Creating Psychological Safety in Ensemble and Chamber Music Rehearsals

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1 The Foundation: Safety and Artistic Excellence

Psychological safety is "a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking" (Edmondson, 1999). It allows musicians to contribute honestly without fearing humiliation, rejection, or retaliation for speaking up.

What it enables

- Raising artistic concerns
- Respectful disagreement
- Admitting mistakes and uncertainty
- Asking questions
- Experimenting with interpretive ideas

What it is not

- Being nice at all costs
- Avoiding tension
- Lowering standards
- Requiring consensus on every artistic decision

Central principle: High standards and high candor can coexist. Psychological safety supports rigorous, respectful musical exploration. Research in organizational teams links psychological safety to learning behavior and speaking up (Edmondson, 1999). Its application to chamber music is a pedagogical extension. Every player depends on the others and silence can limit both learning and artistic possibilities.

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2 When Visions and Priorities Collide

- Ego-driven vision: Personal sound, solos, or prominence supersede the shared musical goal.
- Perfectionist vision: Small details dominate before the ensemble has established direction and flow.
- Relationship-driven vision: Preserving harmony takes priority over necessary artistic conversations.
- Avoided conflict: Politeness masks disagreement, concerns remain unresolved.

- Personalized feedback: Musical critique is heard as a judgment of the person.
- Unequal participation: A few voices shape decisions while others withdraw.
- Leadership imbalance: A dominant leader silences others, a passive leader provides no direction.
- No agreed process: The group lacks shared rehearsal and decision-making norms.
- Perfectionism without safety: Demanding excellence is not matched by permission to question, errors, and progress.

The Space Shuttle Challenger disaster (Vaughan, 1996) demonstrates how pressure from leadership and a culture of overlooking warning signs can prevent people from speaking up about serious concerns. While the consequences in music are very different, ignoring concerns or discouraging open communication can gradually weaken trust, engagement, and creativity within an ensemble.

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3 Build a Shared Vision Before Problems Arise

Discuss and revisit these questions as an ensemble:

- What should our rehearsals feel like?
- What level of individual preparation do we expect before each rehearsal?
- How do we communicate when someone is struggling to prepare or cannot meet an expectation?
- How will we handle disagreement?
- What are our desired outputs and artistic goals?
- How will we communicate effectively?
- What process norms will guide rehearsal time and decisions?

Turn answers into two or three observable agreements, for example: “Every interpretation receives a musical trial,” “We critique choices, not people,” and “Everyone contributes before a major decision.”

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4 The Three-Phase Rehearsal Arc

Phase 1 | Priming: align and prepare

Establish specific rehearsal goals:

- Open with a brief (emotional) check-in.
- Do a breathing exercise.
- Share what you need for this rehearsal to be successful.
- Establish an artistic goal.
- Decide on contribution norms.

Phase 2 | Communication and leadership: experiment and refine

Implement rehearsal strategies:

- Use specific feedback.
- Rotate rehearsal facilitation.
- Invite quieter voices before the most assertive players dominate.
- Test alternatives in sound and interpretation.
- Separate instrumental role, seniority, or seating position from decision-making authority.

Phase 3 | After Action Review (AAR): reflect and transfer

Close with a short, structured review. The AAR is a structured reflection practice adapted from organizational learning (Darling & Parry, 2001). Keep it brief, descriptive, and oriented toward the next rehearsal, not toward blame.

- What was our goal? Recall the shared intended objective.
- What actually occurred? Describe the actual events and outcomes. What improved, and where did the group struggle?
- Why did it happen? Analyze the contributing factors to the outcome.
- What will we adjust? Identify lessons learned and plan for future improvements.

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5 The SBI Feedback Model: Situation – Behavior – Impact

SBI is a structure for describing an observation without assigning motive or character. It makes feedback concrete enough to discuss and test.

- **Situation** – Name the specific moment: "In the second phrase of the exposition…"
- **Behavior** – Describe what was audible or visible, not an assumed intention: "…the cello entered before the violin release…"
- **Impact** – Explain the musical effect: "…so the handoff felt rushed and the phrase lost its sense of arrival."

Then invite dialogue and a trial: "Did you hear it the same way? Could we try a longer release and compare?"

Example
Instead of: "You never listen and always rush." Try: "During the accelerando leading into measure 42 (**situation**), you moved ahead of the group's tempo (**behavior**), which made it difficult for us to arrive together (**impact**). Could we try that passage again and agree on where we want the tempo to go?"

SBI is not a script for proving someone wrong. Ask whether your observation is accurate, remain open to other perspectives, and focus on a shared musical result.

6 Conflict Navigation as an Artistic Process

Healthy Sequence:

- State the perspective neutrally: “I hear this phrase as more suspended.”
- Ask clarifying questions: “What character are you aiming for?”
- Test musically: Play both options, preferably under comparable conditions.
- Reflect together: “Which choice best serves our agreed intention and why?”

Avoid

- Immediate voting
- Instrument hierarchy deciding
- Silent resentment

Disagreement can become artistic data → musical experimentation → collective refinement.

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7 Cultural and Power Awareness

- **Recognize communication differences**: Some students speak up easily; others may hesitate to disagree or share ideas.
- **Be mindful of hierarchies**: Instrument roles, experience, age, personality, and teacher authority can influence whose voices are heard.
- **Don't mistake silence for agreement**: Create opportunities for quieter students to contribute.
- **Encourage shared leadership**: Rotate rehearsal responsibilities and invite all students to suggest musical ideas and interpretations.
- **Model respectful disagreement**: Show that questioning an idea is part of artistic collaboration, not a personal challenge.

Key principle: Every student's musical perspective matters, regardless of experience, instrument, or personality.

References & Resources

Books

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