

Learning to Play Well With Others **By Elizabeth C. D. Brown**

I was speaking with a friend recently about her one-year old daughter. She mentioned that her daughter was starting to play with a neighbor's child, but then quickly clarified, "They don't really play TOGETHER yet, they just play NEXT to each other." This led me to think about the process of learning ensemble playing. Probably all of us started off at one point playing "next" to others--our noses buried in the music while our brains furiously tried to count and not get distracted by all those strange sounds around us. Yet the real essence of playing in ensemble is collaboration--listening, breathing and working TOGETHER.

For those of you just starting out, take heart; there are several things you can do to move quickly out of the "playing next to" stage. First off, don't pick music that is too hard! If all of your energy and concentration is going into playing your part, there won't be any left for working on ensemble. Although it is tempting to push at one's limits, no one really wants to hear you struggling through some piece you can't quite play. Once you've picked a piece make sure to practice it with a metronome at a variety of speeds. By doing this you'll be prepared no matter what the tempo. If you can, get a hold of the other parts and play through them a bit to get a sense of what else will be going on. It is really helpful at this point to find partners who are willing to practice with you a lot. Also, if you have a teacher be sure to mention that you want to work on ensemble skills.

Once you've done your homework in picking an appropriate piece, practicing your part and rehearsing enough that you all start and end together, the real work of ensemble playing begins. Generally there is one person, usually the one with the main melody, who is technically in charge of leading a given piece. If you are the leader make sure you have a clear sense of tempo before you try to start everyone. You also need to know the main structure of the piece--especially starting and stopping points within the piece. There are several decisions to make that will cause the music to really come alive. Look carefully at your piece and determine where the major phrases are, and then decide how you are going to treat them. Although the leader often makes many of the main decisions regarding tempo, dynamics and phrasing, all of the members are responsible for executing them. The best ensemble experience is one where the entire group actively leads and works together. It is much more convincing when the whole ensemble portrays a certain mood! Many pieces have sections of contrasting keys, rhythm, melodic range or style. Discuss how the members of your group will help emphasize those contrasts. Dynamics, tone color, arpeggiation speed and articulation are some of the major tools available to the plucked player for creating contrasts.

All of that advice aside, what playing together, versus next to, really comes down to is listening and watching. Without listening, you are unaware of what your partner(s) is doing and whether you are truly together. Without watching, you can't get advance notice of what others are about to do. So you see, it really is easier than learning to share your toys.