

Amateur Chamber Music: Repertoire and Experience

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1. Introduction

The word “amateur”, as sociologist Robert Stebbins notes, only makes sense in relation to an established professional version of the same activity. You can be an amateur golfer or actor but not an “amateur match-book collector” (Stebbins 1992, p. 71). Amateur chamber musicians of the sort I examine here are often thoroughly linked in with the professional world of classical music. They attend professional concerts and listen to professional recordings; they take lessons, receive coaching, and can form an active and enthusiastic ecosystem around the professionals. Additionally, in the other direction, professionals may join amateur groups for reading, and to earn some income from coaching amateurs (Keene and Green 2017). However, professionalism as the necessary condition for amateurism produces two opposite, equally strongly felt, connotations for the word. One relies on the Latin root of the word, “amare” (to love) and contrasts with the supposed grim “duty” of the professional. The other suggests “amateurishness,” connoting a less-than-rigorous attitude and a relatively low level of competence, which contrasts with reliable professionalism. Both these connotations are emotionally and socially loaded, and individuals may strongly identify with one or the other in particular circumstances. Chamber music seems to be a world where, at least among amateurs, “amateur” has more positive than negative connotations; most of the musicians I discuss here describe themselves that way, at least in part. They identify as such despite the fact that many of them are technically and musically advanced and perform at least the occasional paid gig, and a good proportion of them have some kind of professional connection with music, though not necessarily as performers. Stebbins describes self-conception as “still one of the most valid and practicable of operational measures,” (Stebbins 1992, p. 53) so I will use the term “amateur” here while recognising its baggage. My central argument is that, despite some differences, these amateur musicians have generally similar attitudes about both their repertoire and the overall experience, by which I mean the ways in which they process the combination of social, emotional, musical, and haptic factors that go into their music making. However, despite the social, financial, and musical interdependence and the many continuities between professional and amateur chamber music worlds, some amateur attitudes—especially toward the role of personal taste in relation to professional norms about both repertory and interpretation—do differ, at least to

some extent, from those of professional musicians. Finally, I would suggest that the specifics of the attitudes more common among amateurs might be useful to professionals, as well as offering clues to the continuation of amateur chamber music in a changing world.

2. Previous Writing on Amateur Chamber Music

Amateurs have always been part of classical chamber music, and because of its flexibility, the relatively low cost of personnel and equipment, and its capacity to resist institutionalisation, chamber music has always been a pursuit that has welcomed amateurs. Indeed, domestic music making has existed as long as people have made music, and the vast majority of domestic music makers have always been non-professional. The idea of the commercially professional chamber group arose in the early 19th century along with the idea of a canon of great works by revered composers, and this could be understood as the point at which our modern understanding of amateurism in music making begins to make sense (Bashford 2007; Sumner Lott 2015; November 2018; Morabito 2020). Be that as it may, amateur chamber music as it is practiced today, at least in the English-speaking world, is distinctly under-represented in scholarly studies of music making. As a musicological topic, chamber music overall has typically been treated more as repertoire than activity, with all the emphasis on composers and works, and a concomitant sidelining of performers in general and amateurs in particular. A small number of musicological studies have addressed the role of performers in the creation and subsequent shaping of chamber works, but with the works themselves as the principal focus, and the performers studied typically being high-level professionals (e.g., Gingerich 2010; Morabito 2016; Bayley and Heyde 2017). Relatively recently, historical musicologists have started seriously to investigate the relationships between, and meanings of, chamber repertoires and their institutions. These studies, almost exclusively focusing on the 19th century, have typically located amateur performance in domestic settings; they have, also typically, used gender and sexuality as a primary lens, leaving the larger notions of what it means to be non-professional, or how the repertoire shapes the experience, either very much in the background or as non-issues (Brett 1997). Non-musicological social scientists have found chamber groups (especially string quartets) to be useful laboratories for studying group dynamics and organisational behaviour, but such studies typically do not pay much, if any, attention to the music being played, and they have, not surprisingly, concentrated on professional groups (Murnighan and Conlon 1991; Seddon and Biasutti 2009). Amateur music making, overall, has received some attention in the education studies, and in community-music circles, but these studies generally do not spend much time on chamber music, possibly because it is an activity that tends to occur relatively informally and among friends, making it harder to find subjects for sustained study. Such studies often have a

practical purpose: focused on the potential of musical activities to improve the lives of people who do not make a living from music, they concern themselves with the efficaciousness of certain kinds or structures of musical activities (e.g., Pitts 2009). The overall conclusions of such studies tend to be that music making is, physically, cognitively, socially, and emotionally beneficial for its participants (Coffman 2007; Dabback et al. 2018; Goodrich 2016, 2019). Furthermore, this more sociologically based literature pays practically no attention to the contents of the repertoire.

The classic study of amateur music making as an element of civil society is anthropologist Ruth Finnegan's *The Hidden Musicians* of 1989, which looks at the plethora of amateur musical opportunities in Milton Keynes, UK. Finnegan does not address classical chamber playing at all, and the study describes a social world somewhat different from today. Nevertheless, many of her insights about the centrality of these organisations to the lives of the participants, the particular kind of sociability they represent, and the social significance of broadly engaged-in aesthetic enterprises are relevant to, and underpin, this essay (Pitts 2020).

A genre of writing about amateur music making that takes a much more experiential and individual approach is the amateur memoir (Booth 1999; Rees 2008; Rusbridger 2013). Wayne Booth's *For the Love of It* is the only such book to focus on chamber playing, but it shares with other such memoirs the idea of classical music playing as a kind of utopian world of beauty and disinterestedness. This image of the amateur classical music world is not unusual. Even Stebbins, in his 1978 essay "Creating High Culture," which is mostly a coolly descriptive study of then-current amateur classical music-making behaviour in the US, quotes Whit Burnett's 1957 encomium to that activity, even while calling it "fanciful": "here ... among the treasures of the spirit, the players seemed to have been created for the sake of the music, and in this sphere, a realm of sounds, four lone men, with no allegiance other than to this, were lost to the world" (Stebbins 1978, p. 624). In his own voice, Stebbins adds that amateur classical chamber music, especially in pickup groups, is an occasion where "the spirit of the love of music making is least often adulterated by such motives as the desire to see old friends, the obligation to attend rehearsals, the need to perfect a program for a concert, and the like" (ibid.). Burnett and Stebbins use the string quartet as a paradigmatic example, thus conflating the sacred status and cultural capital of the string quartet repertoire with the social pleasures of the activity, whatever the instrumentation.

What is missing in the literature about amateur chamber playing, then, is a study of current chamber music activity that takes an essentially ethnographic perspective, meaning that it gives serious attention to how people's relation to the chamber repertoire shapes their sense of the activity, relies on the voices of the people performing it, and puts these questions in a larger theoretical context.

3. My Position in the Research

In many respects, I am the kind of amateur chamber player that I write about here. I have played the violin since childhood, play regularly with my pianist husband, and, at various times, have had more or less regular ensembles, mostly including piano. I play in a community orchestra, attend a summer adult music camp, and have taken lessons as an adult. I perform the occasional paid gig. Music making is central to my life. As a musicologist, I have also written about the ways in which the emergence of the (largely Germanic) canon at the beginning of the 19th century shaped (and still shapes) the ways performers relate to the music they play (Hunter 2005, 2012, 2017). Indeed, it is the confluence of my academic interests and my amateur music making that has sparked this essay. However, as a violinist, my sense of the repertoire is more skewed towards the standard canonic works than is that of people whose instruments have a smaller repertoire of “great works,” and one of my initial hypotheses was that the culture of wind and brass chamber music might be rather different from that of strings and pianists. The questionnaire whose responses form the basis for the rest of this chapter was thus designed to reach out beyond my own experience; at the same time, that experience inevitably shapes both the questions and my readings of the answers.

4. Questionnaire: Demographics of the Respondents

Appendix A outlines the questionnaire. I sent it to my northern New England community orchestra and to the adult chamber music camp I attend. In addition, I allowed respondents to send it out to their own chamber music colleagues or acquaintances. I then conducted seven follow-up semi-structured interviews and received eight more detailed written responses from participants willing to spend extra time on the subject. The questionnaire yielded 55 usable forms, split almost evenly between wind/brass players and string/piano players. Two-thirds were female. I am personally (though not closely) acquainted with 38 of the 55. The group was overwhelmingly white (87%) and middle-aged to old (52% over 65, almost everyone else between 40 and 65). The relative uniformity of age among my respondents was echoed in a relative uniformity of educational level and social status. J. Murphy McCaleb (McCaleb, this volume) makes a similar point about the preconditions required to participate in a repertory lauded for its internal democracy. Almost all my respondents held positions or had retired from professions requiring a higher education degree, particularly in medicine, engineering, law, and education. In total, 11 respondents were, or had been, professionally involved with music as instrumental teachers, school music teachers, or music administrators. Almost everyone (46/52) had “some” or “advanced” training in their youth; only a couple were adult beginners. Half the group (27/52) had never stopped playing; about 40% of those who began in their youth had stopped in earlier adulthood but found time

or energy for it later in life. For almost every respondent, chamber playing involved some kind of public performance, in venues ranging from churches to formal recital halls. Many performed the occasional paid gig. More than half my respondents were either currently, or had recently been, members of at least one regularly meeting chamber ensemble; such ensembles were overwhelmingly either all-string (or strings and piano), all-wind, or wind and brass; ensembles mixing winds and strings were rare. The couple of pianists who answered the survey played with both winds and strings. Overall, then, this sample of amateur chamber players represents an older, privileged, highly accomplished, and seriously committed subset of the amateur chamber music world.

5. Repertoire

Contents of the Repertoire

For string players and pianists, about three-quarters of their repertoire is from the 18th and 19th centuries and is heavily weighted towards music they consider masterworks. In contrast, only about half of what wind and brass players play is from this period, with about three-quarters of that being music they consider “masterworks”. Wind and brass players play much more music from the 20th century—about a third overall, with slightly more than half of that counting as masterworks. Only 15% of string players’ and pianists’ repertoires are from the 20th century and, of that, three-quarters count as masterworks. Thus, while string players report that three-quarters of their repertoires are masterworks, that proportion is only about half for wind and brass players. Neither group plays much music they categorise as “new”. The largest difference between the groups’ repertoires besides the string players’ much heavier reliance on 18th- and 19th-century masterworks is that noticeably more wind and brass players play non-classical or “early” music; overall, 12% of their repertoire counts as “other,” while for string players, that portion is only 5%. None of this is startling: it mirrors the relative undervaluing of wind and brass ensembles as vehicles for the most “serious” music, especially in the mid- and later 19th century (Adams 1994) and the renewal of interest in such ensembles in the 20th century, as well as the greater likelihood that wind and brass players will have grown up playing in ensembles, such as marching bands, whose repertoire is not entirely (or at all) classical (see Table 1).

Table 1. Proportion of repertoire by period and perceived greatness.

Instruments	18th–19th Century All Repertoire	18th–19th Century Masterworks	20th Century All Repertoire	20th Century Masterworks	Total Masterworks in the Repertoire
Strings/piano	73% of all repertoires	90% of 18th–19th century repertoires	24% of all repertoires	54% of 20th century repertoires	79.00%
Wind/brass	43% of all repertoires	83% of 18th–19th century repertoires	30% of all repertoires	56% of 20th century repertoires	49.00%

Source: Table by author.

6. Importance of Canonicity

My own experience of string and string-and-piano ensembles is that the “brush with greatness” that results when amateurs hurl themselves against the only somewhat-pregnant walls of canonic works is inseparable from the experience. Comments such as “Only Beethoven/Brahms/Debussy could have written that” regularly follow our read-throughs of standard classical and Romantic pieces, often followed by sighs of satisfaction and discussions of how various adult chamber music camp coaches have elucidated a certain corner of the work. However, when I asked (Q24)¹ whether it mattered to my respondents that a piece was or was not considered a masterwork and part of a great tradition, the answers ranged from strong positives (5/48: “Essential” “Primary”) to strong negatives (1/48: “Not at all important”; and 8/48: “Not very important”). People defined “masterwork” differently, at my invitation; nonetheless, string players and pianists gave very similar answers to those of wind and brass players, even though the proportion of indisputably canonic works in the string and piano repertoire is noticeably higher than that for winds or brass. The most common response to this question (18/48) was that the tradition per se meant little, but that the quality or likeableness of an individual piece was important: “What matters is that the music is great—to me. I don’t care at all about tradition when it comes to enjoyment of chamber music” (Q24/P23). I expected from at least some string players some language invoking awe or worship, or the canonic repertoire, particularly given the kinds of remarks that I have personally heard over the years, but that was largely lacking. This stands in contrast to the discourse of worship and

¹ “Q” for “question”, and “P” for “participant”.

ineffability that underpinned Stebbins' comments about amateur chamber music (1978) and is still such a large part of pre-professional classical pedagogy and some professional discourse (see Hunter 2017 and Waddington-Jones, this volume.)

The answers to my question about the importance of masterwork status were also striking because of the importance my interlocutors—both winds and strings—placed on their own taste: participant 23's response (above) about the music needing to be "great—to me" exemplifies this. Respondents noted that they indeed played pieces they were not especially fond of, but typically this was to please other members of their groups or fulfil the expectations of a gig rather than to try to come to grips with a thorny cultural monument or to carve a niche for themselves in a cutthroat professional world. Thus, one can say that amateurs view works as what we might call units of personal experience more than as either examples of a period style or parts of a standard repertoire; this is an attitude that pertained as much to non-masterworks as to the canonic repertoire. In answer to a question about whether they tend to compare non-masterworks to masterworks (Q26), 19/46 responses, equally divided between strings and winds, gave an answer such as "I really take them in for their own merits" (Q26/P21). Additionally, 15 responses, slightly weighted towards winds and brass (9 to 6), gave an answer suggesting that their own taste was more important than a work's reputation as a masterwork: "The only thing that matters is if I like them" (Q26/P24). Only six responses said that their evaluation of non-masterworks was in relation to masterworks, and these, unsurprisingly, were weighted toward string players (four to two).

Respondents who in fact considered masterwork status also tended to mention the way that status demands particular attention to stylistic propriety in performance and seemed to conceptualise the standard canonic repertoire as more about a lineage of performances than about compositional "style history": "I appreciate the masters and try to play them in the style I think they had in mind" (wind player, Q26/P27); "Being coached in learning these pieces by instructors familiar with what those traditions entail and require of the performance is helpful" (string player, Q26/P45). These answers connect with colleagues' comments in my own chamber playing experience. They also connect with answers to a survey and interviews I conducted some years ago about (mostly) amateurs' sense of the composer figure as a presence in the experience of playing music. In general, even though those amateurs (a different group of people than in the present study) were entirely aware of composers as famous names, sometimes had pictures of favourite composers on their walls, and knew some biographical anecdotes, they generally felt that their experience in the course of playing was in a different realm from the world of divining "the composer's intentions", which occupies so much energy for many professional players. One amateur string player in that earlier set of respondents put it particularly memorably:

the more famous, the further away the composer gets, like back to Bach, I feel like I'm on, you know, you know that he's on such a different level, ... and I'm quietly playing Bach and hoping he's so dead he can't be anywhere near me to listen, and I just feel no connection to Bach the person, because I think of him as like an office tower or something—he's not a living breathing person. (Personal Interview, Summer 2014)

Part of this sense of distance from the idea of the composer as a set of intentions behind a work is the feeling that as an amateur one cannot come close to those intentions, so there is not much point in worrying about it; the human relationship aspect of playing is largely or entirely connected to one's real, living colleagues more than to biographical and psychological constructions of the composer. The feeling of separation noted in this quote, which, of course, not all amateurs feel all the time with every composer, acknowledges the cultural capital and aura of greatness around masterworks and canonic composers, and allows for some pride or pleasure in an association with that cultural capital but diminishes, or even removes, the quasi-moral sense of obligation to the greatness that forms such a noticeable part of professional classical players' discourse (Hunter 2017, earlier version).

The question about whether my respondents felt that their amateur chamber playing connected to the wider world of classical music making (Q28) allowed for answers that could link their own repertoire to a larger tradition of playing and perpetuating masterworks. The question overall garnered a relatively low 41 answers, of which seven essentially revealed that they felt no such connection—and a further four said they did not understand the question. However, 11 expressed strong positives. Among both these and the more varied answers (34 in all), only six people (four strings, two winds) spoke of helping to keep the classical repertoire alive. Nearly the same number (five) mentioned the term "keeping alive" in reference to active domestic or quasi-domestic engagement in music making rather than repertoire per se. Four thought of the repertoire and the playing activity together, as part of a larger "tapestry" (one respondent's word) of classical music, and a further six described how playing chamber music felt different from playing orchestral or band music. However, the most striking overall message of these answers is that they present the "wider world" of classical music making as a series of communities rather than a series of institutions or repertoires. These communities are sometimes described as the chamber ensembles themselves, in which people "listen and create something together" (Q28/P52), developing skills that carry outwards to other types of music making, or as social networks of professionals and amateurs where adult amateurs "help support the work of teaching and performing by professional musicians" (Q28/P40). Such "wider world" communities can also involve audiences of friends and neighbours who "would otherwise not hear any live chamber music" (Q28/P53). These answers again paint a vivid picture of the classical repertoire as a series of

occasions for personal experiences at least as much as, and probably more than, a body of works waiting to be “approached”. McCaleb and Waddington-Jones (this volume) also indicate that the experience of collaboration and joint music making is central to chamber-music professionals, but, at least on the evidence of their answers, the amateurs’ focus on the experience rather than the greatness of the repertoire is, at least somewhat, distinct from that of the professionals.

7. Happiness—Effect of the Repertoire

Overall, all but two of the 49 respondents to my question about how happy they are with the music they play (Q21) were either “absolutely” or “mostly” content; nonetheless, while 17/24 string players and pianists were “absolutely” happy, 12/25 wind and brass players indicated that they were only “mostly” so. One person in each group said they were only “partly” happy. Relatively few respondents (25) offered suggestions about what would make them even happier, but among those who provided suggestions, there was a wide range of answers, from practical wishes (e.g., more violinists, more people at their own level, etc.) to desires to play specific pieces or composers (“more Shostakovich” Q21/P45); laments about the restricted repertoire for their (non-string) instrument and yearning for a repertoire perhaps more like that for strings (“A repertoire that does not exist” Q21/P27), or wanting to break out of the genre or period of repertoire they mostly played (“I would love to study some non-western or non-classical chamber repertoire” Q21/P26).

The masterwork status of their repertoire affected my interlocutors’ happiness less than I expected; indeed, only three respondents mentioned it. For Q25, simply asking what music makes people happiest to play, “It is a transcendent experience to play the music of the great composers” (Q25/P34) was a much rarer answer than I had hypothesised. Additionally, three respondents (one pianist and two wind players) suggested that masterwork status actually contributed to unhappiness, as these very familiar works allowed them no room for their own voices: “There is comparatively little I can bring to, say, a performance of the Schubert B-flat Piano Trio” (pianist: Q24/P14); “I have nothing new to offer by way of interpretation, so why bother” (wind player: Q24/P7); “I do like the opportunity to work on a ‘new’ work without any strong preconceptions of how it should be played or how it has been played in the past” (Q24/P47). These musicians were much more excited by playing repertoire that was both less canonical and less familiar to them. At the same time, in the follow-up conversations and written responses, several respondents who did not spontaneously mention masterworks in relation to happiness were at pains to associate themselves either with the canonic standard repertoire or at least “serious” aesthetic sensibilities: “We only play frivolous music for gigs” (wind player, P41/follow-up interview); “It feels more special when you really adore the music, you know, those ‘classical giants’” (string player, P40/follow-up interview).

The question of which music, in general, made my respondents happiest to play (Q25) received 49 responses—one of the highest among all the free-prose questions. More than half of the answers (29) mentioned a particular period or genre of music, even though the prompt encouraged a variety of kinds of answers. String players and pianists mentioned Romantic period music more than any other (9/14 answers referred to this period), while wind and brass players only referred to Romantic music in three of their 15 answers. Brass players, in particular, were happier with Baroque music, and the remainder of the answers from wind and brass players included Dixieland, jazz, and Brazilian music, as well as the “variety” type in and of itself. One string player said that “all kinds” made her happy, but none of the string players or pianists specifically invoked the idea of variety in the repertoire. 13 answers included references to aspects of either the sound of the music or their reaction to the sound. These included answers such as “larger groups with more parts to listen to,” (Q25/P13) or “where everyone has something to do,” (Q25/P23) “a tune I can hum,” (Q25/P28), or “music that has something to say” (Q25/P33). There was no significant distinction between winds and strings in the kinds of musical features mentioned. These answers as a whole were, however, striking for the way they elicited immediately and openly personal reactions such as “tune I can hum” (Q25/P28) or “everyone has something to do” (Q25/P23) as features of (what used to be called) the music “itself”. 14 answers included purely personal or social criteria for happiness: “music from my childhood” (Q25/P20); “more important to me who I play with than what I play” (Q25/P25); and “we can communicate with each other through the music” (Q25/P52). Such answers were also equally distributed among strings and winds.

8. Repertoire and Familiarity

Even if masterworks’ “transcendent” reputations do not universally produce happiness, perhaps their sheer familiarity has something of that effect. There may be a hint of this in the fact that wind and brass players are slightly less satisfied with the repertory they play than are string players (see above), in that they spend less time with works that garner widespread recognition and admiration. However, the proportion of personally familiar music was the same for winds and strings; that is, both groups had either played, or already knew, 68% of their repertoire on average, and for both groups, about 20% of the remaining repertoire (somewhat more for strings than for winds) was “of a familiar sort” (Q20). At the same time, a number of respondents, with no real differences between winds and strings, were at pains to let me know in my follow-up interviews how much it meant to them to explore a new repertoire. One wind player, who has spent extraordinary amounts of time researching and playing lesser-known works for his instrument, even serves as a resource for professional players. My intuition is that a more detailed exploration of

exactly what counted as “familiar” or “new” might produce some telling differences between winds and strings, but at the level of the questions I asked, the two groups offered very similar results. Wind players are forced to be more exploratory, but once they have discovered (or arranged) unfamiliar music, it seems quickly to become “standard repertoire” for them. For both groups, an average of 10% of their repertoire was “of an unfamiliar sort,” but this similarity masks two significant differences. Firstly, engagement with “unfamiliar” repertoire was more evenly distributed among wind players than strings. Secondly, the repertoire that counts as “of a familiar sort” to wind and brass players is often stylistically broader than is the case for string players. The relevance of familiarity to happiness, however, is more likely due to the fact that music, in a truly unfamiliar style (whatever that is), often cannot just be played through; its technical and emotional demands may be different from what players are used to, and the tried-and-true amateur methods of rehearsal (which are heavy on reading through) may not work. In an activity in which interpersonal bonds are entirely voluntary and, thus, perhaps capable of less stress than professional ones, disturbances to existing social habits and pleasures may be less tolerable.

The broad conclusions about amateurs and repertoire, then, seem to be that while there are differences in the content of wind and brass vs. string and piano repertoire, and while wind and brass players may both need and want to be somewhat more exploratory than string and piano players, the overall experience of the music is more similar than different, particularly with respect to questions of familiarity and a sense of satisfaction with the music played. Some degree of familiarity (whether with a particular work or musical style) seems necessary to the vast majority of players; masterwork status is variably important, more to string players than wind or brass, but in any case, is often not important in the way that it may be for many professionals. Finally, among all players, personal taste reigns supreme in the selection and enjoyment of, as well as the commitment to, repertorial choices.

9. Experience

The Pleasures of Chamber Playing

It does not need to be pointed out that chamber music amateurs overwhelmingly engage in this activity because it makes them happy. Every answer to Q18 included at least one positive emotional word or phrase: “love,” “happy,” “personally rewarding,” “total pleasure” “enjoyment”, etc. These words showed very little difference between wind or brass players, and string or piano players, though it might be worth noting that none of the string players used the word “fun,” and that none of the string players wind or brass players used the word “joy”. More wind and brass players than string or piano (20 vs. 14) mentioned the social connections engendered, and more strings and pianists than wind or brass players (nine vs. four) talked in terms of

transcendence or soul satisfaction. Some (more winds than strings) spoke of pleasing audiences. This overall enthusiastic positivity is entirely in tune with the benefits that the literature on the subject ascribes to non-professional adult music making. It also connects with the notion of “serious leisure,” which involves the idea that happiness is also associated with striving, learning, and a sense of accomplishment (Stebbins 1992, pp. 6–7). Similarly, one of David A. Camlin’s participants noted that in their community choir, the “amateur people really wanted to be good,” and thus were eager to follow the director’s instructions (Camlin, this volume). Indeed, when asked what mattered most to them about the people they played with (Q27), over a third (18/47) included something about the importance of being at a similar level as the other players (or playing with people slightly more skilled than themselves), and having the same willingness to work. About a quarter (12/46) of my respondents specifically referred to a shared interest in working.

However, to this list of largely individual pleasures and benefits, amateur chamber music adds a specifically group-oriented set of pleasures, and indeed, a few respondents framed their peak chamber music experiences (Q23) as all about group interaction (see below). A majority of answers to the question of what mattered most to them about their music-making colleagues (Q27) indicated that satisfying music making and meaningful social connections were impossible to disentangle. However, the vast majority of respondents represented, in one way or another, the satisfactoriness of the music making as more salient to them than friendship in the usual sense: “I care most that they are passionate about the music they are performing—great friends or perfect strangers can perform just as well as long as the musicians are paying attention to each other while performing” (Q27/P51). Further, in many of these answers, there is the sense that satisfying music making serves as a sort of proxy for meaningful social connection: “The music and the ‘playing together’ in a group that is listening to itself is what matters first and foremost” (Q27/P13); “I think the best is when you can connect musically with an ensemble to the point that it doesn’t necessarily matter whether you know them or are friends with them. You can have a very intimate musical experience with somebody and not even know their name” (Q27/P26).

Both the tone and the content of the answers to this question support Finnegan’s (1989) observation about the distinct nature of the social bonds within the (mostly large) amateur musical groups that she studied: that despite intense feelings of identity deriving from belonging to these groups, people were not necessarily “friends” in the usual sense:

There was also an element of anonymity even within musical groups. My original expectation had been that choirs, music clubs, instrumental groups, rock bands and so on would be made up of people who knew each other well and that their shared musical interest would be complemented by

some rounded knowledge of other aspects of each others' lives. I came to realise that this could not be assumed either for all groups or for all individuals within them. (Finnegan 1989, p. 302)

Finnegan's concern in these passages is primarily with larger groups such as choirs, orchestras, and brass bands, where a sense of anonymity or impersonality is perhaps not surprising given the music-focused structure of most rehearsals. However, chamber groups differ from larger groups partly in their rehearsal structures, which are often more focused on socialising, but also by virtue of their social selectivity; people choose whom they play with in chamber ensembles but usually do not in orchestras, for example. Thus, the "anonymity" of non-verbal social connection in chamber groups might more accurately be described as "virtual sociability".

This "virtual sociability" (not a term used by any of my interlocutors) also plays a significant role in the answers to my question about peak experiences playing chamber music (Q23). Half of the 49 answers I received about peak experiences included some description of group compatibility or synchronisation (see Camlin, this volume) on entrainment; some of these wrapped a feeling about interpersonal connection into a description of playing challenging or long-admired music, or playing with superior players: "... the joy of both preparation and culmination of two works that have transcendent emotional meaning for me [and] the group, with whom I had developed a long-standing personal bond" (Q23/P34); "Playing and performing very difficult music with two professionals... I felt challenged yet supported" (Q23/P33). Some answers included the audience in the virtual sociability: "... a Grange supper in [a small Maine town] ... the audience was SO appreciative and thankful for performance" (Q23/P50); "Performing a work for an audience where the performance was the best that we could play and where the choice of music surprised the audience with a piece they probably had not heard before" (Q23/P39). In all these quotations, the respondents suggest that musical activity forges social feelings or bonds that may or may not overlap with "real-life" friendships, but that nonetheless have their own power. To borrow McCaleb's use of "chamber" as a verb, one of the joys of chamber-musicking for these amateurs, then, is precisely the "chambering" that occurs with an audience who are probably there as much for their social connections with the players and other audience members as for the music "itself." Other answers to this question describe perhaps a more purely virtual sort of sociability—namely, an intimate connection formed in the moment of playing:

I was lucky enough to be in a trio with two superior players, playing a beautiful 20th century piece, and somehow, in a lyrical part, I was able to lock into sync with the other player with whom I was trading or embellishing the melody. It was a synergy I felt. (Q23/P29)

It is fair to say that this sense of socio-musical intimacy and “flow” is what every chamber player, whether professional or amateur, hopes for, but the ingredients that constitute it may be slightly different for amateurs than those for professionals, particularly the sense of being carried along by more skilled players.

10. Themes

My respondents’ generously-given comments offer a finely-grained sense of the place and nature of the actual music making in amateur chamber music. Three themes emerge from their comments: virtual sociability, works as units of experience, and embeddedness in community. Virtual sociability clearly plays a large role in the chamber music experience of most of my respondents. This seems to take several forms, as noted above, from an intimation of the possibility of “real-life” friendship with musical colleagues to a more or less impersonal, but nonetheless intense moment of musical communion, to a temporary sense of belonging among the pros or at least fitting into a group of superior skill and experience. In all these cases, the virtuality of the experience is the direct opposite of the virtual sociability offered by video-conferencing (a technology with which many of us have become all too familiar in 2020). Unlike the video-conference, which, for all its virtues, often ends up leaving its participants with a sense of loss—of touch and smell, of the ability to read body language, of the natural rhythms of social intercourse—the virtual sociability of music often offers an idealised version of the real-life sociability it either presages or simulates. Whether this is as true for professional chamber musicians as it is for amateurs is a topic for further study, but certainly for many if not all amateurs, it is a significant part of the point of engaging in this kind of music making. These social pleasures may be preserved in amateur situations by mostly not digging very deep into interpretative questions, perhaps because such digging can involve deep disagreements among the players, as well as requiring potentially socially awkward or embarrassing rehearsal techniques. It is striking that my respondents’ descriptions of being pushed beyond their norm in either understanding or rehearsing music typically involve professional coaches. The obvious and perhaps main reason for this is that many amateurs are not equipped with either the playing technique or the vocabulary for such “dismemberment” of the music, and also partly because, as noted, the audiences for amateur performances are usually there for the sociability as much as for the perfection of the playing. However, more pertinently here, if such professional-like interventions add tension or awkwardness to the real-life social fabric of the group, they may then create a greater distance between the promise of virtual sociability and the real-life social situation. Professionals often have to learn to separate these realms to a greater or lesser extent, especially if a successful ensemble is not socially compatible (Mann, loc. 684). However, for amateurs, such a separation may be counterproductive (see Camlin, this volume, on both the difficulty

and reward for conservatoire students of valuing the social nexus of musicking over the perfection of the performance).

In addition to the importance of virtual sociability, a view of musical works as units of personal experience underlies many of my respondents' answers. By using this formulation for amateurs, I do not mean that works are not units of personal experience for professionals—other chapters in this book testify that they are. However, my sense from my respondents is that they are much more candidly and overtly driven by tastes they feel to be absolutely their own than by a more culturally mediated sense of what they “ought” to like or “should” be able to play. In a masterclass for amateurs, professional pianist Victor Rosenbaum also notes the ways in which they frankly make the music “their own”. After hearing a “communicative, emotion-filled” (Rosenbaum’s words) performance of Brahms Op. 118 no. 2 (Rosenbaum 2006), he notes that when people play “for pleasure,” that is, “the way [they] naturally play,” they can be “cavalier” about following the expression marks in the score and thus lose the opportunity to “feel different things,” and to explore the “freedom” offered by the “constraints” of the written score. He then goes on to point out how many “not particularly subtle” dynamic markings the amateur pianist has been “cavalier” is missing. Although Rosenbaum tries hard to frame adherence to the letter of the score as an opportunity to “feel more things” than amateurs might when left to their own devices, it is difficult not to hear some condescension for the non-professional frame of mind in his comments and an implication that this pianist has thought of himself before he thought of Brahms. Nevertheless, a closer look at what my respondents repeatedly and clearly say suggests that their own preferences, or pleasures, are precisely the point. My argument here is not that amateurs are or should be obdurate about trying other ways of playing, or that they should not take the advice of professional coaches, but rather that the feeling of “owning” the music in an immediate way is really important to the experience of making chamber music as an amateur, and that may take precedence over believing—as many professionals do—that the essence of playing classical music is simultaneously respecting the composer’s “intentions” and communicating something more or less natural to oneself.

Finally, although almost all my respondents report playing for audiences, not many mentioned audience reactions per se. However, those that indeed typically described their social connections with those audiences defined them as friends, family, and local communities. This sense of reciprocity between audiences who root for the players, and the players who provide both an aesthetic and social service for those audiences connects with the sense, noted above, that the repertoire is the occasion for a series of communities to come into being. As Small (1998) put it more than two decades ago, musicking—the web of relationships that is woven through and around the activity—is the reason for “the music”, rather than vice versa.

11. Conclusions

It is easy to view amateur classical chamber playing—particularly at the high level at which most of my respondents operate—as essentially a diluted (and therefore inferior) version of professional chamber playing. The repertoires overlap considerably, and amateurs are often extremely aware of how professionals play and seek to emulate professional standards, in part by taking lessons and coaching sessions from those professionals, and sometimes even performing with them. However, psychologically and socially, as well as musically, amateur and professional chamber music playing are distinguishable activities. The interesting distinctions (that is, those beyond being part (or not) of the commercial professional chamber music world) partly deal with attitude, especially concerning the difference between the amateurs’ relative sense of interpretative autonomy versus the professionals’ more pressing sense of obligation to both performance and repertorial norms (Juniu et al. 1996). These distinctions also address how the community for this activity is defined (see McCaleb, this volume).

In my own experience of attending coaching sessions with professional musicians, I have noticed, on more than one occasion, that these professionals can display a kind of wistfulness about the apparent uncomplicatedness of the experience of amateur music making. Noticing this wistfulness might easily lead to well-trodden but incomplete conclusions about the difference between working “for love” and “for money” (Stebbins 1992, p. 44). To be sure, there is more than a grain of truth in the idea that working for love is the essence of the amateur experience, and that it is, in many ways, enviable. However, it would be presumptuous and unrealistic simply to recommend that professionals who may be disillusioned or dissatisfied with the very real difficulties and pressures of the professional scene in classical music simply adopt the discourse of pleasure that suffuses the discourse of amateurs, perhaps especially in the economically straitened world described by Waddington-Jones’s participants (Waddington-Jones, this volume). For example, the frequent overlaps among amateurs between friendship and musical connections, while obviously not impossible in the professional world, cannot always be central in the way that they can be among amateurs; thus, the emotional resonance of the amateur “virtual sociability” I described above is not always replicable in many professional situations, though of course, it is not impossible.

Nonetheless, there are, I think, some aspects of amateur pleasure that may be translatable to professional music making. Above, I have identified two of the themes in my respondents’ comments. The first is probably more about discourse than phenomenology,—though one obviously affects the other— and it is the notion of frankly conceiving of the repertoire as made up of units of personal experience. Such descriptions are obviously easier when a musician has a smaller number and narrower range of experience with any given work, which offers a particularity and

intensity that may be harder to find when one has played a given work hundreds of times. It also may be easier to represent works to yourself in this way when learning to play them accurately feels like a monumental task. Nevertheless, the feeling that a piece is more yours than that of the composer's, and that your version of it, however imperfect, is central to your sense of yourself as a musician, can be empowering. Waddington-Jones (this volume) identifies "ownership" as one of the pleasures of chamber music for professionals, but this is more about the absence of a conductor or other players on the same part than about interpretative freedom in relation to the composer. Perhaps more importantly, the frank acknowledgment of the centrality of one's own experience puts performance on a more equal footing with composition (see McCaleb, this volume, on the value of seeing music as object and music as activity as part of a larger continuum rather than being opposed to each other). The second aspect of the amateur experience that may offer something to professionals is the idea that both the repertoire and the activity are in some deep sense about communities of family, friends, acquaintances, and local institutions. That is partly a consequence of most amateur activity occurring in fairly confined geographical areas—less is the case with much of professional chamber music making. This allows amateurs to think of their performances less as challenges to their skills and position in life and more as "simple gifts" to people they know and (sometimes) love. I have been struck that the 2020 pandemic-induced outpouring of online performances from professional musicians, often from their own living rooms or back yards, complete with verbal introductions and stuffed animals on the piano, (e.g., De la Salle 2020) have had something of that spirit; they have a kind of warmth and generosity that stems from being explicitly gifts to a hungry public.

Both Camlin's powerful description of engaging conservatoire students in participatory musicking situations and McCaleb's discussion of "chambering" professional musicking bring up amateurs' sense of connection to specific communities, whether of otherwise inexperienced musickers or of small groups of highly engaged and knowledgeable interlocutors. In both these essays, the power of face-to-face interaction around the music is shown to be central. This kind of face-to-face power is built into most amateur classical chamber playing, and is clearly the source of much of its joy, and particularly as young professionals are forced to be inventive about their careers, could stimulate fruitful and rewarding opportunities.

Many things will inevitably change about the amateur chamber music scene as the century progresses and my "aging fleet" of amateurs passes on. If music educators and others in a position to set people on a path towards non-professional chamber playing not only, as Waddington-Jones suggests, provide all young people with the skills that could equip them to participate in small-ensemble musicking, but reinforce the validity of the personal experience of the classical repertoire if that is the repertoire they choose, appreciate the various forms that virtual sociability can take,

and validate the importance of the interlocking communities that make chamber music possible, then there is every reason to believe that this activity will endure, even if in different forms and with different repertoire than what my interlocutors have described.

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Appendix A

Survey Questions.

- All questions were optional.
 - Most answers simply offered blank boxes for the respondents to write whatever and however much, they wanted.
 - Multiple choice or other “check the box” questions are marked with asterisks, and the choices listed.
 - Numbers of responses are indicated in parentheses at the end of each entry.
1. Name
 2. Contact info for possible follow up
 3. *Age (Below 40/40–65/ above 65)
 4. Gender
 5. Ethnic Identity
 6. Day job or pre-retirement job
 7. *What kind of place do you live in? (Urban/Suburban/Small Town/Rural /Dedicated community)
 8. *How would you describe yourself as a musician (Completely amateur/Mostly professional but not as a chamber player/Partly professional/Other (55)
 9. Instrument (44)
 10. *Musical Training (Advanced training when young, continuous playing since then/Advanced training when young, came back to it as an adult/Some training when young, continuous playing since then/Some training when young, came back to it as an adult/Started as an adult/Other (52)
 11. *How long have you been playing chamber music? (52)
 12. *About how often do you play chamber music? (52) Once a week or more/between once a week and once a month/less often than once a month but several times a year/twice a year or less.

13. What kinds of groups do you usually play with (e.g., piano trio, wind quintet, duets) (53)
14. Do you have a more or less regular group? (54)
15. * Do you play chamber music in public? (i.e., to any kind of audience beyond others in the rehearsal room) (51) Yes/ No
16. In what kinds of venues do you play?
17. *Chamber music is... Essential to me/Nice when I can manage it/I do it when asked/Other (51)
18. Why do you do it? What does it offer you? (54)
19. *About what proportion of the following kinds of music do you play? Use your own definition of "masterwork" and "obscure". 18th-19th-century masterworks/obscure-ish 18th-19th century works/20th century masterworks/lesser-known 20th-century music/New Music/Other (51)
20. *How well do you know the music you play? Pieces I have played before/Pieces I have heard but not played before/Pieces of a sort I recognise, but haven't heard or played before/Pieces I don't know at all, in a style not familiar to me (51)
21. *Are you happy with the repertory you mostly play (Absolutely/Mostly/Partly/Not really (49)
22. If you would prefer to do different repertory, what would it be? (25)
23. Describe a peak chamber music experience. What was best about it? (49)
24. When you play works acknowledged to be masterworks, how important to your overall experience is your sense of a great tradition, or your sense that individual works are great? (48)
25. What kinds of music make you the happiest to play? Can you say why? ("Kinds of music" can be genres, styles, or the relation of the music to your life or experience. "Piano trios," "Late Romantic" and "Music I played as a student" are all good answers. You are not limited to one kind) (49)
26. When you play works not generally acknowledged as masterworks, do you measure them against masterworks, or do you use other criteria to think about your experience of them? If so, what criteria? (47)
27. What matters to you most about other people you play with? (Do you care most about your friendships with them or their musical compatibility, or both equally, or something else?) (47)
28. Do you think of your chamber music activities as playing a part in the wider world of classical music? If so, can you say something about that part? (42)
29. Is there anything else you want to communicate about your attitude to, or the culture around, the repertory or repertories that you play? (36)

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