

Intimate Voices

Jeremy Polmear talks to Catherine Smith, psychotherapist and founder of The Sheba Sound, an oboe-led group that flourished for more than twenty years.

If you're looking for a life of satisfaction in the music business, don't join an orchestra, join a chamber group. You don't have to take my word for it; when a study led by Harvard psychologist J Richard Jackman examined twelve professions for levels of job satisfaction, playing in a string quartet came out on top. By contrast, after monitoring seventy-eight orchestras in the US and Europe, the scientists rated the contentment of orchestral players as slightly below that of prison guards.

These findings may not surprise anyone who knows how incredibly fulfilling playing chamber music can be; but how many of those instrumentalists have experienced the pressures of running a group? That specialist role is fraught with both the external challenges of getting work and making a name for oneself, and the internal challenges of the group dynamic. The extreme undercurrents of emotion that can arise when people are struggling together for perfection are well illustrated by a remark made by a friend – a most diplomatic, mild-mannered person – who, after a rehearsal with his successful string quartet confided, "It was when I heard myself shouting I knew something was wrong."



In the course of producing a retrospective CD of recordings and broadcasts by The Sheba Sound I found myself wondering how complex a task it had been to keep this wind ensemble going for its 22 years of existence. That responsibility had fallen on its leader Catherine Smith. Now a psychotherapist and counsellor, she has among other things taught life skills to young principal singers at ENO. She therefore has exceptional experience of both the practical and the psychological aspects of running a group, and is perhaps uniquely qualified to answer my questions about leadership in chamber music.

In her view, the emotional vulnerability of chamber music players arises from the close attention they have to pay each other: "When you are listening intently to one another, so you can anticipate the other players' pitch and rhythm perfectly – this is both intelligent listening and unconscious intuition. It is more intimate than sex, because it involves enormous intellectual concentration and interactive emotion, both of which are often left out of sex."

Catherine, as the leader of the group, was also vulnerable to how people saw her. "You have to realise that you, the organiser, have the inspiration. The others in the group may not, even if they look upon you as a friend too. With hindsight I now see that as a female leader I was also being seen as the 'mother' of the group. Musicians are independent people, and if a male musician's emotional separation from his own mother has been incomplete during adolescence, he will unconsciously resent the attachment, which has the effect of making him project his controlling mum on to a woman seen as boss."

In other words, some working relationships are doomed from the start by the emotional baggage already being carried. The trouble is, one isn't normally going to discover things of this kind until it's too late. I asked Catherine how she thought a group should choose its members. "Ask around. You need people who are felt to be mature, to be team players, who will help to clear up after the show, chat to the promoters, etcetera. A shared sense of humour and mutual respect work wonders. But you are extremely vulnerable to any emotional problems in your member's private lives. It will be brought into the group, and if not talked about will be reproduced within the group.

"I once had a player who announced that he wasn't going to play a particular piece, even though it was in the programme - and he didn't. Something else had gone wrong in his life, and it was a case of 'kicking the cat'. However, he did give me a silver brooch of a dove of peace a few weeks later."

I asked Catherine about the more practical aspects of choosing members. "It helps if you like them and they live nearby! Much easier for rehearsals." Knowing she wanted a group based on a Baroque Trio Sonata line-up that could also play light music and jazz arrangements, she started with oboist Deirdre Lind and bassoonist Deirdre Dundas-Grant from the BBC Concert Orchestra, and harpsichordist Harold Lester. She knew all three to be flexible musicians used to playing a wide repertoire. These first players signalled their commitment by agreeing not to be paid for the first eighteen months, so that all earnings could be reinvested into the group.



But over a twenty-year period there were bound to be personnel changes, and Catherine learnt to bend with the wind. "Very few people can live off chamber music exclusively. I had to accept the nature of the freelance world - that to other players this is a freelance date and a risky venture. Would they turn down, for example, a week touring with an opera company for one Sheba Sound recital? Eventually I took to printing a list of players for each instrument in the brochure, so that promoters wouldn't feel they were getting second best." In fact, Catherine's personnel list is remarkably small, with seven players making up the majority of tracks on their double CD, recorded over a ten-year period.

Why did Catherine start the group? It was partly that she was becoming bored with her freelance life but, more positively, "I had an exciting idea - I was fired up by the challenge, and the awareness of how it could be achieved." That awareness is perhaps the key to her ability to make the idea work. Many of us, myself certainly, hack our way slowly through the jungle of our careers, confronting each piece of foliage as we meet it, but Catherine had an aerial view, and could see the way through. She also had advantages on the practical side: "I'm good at multi-tasking. I had to be a mum at home, a performer, salesperson, publicist, agent and musicologist. You also need the humility to be able to ask as many people as you can think of about anything you don't know." It also needs determination and *chutzpah*, both qualities which Catherine has in abundance.

She didn't start her group straight out of college, though, and doesn't recommend it. "Everything is changing at that point. You are moving beyond the world of your college friends, and there is the rent to pay. You need to build a basic income before you launch. Then, once you are going, believe in your idea, see the path."

Even if the time is right, however, it is never an easy task to become established on the concert circuit. I asked Catherine if there was anything apart from good publicity, press notices and the like to help a group succeed. "Don't be afraid of boasting!" she insisted. "Also, spend time and trouble talking to concert promoters, to find out what they want.

"Really good presentation is an absolute key. Audiences use their eyes as well as their ears. We spent a lot of time on our costumes, had special music stands designed, and got coaching from an actress on how to speak, and how to curtsy! We introduced our pieces in the language of the audience, which was rare at the time, and smiled and looked as if we were enjoying ourselves, which was usually genuine."



The repertoire for almost any kind of wind group is bound to be unusual, but it should also be interesting, and the chance to expand it is both an opportunity and a responsibility. Catherine spent a long time listening to young composers so that The Sheba Sound commissions would be memorable, and survive. Apart from anything else, you want a piece that your own group can happily play many times. So for example, Catherine gave David Matthews his first commission. Good arrangers are very important, too: Gordon Langford, who has done a lot of work for the group, was recommended by The King's Singers.

There is one final question that has to be asked. When does one call it a day? "When you get tired of arriving back from Hull at 2 am!" says Catherine. "In my case, I was also developing my next career. And players get bored doing the same repertoire. You have to keep giving them a new challenge, with at least two difficult pieces in each programme."

Chamber music, at its best, is a supremely rewarding activity. It's that balance between personal self-expression and being part of a larger unit that helps you get beyond the borders of your own perceived musical personality. And, for me, it has to me more than the odd Sunday afternoon with friends, enjoyable though that is. However, the greater the commitment, the greater the risk. So, if you have enjoyed the sort of stress-free career in chamber music that the Harvard scientists regard as par for the course, the chances are you owe a debt of gratitude to the gifted, diligent and sensitive individuals who led your ensembles.

Illustrations:

The Sheba Sound on tour in Germany, c1979; L to R Alastair Ross, Deirdre Dundas-Grant, Catherine Smith, Deirdre Lind.

The Sheba Sound c1979; L to R Deirdre Lind, Alastair Ross, Deirdre Dundas-Grant, Catherine Smith. Sandra Mackay (L), Catherine Smith

Details and free sound clips of The Sheba Sound's CD are at www.oboeclassics.com

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