Serious Fun:

Amateur and Professional Voices in 21st-Century Chamber Music

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25. April 2020
The way musicians define chamber music has evolved over centuries of collaborative music-making. What began as unobtrusive musical accompaniment to social gatherings of the ruling class is today an established classical music genre that can attract an audience in its own right. Humble origins, however, created a precedent for modern practice, which is defined by the concept of intimacy. Music can be created intimately in the concert hall and in the home, by professionals and amateurs. Indeed, voices from both sides prove that these two spheres are not so different as one might expect.

Chamber music is the only classical genre in which musicians can be truly soloistic while also contributing to a whole. It often operates underground; an entire orchestra can’t exist independently of the classical music “institution,” but some form of chamber music can be found in just about every community. This is the group explored in my research: the classical music “community” that exists alongside and in some cases outside of the classical music “institution.” In the “institution” music is made by professional, established groups in traditional concert locations. In the “community” music is made by amateur players in non-traditional locations.

What is different about the ways amateur and professional musicians engage in chamber music? Is there something to be learned from the relationship between the two? Are there more ways to look at serious music making? We tend to tether amateur practice with not being serious about music. Where does that association come from? And finally, is classical music dying?

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1 The phrase “professional musician” refers to someone who has built a career around music, such as the music faculty at the University of Puget Sound. In the context of this paper, “amateur musician” describes someone who is a professional in a field other than music (such as medicine) but plays music on a regular basis.

2 The term “institution” encapsulates all established, professional musical organizations such as the Seattle Symphony or the Metropolitan Opera.

3 As a student of music with the intent to pursue a musical career, I would define myself as a professional-track or pre-professional musician. This lens informed the preconceptions I took into my interviews; I assumed amateur chamber music to be fun, not taken very seriously, and perhaps not even all that high-quality. This is how a professional musician might consider amateur playing.
This widely-circulated idea seems to refer to the institution as we understand it, i.e. professional music organizations, rather than a lack of engagement. The amateur music community is vibrant, so where does this belief come from? And is there a historical precedent for high-level music making outside of the professional world? How has chamber music been defined in the past, and who participated in it?

Through historical research I sought to determine where chamber music comes from, and how its definition and historical significance have changed over time. With my woodwind quintet I rehearsed select pieces to better understand how chamber music has evolved, and what this might mean for the experiences of amateur and professional musicians. With ethnographic interviews I ventured into the world of chamber music as a musician myself, focusing on individual narratives to discover who engages in chamber music and how their professional lives inform their approach. Do amateur and professional musicians engage differently in chamber music? And is there more than one way to conceive of serious music making?

I originally planned to present my research findings through an interdisciplinary Lecture-Recital on campus at the University of Puget Sound, but nationwide university shut-downs in response to the COVID-19 pandemic made this impossible. I thus adapted my project into a written document and conducted additional research through a new lens: the situation has given me a singular opportunity to explore the ways in which musicians respond to isolation in a global health crisis. Musical involvement is limited and the practice of chamber music is severely compromised by social distancing measures. Musicians struggle to maintain their engagement in an inherently social practice during an unprecedented era of enforced isolation.
Historical Overview

Musicologist John H. Baron establishes in his work *Intimate Music* what he calls the “ingredients” of chamber music.

There are five basic ingredients that, taken together, constitute chamber music. 1) Chamber music is instrumental music. 2) Chamber music is ensemble music, i.e., music for two or more performers. 3) Chamber music is solistic (*sic*), i.e., no two players play the same music at the same time. 4) The purpose of the music is to provide serious ensemble, not the virtuosic display of one member of the ensemble (though the latter often intrudes in chamber music). 5) The core feature of any music is its overt or implied intimacy. 4

For Baron, this last “ingredient” encapsulates many characteristics of the chamber experience. “Intimacy,” he writes, “is a psychological perception; it suggests ‘smallness’ and ‘closeness’ on the part of performers and listeners.” Smallness refers to the number of performers as well as the size of the audience and the room in which the performance is given. Ideally the space “is just large enough for the sound to fully resonate and not any larger; the sound cannot disappear in empty space.” Here Baron implies the exclusion of large halls and outdoor venues, although chamber music happens in these spaces all the time. In previous centuries location may have determined whether or not a performance was indeed chamber music, but especially in the modern era with the implications of technological advancements like radio, television, and internet, the restrictions have relaxed. As long as the perception of intimacy is maintained in some way then chamber music can happen anywhere. His word “closeness” refers to the musicians and their listeners; both must be “physically as near to each other as possible; it also suggests that the performers are aesthetically of one mind and heart.” 5

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5 Ibid., 11.
musical vision, and each instrument’s voice is an important contribution to the whole. Different “ingredients” took priority in different centuries, but each factor contributes to the experience of intimacy.

In the 17th century, instrumental chamber music served as background to social functions in the homes of European nobility. It was not considered to be the focus of the event. In the 18th century the rising middle class also led to higher numbers of bourgeois amateur engagement; it was no longer only career musicians or members of the nobility who played chamber music. Increasing democratization in Europe was reflected within the chamber ensemble, because composers wrote for groups of equal partners, rather than a soloist with accompaniment. With only one person per part, each musician played a crucial role. John H. Baron explains in *Intimate Music* that in chamber music “each player and each part has an ego-boosting importance not experienced in orchestral music.”

Musicians value the autonomy (and intimacy) they have in a four-person ensemble that cannot be found in a large orchestral string section where multiple players play the same part.

With the expansion of the middle class, numbers of educated individuals like physicians, lawyers, and teachers increased. Because many of them had some form of musical training, they looked to chamber music as a form of release from the tedium of their day jobs. Around the turn of the 19th century a dichotomy emerged between the public performance of chamber music by professional musicians for an audience and the private performance by amateurs at home. Although originally the same music was performed in both venues, two categories began to manifest as publishers sought either renown by publishing the works of great composers like

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Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, or financial gain by printing music technically easy enough to be played at home by the growing number of amateurs of varying talent. The entry for chamber music in the Oxford Companion to Music notes that “a body of such works as instrumental duets and arrangements of theatrical tunes for small ensembles was tailored to amateur musicians of limited abilities. Alongside this,” in a separate category, “developed what is now considered the mainstream Classical chamber repertory of quartets, quintets, and trios.”

As the gap widened, public concerts became increasingly serious, and although great music still happened at home behind closed doors, there was an increased emphasis on the public performance as a measure of value. In the 19th century, “concerts given over to chamber music became ever more part of the musical calendar in many European cities,” and “with their audiences usually characterized as comprising devotees, the events themselves quickly took on associations of high seriousness.”

As public performances of chamber music were increasingly regarded as serious concerts, their private counterparts lost credibility.

Location characterized the genre during the first half of the 19th century. In Germany, chamber music referred to public performances, while music performed in the home was designated Hausmusik, literally “house music.” The difference in terminology led the two categories to be valued differently, even though the same piece of music might be played both publicly and privately, and both could be done at a very high level. Baron describes this as “the dichotomy between trivial chamber music for the home (Hausmusik) and great chamber music

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8 Ibid.
for the concert stage.” A hierarchy of music emerged, with Hausmusik regarded as closer to dance music than anything performed in the concert hall. Like dance music, Hausmusik was considered to be catchy music that was fun and easy to play, but lacked substance.

Chamber music became a common leisure activity of middle class families, and they in turn considered the “art music” performed in concert halls to be entirely beyond their grasp. “The average family musician would not tell the difference” between the music they played at home and the music played by professional musicians in concert halls, writes Baron, “except that salon music was pleasing and easy to play and art music incomprehensible and too difficult to play.”

Two groups began to emerge, each making assumptions of the other: amateurs, who made assumptions about professional music making, and professionals, who made assumptions about amateur music making.

Instrumentation, or the instruments for which a piece of music is written, became the most important factor in defining chamber music by the turn of the 20th century. Any combination of instruments can form a chamber ensemble, but the number of musicians is absolutely crucial. If “chamber music” is synonymous with “small ensemble,” then chamber music can be performed both publicly and privately, in concert halls and living rooms, as long as intimacy is maintained. Public performances were scrutinized by audiences and critics, which

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9 Baron, *Intimate Music*, 301.
10 It is a topic rich enough to inspire another thesis entirely, but at this point it must be said that this division is a gendered one. Who might have played music publicly, and who was restricted to the domestic sphere? Certainly there were few women making music outside of the home at this time; the same Oxford Reference entry for chamber music includes that “music for the home centered on the piano, which was now the quintessential domestic instrument, badge of female gentility and social respectability.” Men were seen as better musicians and were taken more seriously as performers, composers, and conductors. When women and girls don’t feel welcome in a male-dominated sphere, this creates a cycle difficult to break. Just open any concert program for proof. For further reading see the chapter “Girling’ at the Parlor Piano” in Ruth Solie’s *Music in Other Words: Victorian Conversations*.
11 Baron, *Intimate Music*, 305. Here “salon music” is synonymous with “Hausmusik.”
meant that chamber music came to be rehearsed and prepared as seriously as orchestral music, a
genre already well established in the concert hall.

Throughout the 20th century, new chamber music has become increasingly demanding
technically and intellectually, which could exclude a player seeking light music to play for pure
enjoyment. “The rise of permanent professional quartets—many of which gained international
reputations—stimulated new contributions to their medium, though at the expense of the amateur
musician,” write Paul Griffiths and Christina Bashford in their contribution to the Oxford
Reference entry on chamber music. “Hindemith and some others wrote works expressly for
home use, but in general 20th-century chamber music was a field for the virtuoso ensemble. For
instance, the Kolisch Quartet in the 1920s and 30s were able to give the first performances of
works by Schoenberg (Third and Fourth Quartets), Bartók (Fifth and Sixth Quartets), Berg (Lyric
Suite), and Webern (String Quartet op. 28)—all pieces that very few amateurs could contemplate
performing.”¹² The contrast between early, approachable chamber music and the difficulty of
more contemporary pieces is particularly evident in examples of wind chamber music. The
following description of musical excerpts is intended to illustrate that change over time,
beginning with one of the earliest quintets ever written, and followed by an example of a difficult
20th-century piece.

**Musical Examples**

The Wind Quintet in E-Flat Major, Op. 100 No. 3, published in 1824, is one of many
quintets written by Anton Reicha in the early 19th century. Upon publication these quintets were
performed with immediate success in both public and private spheres because they were

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musically attractive to amateurs and professionals alike. This is an approachable piece for several reasons. It stays within the same meter; if you were to tap your foot along with a recording, you would soon understand where all the downbeats are. It’s also very scalar: musicians learn their scales from a young age, which makes their fingers comfortable playing certain sequences. Additionally, the melodic material is predictable. The flute might have the melody, then the oboe; it’s passed from player to player, and musicians and listeners alike can anticipate what will happen next. Reicha’s music was also appealing because he “achieved a perfect balance among the instruments. Each player plays his/her own instrument idiomatically and with the assurance of a virtuoso, and each instrument retains its identity while blending with the others.”\textsuperscript{13} Every composer of woodwind quintet music seeks to achieve this harmony between parts.

György Ligeti’s 1953 ‘Six Bagatelles for Wind Quintet’ accomplishes this balance very differently from Reicha’s classical-era composition. This piece is an excellent example of 20th-century music becoming more demanding and complex, even exclusive. The notes are not in predictable patterns like they are in the Reicha, which makes it harder to get right the first time. This piece needs a lot of individual practice time to build muscle memory on these particular note combinations. The melodic material is unpredictable; the instruments pick up different ideas at odd times, and the character of the music changes rapidly. The meter varies. If you were to try tapping your foot along with the music like you would for Reicha’s quintet, you would soon get lost, because the only way to follow along is to have the sheet music in front of you! For these reasons a great deal of group rehearsal time in addition to individual practice must be spent lining all of the parts up.

\textsuperscript{13} Baron, \textit{Intimate Music}, 288.
Based on the historical development of chamber music’s cultural function and subsequent analysis of representative works, one might assume that amateur musicians choose light repertoire to rehearse and perform informally in the home, and that professional musicians choose difficult repertoire to rehearse seriously, with the intent to perform in a formal concert setting. The following ethnographic interviews complicate these assumptions.

**Ethnographic Study**

Does the difficulty of Ligeti’s “Six Bagatelles” make it exclusive? Before conducting interviews with a number of amateur and professional musicians, I assumed that this piece would be too intimidating for an amateur group to tackle. However, my interview subjects taught me that amateurs engage with “serious” chamber music all the time. For example, violinist, violist, and pediatrician Andrew Lan describes a “grueling” series of concerts he put on with his clarinet quintet in different churches and arts centers. The program featured works by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Johannes Brahms, and Osvaldo Golijov. Process-oriented preparation and performance-oriented preparation are not mutually exclusive. Both amateur and professional musicians often prepare music with the intent to publicly perform it and simultaneously find great joy in the rehearsal process.

The St. Lawrence String Quartet (SLSQ) is a professional string quartet that was established in Toronto, Canada in 1989. Immediately they were wildly successful in international chamber music competitions, and over the course of their career they have made a number of prize-winning recordings. Together the members of the SLSQ direct the chamber music program at Stanford University and run the university’s annual summer chamber music seminar, which is designed to bring amateur and professional musicians together.
The Stanford Chamber Music Seminar is a ten-day program of workshops, rehearsals, coachings, and performances. Participants receive instruction from the St. Lawrence String Quartet and from guest faculty musicians. The seminar’s website explains that the program caters to musicians with “a serious ongoing interest in chamber music,” which is a notable use of the word serious, given that the seminar attendees range from young, professional-track players to adult amateur players who are professionals in areas other than music.\footnote{“Chamber Music Seminar.” Stanford Department of Music. Stanford University, 2019. https://music.stanford.edu/ensembles-lessons/ensemble-in-residence-slsq/slsq-stanford/seminar.} The program is a case study for the overlap between amateur and professional chamber musicians. Christine Choi, violinist, emergency physician, and long-time seminar participant, says that for amateurs, it’s inspiring to see young hot-shot groups that are going to make it big one day, and it’s amazing to work with such talented faculty. Likewise, for young professionals she notes that “it’s unusual for them to be at a festival where they’re not surrounded by people exactly like them,” which serves as a reminder that people play because they love it. This can be hard to remember as a young group struggling to make a living.

An environment like this helps to facilitate mutual inspiration. When I asked them to describe memorable chamber music experiences, amateur players often shared stories of reading alongside famous professional players. Lan describes a time he read Brahms sextets with Jonathan Vinocour, principal violist of the San Francisco Symphony. Choi recalls a time she played alongside members of the Danish String Quartet.

On the other hand, Choi also describes watching a memorable performance by novice players: “as a listener, half of me was just appalled because it was out of tune and not together and it was gross, but half of me was incredibly moved and inspired that these people, some of
whom could barely play a two-octave scale, were performing in front of people, this incredibly
difficult movement, because they loved it so much.” Similarly, Francine Peterson, freelance
bassoonist and affiliate artist at the University of Puget Sound, shares a period of time in her life
when she felt discouraged in her musical career, but has since found inspiration in her adult
students’ passion for playing.

Classical Revolution is another example of overlap between amateur and professional
music making. The organization began in the San Francisco Bay area and there are now chapters
all over the world. Classical Revolution was founded in 2006 with the goal to make classical
chamber music more relevant in neighborhoods and communities. The approach is laid back,
with performances held in bars and cafes rather than concert halls. The programming is diverse
and of a high quality. Musicians decide what they will play on the spot; sometimes they will
even collaborate with musicians they have never played with before. Lan describes the
excitement of performing while sight reading —it’s high energy, high adrenaline, and he plays
up the stage presence to make it exciting for the audience. Although casual performances such as
these are fun, Lan explains that he finds successfully tackling very difficult music to be more
rewarding: “it’s great to sit down and play pieces . . . but the ones where you can’t do that, where
you really have to sink into it, score analysis, listen to it, rehearse, like a Bartok quartet,
ultimately I feel like I get even more satisfaction.”

This musical drive is a trait common to every amateur player I interviewed. Before
beginning my research I had assumed that amateur engagement would be limited to casual,
one-off reading sessions with a few friends. In the course of conducting interviews, my own
prejudice as a pre-professional musician was revealed: I was surprised to learn that amateur
rehearsals are structured just like my own! They prepare their pieces and schedule rehearsals with a concert in mind.

My amateur interview subjects also lead rich professional lives alongside their musical lives, and engage with music either as a counterbalance, like Jeff Wolfeld, Andrew Lan, and Christine Choi, or as something that deeply informs their professional lives, like Jennifer Wolfeld and Alessandra Aquilanti. They all hold a lifelong love of music, and many emphasized the importance of chamber music to establishing their friendship communities.15

Jeff Wolfeld is a clarinettist and a developer in the Bay Area, and because his profession has very little overlap with music, he describes himself as leading two lives. “I just think of it as my other life,” Wolfeld says. “So I have my work life, and then I go home and I have my music life.” One of the things he values most about his musical life is the experience he can create for his audiences, “the fact that people really want to hear what you have to play, that you can make them happy, you can give them something special.”

Jeff and Jennifer Wolfeld are married; the couple met when they played together in a woodwind quintet. Jennifer Wolfeld is a bassoonist and an English language specialist at Carnegie Mellon Silicon Valley, and her musical training directly informs her teaching methods. “What do you mean by telling a foreign language student to go practice?” she says. “It ends there. No one gives practice instructions.” It goes without saying that practice is essential to improvement, but no one teaches language learners how to practice. Playing the bassoon taught

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15 In the course of my research I engaged with only a limited slice of the population. All research participants are from similar socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. All “amateur” participants engage with music at a very high level, and there is a large, unexplored swath of the population who also play music but perhaps not as seriously or as well. This is a consequence of my ethnographic work being fairly limited in scope, and a lengthier study might incorporate a broader cross-section of demographics to better explore chamber music engagement in relation to gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and class.
Jennifer Wolfeld what works in terms of self-improvement. She knows that repetition and ear training are crucial; she often asks that her students listen to recordings of themselves speaking, something that is already common practice in the musical sphere, because it helps musicians evaluate their own playing from a different perspective. For language learners, it helps them learn to differentiate between “certain vowel sounds that are going to change the meaning of a word,” because, Jennifer Wolfeld says, “auditory discrimination is something that evolves over time.” Like musicians, if language learners neglect their practicing, they “will not have the automatic muscle memory that you need to carry on a conversation that is real time.” Her methods have been proven to be very successful, and Jennifer Wolfeld believes that she owes this to her musical training: “I don’t think I would be in this job were it not for my understanding of . . . what it takes to be a good musician.”

Like Jennifer Wolfeld, Alessandra Aquilanti, a violist and the program manager of the St. Lawrence String Quartet in the Bay Area, believes that her musical training makes her better at her job. She previously worked in marketing for the San Francisco Symphony and for Stanford University, where her musical knowledge helped her to write publicity materials. “What descriptors are you going to use for Beethoven, and what descriptors are you going to use for Prokofiev?” she asks. “They’re going to be really different, right, and you want to make sure that everything isn’t ‘thrilling and exciting.’” Concert-goers want to know, “what am I getting here that I’m not getting somewhere else?” Aquilanti describes this as “telling the story of the music,” something she can do because she is musically trained. Now as the manager for the SLSQ, she deals with fundraising, which, Aquilanti says, she never expected to be a part of her life. She finds once again that her musical background means she’s up to the task: “I never thought that
fundraising would be a thing that I did, because, like, lame, but actually when it’s something you care about it’s a lot easier to speak about it with conviction, and at least believe in what you’re doing a little bit.”

Violinist Christine Choi is an emergency physician at two hospitals in Vancouver, Canada. She describes a time in medical school when she found herself needing to invest time in her musical passion. “Two years in,” says Choi, “I was in sort of not a great place. And it kind of occurred to me that that might be my last chance to take time off.” With the support of a student affairs liaison, Choi spent two years at the University of Toronto Faculty of Music. The experience improved her playing, but more importantly, she says, “it allowed me to scratch an itch, and sort of to put to bed this idea, ‘what if, what if.’ And having done that I was actually ready to go back to medicine.” She regards it as one of the best decisions she ever made: “if I hadn’t done that, I think I would have always wondered, and sort of regretted it . . . it provided me with enough of an experience that I was able to leave, to go back to medicine, without really any serious regrets.”

Choi describes chamber music as her “big passion”—it’s what she spends the most time doing outside of work. “There’s nothing in the world that captures so much intense joy and exhilaration for me,” she says, and besides, the skills she has developed in chamber music make her a better physician and colleague. She can cooperate with many different personalities amongst the ER staff, and she reads her patients better because of her musical training. “It makes you very emotionally aware and emotionally intelligent,” Choi says, especially when “speaking with patients about delicate topics, being able to read their expression, their nuance, being able to tell when there’s something else, when they’re unhappy about something.” Her musical ear has
made her a better listener in a medical context; she listens differently than her colleagues, “not just hearing what was said, but listening to what was unsaid.”

Andrew Lan is a violinist, violist, and pediatrician in the Bay Area of California. Like Choi, he believes that the patient-physician connection is enhanced by his musical training. He feels that his musical involvement allows his young patients and their parents to see him as more human. “I’m not just this doctor who’s diagnosing and treating,” he explains. “I have hobbies that I’m passionate about.” His two lives balance each other, but it’s no secret which brings him greater happiness: “I’m happy to end my day at work, I’m the first to admit it, but I could do music every day nonstop . . . one is a vocation, a job, which I enjoy, but there are limits, and the other is a passion that I could do just nonstop.” Lan’s involvement in chamber music ranges from gatherings of friends that read music and disband the same evening, and serious rehearsals where he prepares music to perform for a concert.

Professional and amateur musicians use similar language to describe their relationship with chamber music. The word that surfaces most is passion; both amateur and professional players refer to passion when they describe their musical involvement, and professional players explain that they feel incredibly lucky that they are able to pursue their passion as a career.

Maria Sampen, director of strings and professor of violin at the University of Puget Sound, describes the role of music in her life: “it is my job, but I don’t think of it as a job. I think how fortunate I am that I get to do this thing that I love to do and I get paid for it, it’s amazing!” She can’t see herself ever wanting to retire. Sampen explains that what she loves most about chamber music is its ability to connect the audience, the musicians, and the composer by “expressing something without using words.”
Similarly, Francine Peterson, freelance bassoonist and affiliate artist at the University of Puget Sound, feels that chamber music is where she’s best able to express her musical voice. She describes tumultuous rehearsals with the faculty woodwind quintet at PLU, the members of which are also some of her closest friends: “it’s an emotional rollercoaster, but where else are you going to find that? And not lose your job? So you can have all these emotions come out and it’s really cool.” With freelancing, however, comes job uncertainty. “I still have a lot of work, but I don’t know when the next one’s coming,” Peterson says. “It’s scary.” To counter the stress, she invests energy in her private students, who range from young kids who have to be told they “only need to practice on the days that you eat” to older adults returning to the instrument after a long career in an area outside of music. Peterson also finds wine tasting to be a fulfilling social outlet.

All subjects, professional and amateur alike, value the social community created by chamber music. Lan says: “most of my longest-term and dearest friends are met through music . . . you bond, you connect with the other people on a different level than just going out for coffee or stuff like that.” Indeed, this connection can even spark romance; Jeff and Jennifer Wolfeld met while playing in a woodwind quintet together, and Sampen and her husband Tim Christie met at Interlocken in high school. Both couples later married. Aquilanti’s social circle revolved around chamber music in graduate school. “In grad school I did it so much, I mean it really was my entire social life . . . and that made me very dependent on it,” says Aquilanti. “Even now [that] the environment’s totally different, the vibe is different, the people are different, I couldn’t really imagine not doing that.” Similarly, Lan says that chamber music helped him get through medical school. “It’s a pretty lonesome activity,” says Lan of medical
“You’re mostly studying in the library and stuff like that, so I think getting to see other people and play music . . . fulfilled sort of a double need that just studying in the library did not have.”

Only amateur subjects describe themselves as leading two lives or experiencing another life outside of their profession, but no matter the profession, each subject needs something else to serve as a release, an outlet. In other words, professional musicians need hobbies, and extra-musical professionals need music. As an ER physician Choi understands the value of seeking fulfillment outside of the professional sphere. “When I look at my colleagues, when I look at the people who have staying power . . . who continue to do the job and actually enjoy it, or still continue to find it meaningful, they’re the people who have a rich life outside of medicine.” For Choi, this is music. Peterson said the same of her orchestra colleagues; she describes it as “leaving it at the office.” Sampen describes her own need for hobbies that don’t involve music: “I don’t go home and listen to music, I don’t put on music. I do need things that allow me space.”

For professionals in areas outside of music, music is the perfect release. Rehearsal requires all of your focus, says Lan: “you can’t be thinking about your next day at work, or that patient you saw, otherwise you’ll get lost, or not play as well. So it’s like meditation. You literally have to be in the moment of what you’re doing.” Aquilanti describes this focus as something she doesn’t experience anywhere else. “There’s something to be said for sitting in a rehearsal for two hours and really having to concentrate,” says Aquilanti, “because I can sit in my office for eight hours and not do anything—nobody knows, right, and that’s fine—but if you’re sitting in orchestra . . . you need to pull your weight . . . you need to be responsible, and
be really concentrated, and I feel like that’s a thing I don’t do anywhere else, with that level of brain power.”

This sense of accountability is something appreciated by professional and amateur musicians alike. In chamber music, the whole is much greater than the sum of its parts, yet the parts themselves are each totally crucial. Aquilanti explains the rewards of playing in a chamber ensemble as opposed to a large orchestral section: “it’s really fun to have a bigger voice in what I’m doing . . . those moments where even if I’m background, even if I’m inner harmonies, it’s me doing it, it’s not ten of us, it’s me.” This is a big responsibility; Aquilanti explains that “other than playing a concerto, it’s the least forgiving thing you can do, but unlike playing a concerto, it’s way more fun” because although your part is totally exposed, the collaborative aspect is incredibly fulfilling.

Peterson describes the same phenomenon as being “like a solo but with friends around.” As a chamber musician, the other members of your ensemble trust that you will practice your part and deliver a high-quality product. “You can get buried in an orchestra,” Peterson says, but “chamber music—it stimulates you. It makes me accountable.” Both amateur and professional players relish the challenge of performing difficult music at a high level, and Peterson explains that chamber music is the best exercise for her musical skills. “I find when I’m not playing chamber music, my playing takes a dive,” Peterson says. “Because in chamber music you are accountable just for you. There’s no conductor; you’ve got to have your shit together.” It’s a satisfying way to experience personal responsibility.

Sampen emphasizes the collaboration skills essential to success in a chamber ensemble. “Chamber music is about sharing ideas, you’re not always right, it’s not always getting your
way,” says Sampen. “It’s making the group sound better than the individual, and being able to execute somebody else’s idea and support their idea even if it maybe wasn’t your first idea, having a conversation about that, coming to something that’s different than maybe where you started.” Chamber music has great educational value; Sampen suggests that “more kids should do chamber music from an early age,” because playing music unconducted demands a high level of awareness and focus. “It’s such a deep level of listening,” Sampen says. School music curriculums often center around orchestra, but “being independent in that way, in a small group, you learn so much.”

**Chamber Music in the Era of Social Distancing**

This is exactly what musicians miss most about collaborative musical experiences now that social isolation measures are in practice all over the world. The first COVID-19 patients were in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China, and the virus quickly spread worldwide; on March 11th, 2020 the outbreak was characterized as a pandemic by the World Health Organization. Stay-at-home measures have been in effect in some places in the United States since early March, and as of April the entire country is still in lockdown: all businesses other than essential services are closed, and people are asked to stay home to limit the spread of the virus. As of April 25th, 2020, there have been 2,719,897 confirmed cases of COVID-19 worldwide, and 187,705 people have died.

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I reached back out to my interview subjects to find out how their musical lives have been impacted by the crisis. How are they staying musically active despite being unable to rehearse with colleagues? What feelings are brought up by the loss of collaborative musical experiences, and what are the implications of that loss for musicians’ daily lives? And how do they believe this will impact the musical community long term?

“No quintet,” says Peterson. “That kills me.” She has more time to practice now than ever before, but Peterson misses the collaborative ensemble environment that is so crucial to her improvement. Tim Christie, affiliate artist in violin at the University of Puget Sound and founder and artistic director of the Walla Walla Chamber Music Festival, explains why practicing alone just isn’t the same: “the chamber musician has to be able to produce sounds that combine well with others, and it’s impossible to do that in a vacuum.” Sampen has been busy with virtual teaching and recording teaching materials, but agrees that there’s something missing: “it’s important to play with other people because you listen a lot differently when you do that,” she says.

Rosie Rogers, a senior bassoon performance major at the University of Puget Sound, describes the type of playing she’s been doing recently as “utilitarian practicing.” Rogers now has more time to spend with her instrument, but without rehearsals and concerts to prepare for, the work has not been as enjoyable. “Practicing is a big part of what we do,” says Rogers, “but for me, I practice to improve my skills for when I’m playing with other people. It’s not about just playing by myself.” This sentiment is echoed by horn player Savannah Schaumburg, a senior

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18 A rehearsal is a scheduled time where multiple players work on a piece of music together, usually in preparation for a performance— the equivalent of a practice for a sports team. In music, however, practice refers to time spent by an individual working on their own part of the music (and/or scales, etudes, solo works, etc.) alone.
music education major at the University of Puget Sound. All university functions including concerts and rehearsals have been shut down since mid-March, and as a musician and a graduating senior, Schaumburg feels this loss keenly. “I might not even see certain people ever again, let alone get a chance to play with the same groups of people that I’ve been playing with, which makes me really sad,” she says. “I do . . . find the value in the collaboration with music more than just individual work.”

It isn’t just university students who struggle to find meaning in their practicing without something to prepare for. “If you have a rehearsal to go to, okay, you practice for it, and then you go, and it’s scheduled, and you’re expected to be there, there’s no question of motivation,” says [Jeff] Wolfeld. “But if nothing is coming up and you can’t play with anybody, then . . . I think probably most of the people I would try to do this with are suffering the same ennui that we are.” [Jeff] Wolfeld predicts that this lack of structure may lead some amateur musicians to quit playing altogether, but he’s in it for the long haul. Once isolation measures are lifted, he says, “I think I’m going to go crazy with just playing as much as I possibly can with people.”

Peterson has continued lessons with her students virtually but is frustrated that she is unable to help them with their reeds. She feels fortunate to have her studio, particularly because all of her freelance work has vanished. “I’m terrified about the summer,” Peterson says. “With all the lessons I’m teaching, I’m just hoarding the money. Because there’s no Marrowstone; I have no idea if the other summer festivals are going to happen, and I’m paying everything outright, paying my bills months ahead of time while I have the money.”[^19] Freelancers

everywhere are experiencing the same financial insecurity. Like Peterson, Aquilanti feels fortunate that she isn’t completely dependent on freelance, but for her the problem is still very close to home. “Thank God that’s not my main job,” Aquilanti says, “but for a lot of people that is, including my mom, so that literally means zero income for the foreseeable future.”

Clarinettist Jordan Loucks, a senior music education and Spanish double major at the University of Puget Sound, identifies a disparity between artist and consumer experience. “People are relying on the arts now maybe more than ever,” Loucks says. “People stuck at home are turning to streaming music, or watching this concert online . . . on one hand you have freelance musicians who are out of work and won’t be able to go back to work for months and months to come . . . and then on the other hand you have the general public relying on music in new ways.” [Jennifer] Wolfeld hopes that this will generate a greater appreciation for the arts once concert halls reopen. “Guess what you guys are doing when you’re just sitting around at home?” says [Jennifer] Wolfeld. “You’re watching all these artists. So let’s give credit where credit is due. The value of arts, now you see.” Aquilanti is less optimistic. “I think we’re fucked,” Aquilanti says, when asked for a prediction of the long-term effects on the musical community. “When this ends, what orchestra is going to exist still? Everyone will have gone under.” Long term change is an unlikely possibility: “people are hungry for connection and whatever right now, but I don’t know if that translates into a lasting impact on the arts or a lasting understanding of what it actually means,” Aquilanti continues. “It is more than me playing in my living room, and it is more than some money raised for a relief fund. We’re not looking for a relief fund, we’re looking for long-term, sustained funding for these organizations and it just has never happened and I just don’t see how it will.”
As the founder of the Walla Walla Chamber Music Festival, Christie is dealing firsthand with the impact on arts organizations. Their June concert series has been cancelled, and he has given patrons the option to either refund their ticket purchase or to convert it into a donation. He hopes to find a way to pay his musicians by creating virtual material for the festival in the form of short home concert videos. At this point, no one knows exactly how long the pandemic may last, and Christie doesn’t believe that “it’s necessarily very appropriate for arts organizations to express how much pain they’re in and ask people for money when homeless shelters and certain really crisis-critical social needs” are also in dire need of financial support. “Maybe I’ll say it this way,” says Christie wryly: “the musicians on the Titanic did play as it sank, but they weren’t asking for tips while it was going down.” Fortunately in the case of the Walla Walla Chamber Music Festival, Christie says, “we have planned for the rainy day, and we’ll be fine.”

Sampen describes a new movement that she sees emerging on social media platforms such as Facebook: less perfection, more sharing. “This idea of trying to create this perfect recording to put out, your perfect brand” is no longer current, Sampen says. “Most of the people I know are just like, I want to play this and I’m going to post it today.” Rogers suggests that this might increase accessibility to music in the long run, because the concert hall can be an exclusive space. A digital platform can help attract a new, wider audience. “It makes me want to do more to share,” says Schaumburg, who hopes to tackle a recording project with Loucks while they are stuck at home. Sampen urges musicians to practice on their front porches for neighbors and passersby to enjoy; Christie describes this as “a sonic welcome mat.” Innumerable viral videos—opera singers performing for their neighbors across the street during Italy’s lockdown,
spontaneous duets between musicians on neighboring balconies—attest to the power of shared musical experiences during a time of enforced isolation.

Even after social isolation measures are relaxed, a fear of large public gatherings will no doubt linger. The house concert may experience a revival in the months and years to come. “The experiences are going to become more intimate, smaller numbers of people,” says Sampen. “Somebody on Facebook was just saying that after all this is over they want to present concerts in their living room, just have ten, twelve people over.” A chamber music renaissance may be on the horizon.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic turned the classical music world upside down, the institution was changing, which some professional musicians identified as decay. Discouraged by long job searches or a lack of autonomy in orchestral sections, not to mention ongoing lack of funding for the arts, professional musicians looked to vibrant, joyous amateur involvement for inspiration. Now that professionals and amateurs alike are seeking ways to stay musically active from home, there is more uncertainty than ever before about the future of the classical music institution. The passion of the musical community, however, is very much alive, even though the “community” is virtual. “I think there’s just going to be this outburst,” says [Jeff] Wolfeld of a post-pandemic world. “Everyone’s going to not even be so fussy about playing. Just play.”

Chamber music keeps musicians sane, used as a release from careers musical or otherwise, and there are pockets of chamber musicians everywhere waiting for collaborative experiences to become possible once more. “We always come through it, somehow,” says Peterson. “We’re fighters.”
Young musicians begin with insatiable curiosity, and some discover a great musical passion as they grow older. Can these musicians engage in “serious” music making even if they decide to make a career out of something else? Yes—by playing chamber music. Can following their passion into a musical career lead someone to forget why they love music? It probably won’t if they play chamber music. Chamber music is crucial for amateur and professional musicians alike; it creates strong friendships, helps maintain a work/life balance, and provides a rich creative outlet. Classical music is not dying. The institution may be in the midst of evolution, but through chamber music, communities keep classical music very much alive.
Works Cited


Interview Subjects

Alessandra Aquilanti (viola), program manager, St. Lawrence String Quartet
Interviewed January 29th, 2020 and April 8th, 2020

Deanna Badizadegan (viola), substitute violist, Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra
Interviewed April 16th, 2020

Christine Choi (violin), emergency physician
Interviewed February 7th, 2020

Tim Christie (violin/viola), Artistic Director, Walla Walla Chamber Music Festival; affiliate artist, University of Puget Sound
Interviewed April 5th, 2020

Andrew Lan (violin/viola), pediatrician
Interviewed February 4th, 2020

Jordan Loucks (clarinet), student
Interviewed April 20th, 2020

Francine Peterson (bassoon), freelance musician; affiliate artist, University of Puget Sound
Interviewed February 27th, 2020 and April 4th, 2020

Rosie Rogers (bassoon), student
Interviewed April 20th, 2020

Maria Sampen (violin), professor of violin, University of Puget Sound
Interviewed March 6th, 2020 and April 5th, 2020

Savannah Schaumburg (horn), student
Interviewed April 20th, 2020

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20 I conducted an interview with Deanna Badizadegan but chose not to include excerpts from our conversation in my thesis findings.
Jeff Wolfeld (clarinet), software developer, Cisco Systems, Inc.
Interviewed February 2nd, 2020 and April 6th, 2020

Jennifer Wolfeld (bassoon), English Language Specialist, CMU Silicon Valley
Interviewed February 2nd, 2020 and April 6th, 2020