, p. 44). Regardless of its accuracy, this expectation leads to the perception that both chamber musicking and repertoire are only enjoyed by a subset of the larger population; in particular, one which has been trained to "understand" this music. The resulting exclusivity could have opposing impacts on different potential audiences. Some audiences may view this exclusivity as a benefit—a cultural "members-only" club which grants prestige to those who participate. Others, however, may view this exclusivity as alienating, reinforcing cultural class distinctions. Pulling chamber music further into academia may encourage it to be even further entrenched in its exclusivity, or unpopularity, propagating a cloistered existence which increasingly distances it from commercial canon and practices.

Little research has been conducted on both audiences' and performers' participation in chamber music. However, pockets of specific information are available, which allow some conclusions to be inferred. Looking at audience behaviour in Sheffield, chamber music concerts are principally attended by people over 45 years of age and within the upper- and middle-middle class social grades (Barlow and Shibli 2007). This demographic trend is not new: even in the late 1980s,

Janet Levy recognised the class relationships embedded within chamber music when she wrote:

For many people, part of [chamber music's] captivation may reside in the "memory" of chamber music's having originated in performances in salons of the upper classes. This now archaic link with the upper classes and connoisseurship has a mystique that dies hard. At the same time there is the quasi-contradictory and vicarious experience of democracy: the listener witnesses the democratic functioning of equals on a team. There is also the alluring mystery of ensemble-playing without a conductor. Thus some of the covert valuing of chamber music might, paradoxically, be understood as providing vicarious experiences of the best of both worlds—the aristocratic and the democratic! (Levy 1987, p. 14)

In an Australian context, Pauline Griffiths writes that chamber music audiences form "a narrow social group", and that chamber music "remains unattractive and therefore off limits to most Australians despite the communication strategies of music organisations and their attempts to let people know what is going on inside concert halls" (Griffiths 2003, p. 23). Thus, it is arguable that the mystique of connoisseurship has not yet died at this point in the 21st century.

#### *2.4. The State of Play*

Emergent through the previous explorations of chamber musicking and chamber repertoire is a kind of paradigmatic tension centring around the nature of inclusion and intimacy. For being an artform that has the "potential to exemplify democracy, mutual respect, and empathy" (Chamber Music America 2013, p. 5), there are several features that can be interpreted as minimising opportunities for egalitarian interaction between participants. Fundamentally, both chamber musicking and chamber repertoire exist in a framework that reinforces a distinction between composer, performer, and audience. Chamber musicking has broadly shifted from a participatory activity that is centred in domestic environments to a presentational activity in public environments. Chamber repertoire, the "object" of chamber musicking, not only requires a certain level of musical literacy and proficiency to play, but is also potentially viewed by audiences as needing a musical understanding to appreciate fully.

As Christopher Small writes, "every musical performance is inescapably to some degree a political act" (Small 2001, p. 349). The democratic environment ostensibly maintained within chamber musicking is only contained within the performers themselves, and is generally structured according to the framework dictated by the chamber repertoire. Agency, in this instance, is limited to those actively playing

music, and even then, that agency may be constricted within a *Werktreue* framework.<sup>1</sup> Thus, although chamber music in the 21st century is still hailed as an intimate art form, there are limits to its inclusivity. Whilst it may have been more accessible at its origins, it does not fulfil the same societal niche now.

### 3. The Verb

One possible route to addressing the potentially increasing anachronistic nature of chamber music in the 21st century goes back to the core of the ambiguities explored earlier in this chapter. This is not rebranding chamber music for a younger audience, but rather exploring how framing it in terms of its overarching principles may allow its relevance to modern cultural practices across society to become clearer.

Existing definitions of both chamber musicking and chamber repertoire appear to be preoccupied with surface-level details—the number of players or parts, where the musicking takes place, the instruments being used, etc. This categorisation of details allows authors such as Radice to make comprehensive lists of what counts as real, authentic, or good chamber music. These definitions are paradoxically rigid and fluid: rigid in that there are a number of qualifying features that can be used to gatekeep “authentic” chamber music, but fluid in that the existing literature on chamber music does not consistently agree on those qualifying features.

#### 3.1. *Music-as-Discourse*

As useful as it is to discuss chamber musicking and chamber repertoire as distinct aspects of chamber music, establishing such a dualistic divide may itself be too rigid. Sociologist Martyn Hudson suggests that Roy and Dowd’s distinction of music as an activity and an object (2010) does not fully capture how music acts and is interacted with in society. Rather than viewing music as an ontological duality, he proposes to “examine both at once in the study of music-as-discourse where music hold within it discourses from society that can be described and that have ideological impacts in the social world” (Hudson 2014, 2.9). Along those lines, therefore, defining chamber music as the sum total of the characteristics of chamber musicking and chamber repertoire might be limiting. Exploring the discourse between activity and object may yield a more nuanced understanding of what chamber music is and, importantly, what it could be. In this context, two discourses arise through the

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<sup>1</sup> *Werktreue* is a performance culture “characterised by the principle of the performer’s fidelity to the composer’s presumed ‘intentions’ in a musical work” (Leistra-Jones 2013, p. 399). As Lydia Goehr explains, a performance will have met the ideals of this culture “when it achieved complete transparency”, allowing “the work to ‘shine’ through and be heard in and for itself” with minimal interpretative residue left by the performer (Goehr 1994, p. 232).

shared characteristics of chamber musicking and chamber repertoire: the centrality of intimate relationships and the economy of resources.

The first discourse that emerges is the centrality of intimate relationships. Both popular and academic writing about chamber music highlight it as a paragon of “an egalitarian, convivial society” (Small 2001, p. 354). This is most overtly manifested through chamber musicking, as the micro-society created through performance is one in which individuals are autonomous and hierarchy is flattened, to varying degrees. Such a social network is not spontaneously generated, though; chamber repertoire lays the groundwork for these relationships similarly to how the rules of sport might be constructed. Such repertoire is designed to encourage the generation of these intimate relationships—if only for the duration of the piece—through balanced complexity of parts and nuanced interplay.

The second discourse taking place is around an efficiency of resources. There is a certain economy at the core of chamber music, which emerges as an interplay of activity and object. This mainly concerns drawing from a capped pool of resources: in particular, a limited number of musicians, instruments, and parts. Such an economical approach to musicking could be considered to extend to an efficiency in space usage, recalling the original terminology of “chamber” playing. What were once practical requirements of performance have bled into compositional constraints, which have then become standardised. This economy of resources, particularly in terms of personnel, helps create an environment where chamber music’s intimate relationships can thrive. Each participant is there due to the fact that their part and performance provide an essential element of the experience.

Considering these two discourses simultaneously *within the context of western art music* might yield a perfectly viable understanding of chamber music. Within a wider context, however, these discourses could be ascribed to entire genres of popular and folk music. A jazz combo, a ceilidh band, and an indie rock band all share features with chamber music, and thus could be folded into consideration of these discourses. The 21st century provides an opportunity for us to reconsider what chamber music means, which may involve stripping away the cladding of the genre, i.e., the descriptors used to distinguish it within a wider market, and identify its values.

### 3.2. *Chambering Music*

Considering these two discourses between chamber musicking and chamber repertoire allows us to reframe what it means to engage with both an activity and an object. In other words, to engage in both an activity and an object in these discourses is to embody their shared inherent ideologies and values. Hence, I propose that it is useful to consider the term “chambering music” as a means of opening up the concept of chamber music to encompass the positive and inclusive aspects of this

social phenomenon: *to chamber music is to create intimate musical experiences through an economy of musical material.*

Chambering music centres on intimacy. Lauren Berlant writes that “to intimate is to communicate with the sparsest of signs and gestures, and at its root intimacy has the quality of eloquence and brevity. But intimacy also involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way” (Berlant 1998, p. 281). Within both chamber repertoire and chamber musicking, two key intimate relationships are developed: the sonic relationships between musical parts and the interpersonal relationships between performers. However, neither chamber repertoire nor chamber musicking encourages the development of *intimate* relationships with audience members. Herein lies the crux of the issue. Audiences may observe performers enact intimate relationships and listen to intimate sonic relationships between musical parts, but they are, by and large, external to these relationships. Thus, to chamber music is to create intimate musical experiences *for all participants* through an economy of musical material. Recalling Turino’s terminology, chambering music would shift the activity from a presentational mode of performance to a participatory one (Turino 2008). Through this, the lived relationships between participants would reflect what sociologist Veronika Zink describes as an “affective community”: “a specific form of collectivity that can be characterised by a shared sensuality eliciting an implicit sense of commonality and immediateness” (Zink 2019, p. 289). Zink proposes that such affective communities maintain social values “informed by the belief in a seemingly enlivened and, hence, basic form of collectivity that is in direct contrast to modern visions of a functionally organised, alienating society governed by instrumental reason” (ibid., p. 297). Thus, exploring how music may be chambered would entail fundamentally reimagining the relationships between all participants in the encounter, pursuant of what Zink calls “a playful form of practicing convivial connectivity” (Zink 2019, p. 290).

The remainder of this chapter explores possible implications of chambering music. Recalling Berlant’s definition of intimacy given above, what would an aspirational narrative about something shared through chambering look like? Who would be involved? Ultimately, how would it turn out?

#### **4. Flattening Hierarchy**

Chambering music expands the scope of intimacy to include all those partaking in the experience of the live performance. Its full extent requires a flattening of the artistic hierarchy typically found in presentational music, placing the performers and the audience in parity with each other. It is difficult to imagine how intimate relationships can be developed between parties whose power or degree of control vary dramatically. Chambering music validates and elevates audiences’ experiences.

By extension, the composer should not hold sway over the performers or the audiences, and the performers should not hold sway over the audiences.

Positioning performers and audiences as parties in equal dialogue with each other—and, consequently, in open dialogue with chamber repertoire—would certainly require adjustments in accepted societal roles, but I do not think this is unachievable. It would, however, mean dismantling the formality and mysticism around western art music in particular, and musical performance in general. To fully embrace chambering music is to move away from a hierarchical model of musicking and make it more about sharing creative moments—more about the human connection that helps manifest that creative moment.

#### 4.1. *Limiting Numbers*

Blurring the boundaries between performer and audience impacts the practicalities of performance. It is difficult to imagine how intimacy may be developed effectively across large numbers of people. Thus, concert halls and venues that are designed to maximise acoustic properties and to seat proportionally larger audiences than performers are likely not effective places to chamber music. From an economic standpoint, chambering is not a model that will maximise profits for minimal expenditure. Instead, it is more about audiences engaging in deeply personal experiences with performers, building up relationships, and sustaining their engagement. Catalysing those experiences will likely mean performing in environments that encourage intimacy: smaller spaces with less public thoroughfare or disturbances and increased privacy.

This physical intimacy between performers and audiences becomes revealing in other ways, particularly around the manual act of performance. Performance is not aseptic or sterile; creating sound requires *effort*, and musicians move, breathe, grunt, shift, sigh, shuffle, etc., while operating their instruments. The acknowledgement of these sounds in the chambering space—which Peter Kivy recognises as signifying sonic authenticity (Kivy 1995, p. 48)—may further humanise performers. Ultimately, all of these steps may further dismantle the sense that audiences are on the outside of an imaginary museum. Performances such as those promoted by Sheffield’s Music in the Round do well to reconfigure conventional performer/audience physical divisions,<sup>2</sup> as they seat audiences closer to and around performers, provide more spoken introductions than may be usually present in other classical music performances, and broadly adopt a more informal style than other chamber music series. Lucy Dearn and Stephanie Pitts, who have extensively researched this

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<sup>2</sup> For more information about current activities by Music in the Round, see: <https://www.musicintheround.co.uk> (accessed on 21 September 2021).

initiative, note that “these features have been reported by regular [Music in the Round] audience members to contribute to feelings of accessibility and inclusivity, building audience community through familiarity with the performers and the opportunity to watch other audience members as they listen” (Dearn and Pitts 2017, p. 47). However, these features could be applied to an even greater extent.

#### 4.2. Repositioning Repertoire

Placing performers and audiences in such close proximity and as equally agentic participants has a further impact on the ontological nature of performance. Rather than performers striving to precisely articulate a *Werktreue* ideal, practised and honed for audience consumption, chambering music would encourage performers and audiences to more openly explore chamber repertoire together. This would shift performances again from presentational towards participatory modes, with repertoire becoming less “a set item [or] and art object” towards “a set of resources, like the rules and stock moves of a game refashioned anew during each performance” (Turino 2008, p. 54). Divisions between rehearsals and performances blur, in this instance, allowing repertoire to be explored by performers in conversation with audiences.

From another perspective, however, the relationship among performer, audience, and repertoire may become more of a continuous narrative than a one-off event. Developing such a relationship with a work may involve revisiting it repeatedly, exploring and playing with it, breaking it and mending it. Performers are familiar with this through the process of rehearsal, although there may be varying degrees of perceived authority to not just play, but play *with* a piece and explore potentially radical interpretations of it.<sup>3</sup> Audiences may develop similar relationships with repertoire through repeated listening, although again, the degree of agency in these relationships may be limited. Through chambering, both parties may be able to play with the intricacies of pieces, *living* the music within a shared experience. Repertoire thus becomes the material that prompts the joint exploration of sound. Chambering is less about recreating a work to a particular standard, but more about using works as opportunities to explore, grow, and live with other musicking people. In a way, this is similar to gamification, the process of “using game design elements in non-game contexts to motivate and increase user activity and retention” (Deterding et al. 2011, p. 9), where non-playing and playing participants are playing non-competitively together. By extension, chambering music side-steps the notion of a canon of chamber repertoire in favour of localised canons. These canons may

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<sup>3</sup> Performers’ interpretations of a piece may be impacted by a number of factors, not the least of which is their perceived role in relation to their conception of “the work”. More conservative interpretations may result from a presumed obligation to adhere to a *Werktreue* ideal—a musical worldview that perceives performers as those articulating rather than creating works.



not arise through wider historical importance or greatness (Desler 2013, p. 387), but rather through shared experience of pieces together.

#### 4.3. *Chambering in Practice*

The following imagined narrative may provide insight into how chambering music may look in practice. This is certainly not intended to be prescriptive, but is offered as an illustration of how chamber musicking and chamber repertoire may be repositioned to allow for more broad participation and engagement.

The session begins as it always does: with a round of coffee and general conversation. The brass quintet and five audience collaborators are well-acquainted with each other, and have been playing together in various combinations on and off over the last year. Today they're meeting in a smaller rehearsal space that would only fit a few more people than those already present. After catching up about their families and day-to-day lives, a handful of people start flipping through sheet music on an iPad. One person suggests a piece to warm up with, something to help the whole group centre their listening and breathing. They decide on *The Webster Cycles*, by Steve Peters (1981), a semi-improvisatory piece structured around all the words in Webster's Dictionary that can be spelt with A, B, C, D, E, F, and G. This has become a personal favourite of the chambering group, as it not only helps the brass players warm up their instruments and bodies, but also slows the whole group's breathing and clears away thoughts of busy lives and to-do lists. People are seated throughout the space, with some audience collaborators in-between performers and some at the fringes of the group, situating themselves where they prefer the resonance in the space. After the piece finishes, someone remarks that there ended up being some notable gaps between phrases in this play-through, prompting the trumpet players to joke about how they ended up synching more than they intended. The horn player points out how much they find the longer words such as CABBAGE or DEFACED fun to play, simply because there are so many options for interpreting those sequences of notes—a comment echoed by an audience collaborator, who likes being surprised by different interpretations of phrases. Another person comments that they always like finding a place to sit at a particular spot between the tenor and bass trombonists, as they can feel the resonance in their chest particularly well.

Having settled into the space, the group discusses what to play next. The bass trombonist has recently acquired a copy of Joan Tower's (2006) *Copperwave* upon the recommendation of a friend, and suggests that as an option. The group agrees, so they all start looking through the parts. The brass players start unpacking their various mutes, and the audience collaborators comment on the performance instructions and ask about some of the techniques required. Scanning through the sheet music, people point out areas that might be a bit more complicated to put together. The environment feels part open rehearsal, part workshop, with everyone

sharing their initial thoughts on the music. Reading through an online review, an audience collaborator flags up how much the piece is influenced by Latin music, sparking a moment of understanding in one of the trumpet players working on deciphering a particularly tricky rhythm. After identifying the main sections in the piece, the group decide to tackle them in order, agreeing to pause at the trumpet cadenza. They establish a conservative tempo amongst themselves, then count in. As the players launch into the piece, the audience collaborators stay focused—some tap their feet and groove along, some watch the notation go by, and some close their eyes and focus on listening. The play-through is not polished; in fact, some sections slip slightly out of the grasp of the players. Errors are not received with derision or shock, but instead treated as elements of risk and edge-of-the-seat tension. The pleasure that comes from attempting tricky technical gymnastics within an instrumental part is shared with the audience collaborators, and at times, players and audience alike laugh at successfully navigating complicated phrases. Once the group reaches the trumpet cadenza, everyone relaxes, and conversation begins again. After some immediate conversation around particular parts, the floor opens up, and people discuss what they found most exciting, interesting, or challenging. Even though technical details are mentioned—tricky rhythms to align, chords that could be tuned more quickly, or dynamics which went by unnoticed—the discussion is as much about the joy of encountering this new music together as it is about highlighting things to try differently in subsequent playing. Before launching into the next run-through of this section, everyone has an opportunity to discuss their experience. One person tells a story about how this piece reminds him of his favourite salsa band, and the rest of the group chuckles at how seemingly everything leads back to this band for him. The group continues through the piece, taking the time to learn it together. Audience collaborators' input is valued by the performers, who use that to inform how they interpret their parts and pull the piece together overall. Having read through each section, the quintet plays through the whole piece. Some players comment on how much trickier some sections are when buried in a much longer play-through, some collaborators remark on how well the themes of the piece link together when heard back-to-back, and all agree that this is a piece they would like to return to again.

As the session nears its end, the group decide to return to a piece they worked on several sessions prior—an arrangement of Debussy's (1910) *La fille aux cheveux de lin*. The players and collaborators had explored a number of the different recordings of arrangements available in the time since that session, and started off by discussing what they particularly liked about each. Working through the piece, the group jotted down notes about how they might shape their specific interpretation—stretching time slightly more in some places and speeding it up in others. The brass players discussed some of the practicalities of these decisions, with the bass trombonist

flagging up how at times their breathing patterns may have to change at different tempi, and a trumpet player pointing out how lingering on a high note would be lovely, but optimistic, this far into the session. When the main decisions are sorted, the conversation settles, and the group begins to play. This is a piece they all know well, and both players and collaborators inhabit the performance as they would a well-loved piece of clothing.

## 5. Conclusions

Marginal, impractical, yet prestigious: Botstein's description of chamber music captures three possible reasons why its intimacy has been limited. At present, the social sphere within which intimate relationships occur through chamber musicking and chamber repertoire only encloses the performers and the work being performed. When audiences encounter chamber music through performances or recordings, they may observe intimate relationships being played out, but their participation is somewhat limited—their role is dictated within “a functionally organised, alienating society” (Zink 2019, p. 297). This is not to say that audiences do not impact a concert's atmosphere or performers' actions, but that the degree of agency audiences have is significantly less than that of performers, and thus, they are not fully participating in the potential affective community. Audiences may have a window into narratives “about something shared, [stories] about both oneself and others” (Berlant 1998, p. 281), but they are excluded. Ultimately, this kind of power imbalance between participants may result in chamber music being perceived as being “at odds with the contemporary age” (Griffiths 2003, p. 11), where its prestige is wrapped up in a “now archaic link with the upper classes and connoisseurship” (Levy 1987, p. 14).

Underpinning the surface-level features of chamber music are two recurrent themes: the centrality of intimate relationships and the efficiency of musical resources. These themes become more evident if chamber musicking and chamber repertoire are not considered to be two parts of an ontological duality, but rather two parties in dialogue with each other. The liveness of this back-and-forth between activity and object can be framed as a verb: “to chamber” music is to approach musicking in a manner which is motivated by the creation of affective communities, which elicit “an implicit sense of commonality and immediateness” (Zink 2019, p. 289). Principally, such an endeavour entails flattening social hierarchies among composers, performers, and audiences; limiting the numbers of participants; and repositioning repertoire as the prompt for activity rather than the ideal goal. From this perspective, chambering music in the 21st century involves a potentially wider array of practices than would normally be considered chamber music in its most traditional sense. Chamber music, the noun, is enriched by chambering, the verb. To chamber music is to create a recurring, sustainable creative space that centres around personal, human relationships between all parties, where all people contribute to the shared

experiences. Centring chamber music around the creation and maintenance of intimate relationships could address chamber music's potential marginality within the 21st century.

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