

## **Why Is Ensemble Playing So Beneficial?** **By John Amato**

As a musician learns daily by practice and real-time playing, they are consciously and unconsciously adding to their pattern of individual growth. Ensemble playing, or simply put, 'playing with others' educates the entire musician like no other concept, and in very specific ways – all especially beneficial in more ways than obviously 'musical.'

When a musician plays a piece as a solo, he visualizes the music as his own statement or voice of expression – and willfully places himself in total control of his world, or medium, or expression. He is responsible solely to himself in the production of his music. However, within the scope and endeavor of ensemble playing we have an abstract human element inaccessible to any other medium – but shared in certain aspects to shared communal efforts of sports and teamwork.

Ensemble playing, as integral to itself and as a beneficial by product, educates the vast expanse of feeling and emotion beyond the limitations of words, and beyond the limitations of solo performances.

As an integral part of an ensemble: duo/trio/quartet/quintet/sextet/orchestra, and a whole host of multiple musicians playing together, the common ideology has been, and still remains, to sacrifice oneself for the benefit, well being and overall excellence of the "Group" effort -- to produce the most effective expression of "Sound." However, instead of each individual realizing a "sacrifice" of self for the group, let it be realized as one's individual "investment" in the "group" effort – with rewards that may not necessarily be immediate – but worthy of “my,” “your,”

“his,” “her,” and “our” combined contributions to the whole of “making music.”

Seeing sacrifice as investment takes the "pain" out of "sideman," or background player, and puts the deferred "reward" element in the foreground of overall group achievement with rewards that are collaborate. One's 'joy' becomes added to multiple 'joys' and also add 'joyfully' to produce an almost musical "euphoria." As the maker of music attains a somewhat euphoric state derived from his/her own developing musical skills (experts in the field have noted that a “euphoria” is derived when we play music); thus, he/she wants to “play” more in order to attain more pleasure; and, with “more playing” comes more developed skills, thus producing more pleasure, and so on: it then becomes cyclical – more practice, more pleasure, more practice, more pleasure – and the better the student (we the musician) gets.

In fact, adults can benefit the same way that young children and teenagers do. Often times, adults are very intimidated by playing in front of other people. They can't see the benefits of performance because of this. The ensemble gives them a supportive group and allows them to feel more comfortable on stage. As they gain more and more positive experiences and confidence on stage, they may soon feel comfortable to perform solo pieces.

No matter the age or level, I think the benefits of ensemble playing are more than clear. First, there is the set of a community of musicians who you'll learn to play with. It is good to know that you aren't alone in your studies of your instrument. Observing my ensembles that I direct, before the rehearsals I see many of the students talking to one another. They've gotten to know each other during their time in the ensemble rehearsals. They've shared a common interest in the

piece(s) to be played (their common goal), and they've practice individually alone on their respective parts – **all** very conscious of the overall piece that will come together as a result of all their hard work. But more important is that they come to know the process of communal living and working together for a common goal – in this case, *Music*. They all know each other and have become friendly with one another. It is seeing this behavior that has solidified my view on creating a larger ensemble program.

Besides the players in any unit that play the lead role, or roles, in producing the melody, or usually, the high parts (which people hear right away) – and are often seen as the 'lead' players, the nuts and bolts of any ensemble unit is the essential 'rhythm section' which is made up of the core of the unit – whether it be guitar, bass, drums, piano, organ, etc., etc. What has helped me immensely through the years of playing both solo and ensemble in a number of multiple situations is the understanding (hopefully by everyone in the unit) that my playing is enhanced in the long run when I enhance the 'lead' or solo instrument. A mutual understanding and application of this concept makes for some beautiful music. The actual 'how-to' in this involves what I call ***“Maximum Minimalism in Accompaniment”***. What this involves is the awareness of the lead, or other instrument that is playing (as well as the rhythm section) to play the “comp” (accompaniment) in support of the lead and the rhythm section as a whole. It can involve 'call and response", similar playing of rhythms and/or harmonic and/or melodic lines with and in sympathy with the lead or rhythm section. For example, this could involve a soloist musically asking a question, and another unit member musically answering that question. Here, I am only mentioning a very few of the myriad of ways the effective ensemble player can support and enhance the unit – which is a subject for another discourse. But, the danger here is 'ego". What I

mean is that one must submit to the MUSIC and play at a volume level that will not overtake the lead or the rhythm section—but must support, enhance, enrich, empower, and give the other players a well-balanced background of music pleasantries. This will not only produce an overall great sound, but it will highly encourage and invite the other players to express their best efforts.

The playing benefits are quite clear as well. The music itself can be used as a reinforcement of techniques and concepts learned in the pieces played together. Any musician will broaden their own vocabulary by playing in a number of different ensemble situations, and by playing and sharing musical pieces heretofore unknown or unfamiliar to that player. (One will usually go away from such a situation to practice unknown pieces individually on one's own to come back later more prepared.)

One takes away from any ensemble situation individual insights into one's own skill level, deficiencies and/or weaknesses to work on in position playing, reading, accompaniment, and a whole host of what is essential in any ensemble situation – to be ready one learns 'to be ready' by ***practice***.

Being in an ensemble and understanding how the different parts relate to each other can reinforce their solo playing as well. The concept of balance is something that is continually talked about in ensembles. Achieving the right balance between the voices is extremely important, knowing who has the melodic and who's accompanying them, and how to create this balance. While the musicians are exposed through the ensemble, they now have real life experience to the concept of balance and how this experience will help to reinforce a musical point (or a living point). Rhythmical concepts also become

extremely important and through playing in an ensemble one really gets to know how good their rhythm truly is – and how effective to the overall sound their rhythm is while playing in exchange and mutual harmonic/melodic/rhythmic interplay with the other players.

There are lots of other benefits as well – ones that only become evident when one almost forgets 'Self' in sublimation for others – others being the musicians in one's communal project – which is the ***ENSEMBLE***.