"Let's Play!": Professional Performers' Perspectives on Play in Chamber Ensemble Rehearsal

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1. Introduction

Professional chamber ensemble performers in the western art music tradition will undoubtedly spend many hours "playing" in rehearsals across their lifetime. The phenomenon of "play", however, is relatively underexplored in this context, despite long associations between music and play.[1] In modern Anglophonic traditions, the term is prevalent in musical encounters: "what instrument do you play?", "let's play that piece again", "let's play through the opening bars", "let's play around with that idea", "can you play the melody like this?". Moreover, it is not uncommon to hear musicians referring to themselves and others as "players", such as "ensemble players", "orchestral players" or "clarinet players".[2] Beyond this, the word "play" is used in a range of everyday contexts, such as to describe children's "playtime" or to denote people engaging in different pursuits, including games (e.g., "to play chess"), sport (e.g., "let's play football"), drama (e.g., "role play") and theatre (e.g., "did you enjoy the play?").

In general, play, as a verb is associated with actions (e.g., "to play football", "to play a musical instrument", "to play with a friend"; "a smile played across his lips"; "she played the main character in the film"); and, as a noun, it documents events in time and space (e.g., "the premiere of the play is tonight"; "it is play at lunch"; "there is little play in the mechanism"). This chapter focuses on Anglophonic usages

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[1] Reichling (1997) suggests that the genesis of this association antedates Apollo and the Muses. Etymologically, the association is made in the English language from 400AD: the word "play" is rooted in the Old English *plegan* and Middle English *pleien*. This referred to a range of actions and activities, including playing music (Online Etymology Dictionary n.d.). In other languages, up until the 1400s, the word "play" was not always used in the context of music; for instance, instrument noun derivatives were used in Ancient Greek (e.g., the guitar *kithara* became "to guitar" *kitharizo*). Interestingly, the etymology of "play" (*paizo*) in Greek has the same root as "child" (*pais*) along with the word for "train" or "educate" (*paideuo*) (Apostolaki, Artemis. Personal Communication, 20 January 2022). A distinction was also made in Ancient Greek culture between play (*pais*) and sport or games (*agon*), while the Roman word for "play" (*ludus*) encompassed both types of activity (Huizinga [1938] 2016).

[2] Related to play, "player" also derives from Old English (*plegere*) and Middle English (*pleiere*), denoting "one who takes part in pastimes or amusements". It is believed that musicians started being referred to as "players" in Modern English from around 1400 (Online Etymology Dictionary n.d.).

and applications, and we acknowledge that terminology in other modern languages varies, such as the German "spielen" and "stück", and the French use of the verbs "jouer" and "faire".

Given the breadth of the use of the word in everyday language, both within and outside the domain of music, a distinction is made for the purpose of this chapter between "playing music" (that is, the notion of play as it is ordinarily used in making music) and "play" (that is, the pervasive social and cultural activity that manifests itself in many contexts).[3] The ensuing account focuses specifically on investigating the latter in the context of professional chamber ensemble rehearsal, which reflects the research interests and performing experiences of the authors. It is assumed that "playing music" does not necessarily overlap with "play". Indeed, existing analyses of ensemble music making (e.g., Ginsborg and King 2012) suggest that chamber performers distinguish (albeit subtly) between the use of these terms in their rehearsal talk: for example, playing music is reflected in the phrases "'let's play through the piece", "let's play from the beginning" or "can you play that again?", while play is implied in the phrases "let's play around with that idea" or "let's play about with the tempo". There is limited understanding, however, about the phenomenon of play in this context. So, how do professional chamber ensemble performers understand and experience play in their rehearsals? This chapter will be divided into four sections. Section 1 conceptualises the phenomenon of play according to existing research so as to provide insight into its characteristics; Section 2 considers musicological perspectives on play in relation to music performance; Section 3 reports the findings of a novel empirical enquiry that gathered professional chamber performers' understandings and experiences of play in their rehearsal activity and cross-compares the data with research perspectives; and Section 4 highlights the implications and directions for further research by way of a conclusion.

2. Conceptualising Play

Play, as a social and cultural phenomenon, has received considerable research attention, yet it is extremely difficult to define. Play is "complex" and "ambiguous" (Eberle 2014), and the task of understanding it has been regarded by some as "futile" (e.g., Gilmore 1966; Power 2000; for a history of play research, see Henricks 2019). Eberle (2014) recognises that conceptualisations of play need to accommodate "diverse pursuits", from peekaboo to baseball, as well as a "mix" of human experiences, including physical, social, emotional and intellectual experiences

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[3]   The term "musical play" is used in literature on play and music making within school-based learning environments where the focus is on experience and exploration (e.g., Berger and Cooper 2003; Niland 2009).

(pp. 214–17). This breadth is reflected in dictionary definitions which typically describe play as functional (such as when referring to a type of action or activity, encompassing "diverse pursuits") and experiential (such as when detailing the social or emotional effects or rewards of engagement in an action or activity), although differentiating the functional and the experiential is not always possible. For example, the Cambridge Online Dictionary (n.d.) lists four instances of play which reflect such descriptions, all of which may be considered as both functional and experiential: first, to engage in activity for enjoyment or recreation rather than a serious or practical purpose; second, to take part in a sport; third, to be cooperative; and fourth, to represent a character in a theatrical performance or film.[4] However, the idea of play-as-function and play-as-experience provides a simple (albeit crude) way to delineate the phenomenon and much of the existing discourse focuses on conceptualising the latter.[5] Two main issues have preoccupied researchers over the past several decades: first, identifying the characteristics of play; and second, understanding its boundaries (that is, what is and is not play). Both issues are often interrelated, as discussed below.

There are many different types of play experiences, including symbolic, imaginative, fantasy, solitary, social, child's play, object play, rough-and-tumble, physical and competitive.[6] Each type of play involves one or more physical, emotional, motivational and cognitive features, all of which may develop, undergo transformation and connect events for the duration of a particular play episode (Sutton-Smith 1997). Beyond recognising types of play, researchers have characterised how play operates. In his seminal text *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, Huizinga [1938] (Huizinga [1938] 2016) posited play as "a voluntary activity … executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted …, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is 'different' from 'ordinary life'" (pp. 28–29). Building on this perspective through the work of Burghardt (2005), Henricks (2006) and Eberle (2014), seven basic characteristics of play emerge in the literature:

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[4] Upton (2015) explores the same distinction (functional and experiential) in his research on acting.
[5] Some philosophers argue that play transcends the boundaries of human experience altogether. For example, in her cultural and political critique of play, Shields (2015) builds on the work of Johan Huizinga, Mihai Spariosu and Friedrich Nietzsche by arguing that play exists partially outside of the human experience and defies linguistic articulation. She describes play as the "feeling of Otherwise"—that is "a basic [metaphysical] force" (p. 298)—thus opening up complexities about the notion of play as a lived experience. Furthermore, she suggests that play enables people to imagine alternatives, including different cultural verities.
[6] For a taxonomy of "play types" (see Hughes 2011, p. 98).

1. Play is voluntary: people play because they want to and not because they have to.[7]
2. Play is purposeless: it exists for its own sake; thus, players do not have a specific purpose or reason for engaging in it. If there are "stakes" at hand (such as when there are material consequences attached to the play), these may diminish the experience of play.
3. Play is special and set apart: it is recognised that play is not "ordinary" life, even though it might mimic it.[8] It normally takes place in a particular (physical) setting, such as the playground, field, woods, ring or room, and involves inhabiting a different (mental) world.
4. Play is fun: it is acknowledged that fun might involve a range of feelings, including enjoyment and tension.
5. Play has rules: rules, implied or explicit, help to organise play (such as turn-taking), make it fair (or not!) and sustain interest. Rules will vary widely and may be different to those followed in everyday behaviour. Additionally, they provide fixed boundaries for play in that they only apply in a certain time and/or place.
6. Play is a process: it involves experiencing different "elements", whether positive or negative, and different patterns of "motion" and "mood" that are regular, irregular, repetitive or even transitory.[9]

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[7] Interestingly, Huizinga makes a distinction between work and play in relation to artistic pursuits. He describes music performance as a kind of "free play", but points out that training and expertise are required to do this, which relies upon work ("labour") rather than play.

[8] Some writers argue that play is not necessarily set apart from ordinary life; that there is interaction between "real" and "play" worlds (e.g., Dewey 1910; Fink et al. 1968; also see Reichling 1997). Bateson (1955), for example, claims that humans (and animals) must be aware that they can simulate, or refer to, other activities in play, so they must understand that play is not "real". He posits that these worlds are intrinsically linked because the real world is present in the play world through meta-communication; that is, communication which refers to communication (Mitchell 1991). Meta-communication involves signalling (or "framing") to one another regarding what is or is not play (also see Lorenz 1952; Amabile et al. 1994; Nachmanovitch 2009). Likewise, Henricks (2006) suggests that in order for play to happen, there needs to be an awareness by others that they are only *acting* as if some other world or set of rules exist (also see Shields 2015). He goes on to say that the play world needs the real world in order to exist, even though the real world does not need to be present in the play world, and so the latter can be understood in terms of an image. This is depicted through an analogy with nature: if a tree is situated near a lake, a reflection of the tree in the lake may be visible; the image of the tree in the reflection is like the play world, for without the tree (the real world), the image (the play world) would not exist, even though the tree does not need the image to exist (p. 28). The play world is acknowledged in contemporary literature as a "play space" (also see Larsen 2015) wherein imaginative and fantasy play operate and the player's abilities can transform and manipulate ideas and objects from the real world to suit their play.

[9] The process of experiencing play has been conceived in different ways in previous research, including as dualistic (positive or negative) and rhythmic. For example, Eberle's (2014) spiral contains six (positive) "elements"—*anticipation, surprise, pleasure, understanding, strength* and *poise*—with opposing (negative) elements lying at the outer edges (which he defines as "non-play"). Henricks (2018) posits different colours to represent this dualism: "green play" (positive) is orderly,

7. Play is creative: it often lies within the realms of pretence and uses the imagination.[10]

The above characteristics have been used as criteria to determine whether an activity is or is not play; yet this approach is not without its problems. First, it relies upon the establishment of various artificial boundaries, such as between real ("ordinary") and play, work ("labour") and play, fun and seriousness. Second, the characteristics are not necessarily bulletproof. For example, according to Eberle (2014) if children engage in playing doctors and nurses, their play might be *purposeful* because it serves a wider preparatory purpose or even "rehearsal" for later life (p. 216). In the adult world, the purpose of engaging in play might be to experience something that is unlike work or ordinary daily activities, so the experiences it affords are its own purpose. As such, play might be regarded as *purposive* without purpose, similar to aesthetic experience or judgement, as explained by Kant [1790] (1988) among others. So, the assertion about the purposelessness of play is not straightforward. Likewise, there is a fine line between play and creativity, and it is difficult to determine if one is playing creatively or creatively playing. Nevertheless, even when researchers such as Eberle attempt to move away from defining characteristics by conceiving play as a flexible and self-organising process, the approach still lends itself to the formation of criteria.

To surmise, the phenomenon of play is multifaceted and is most usefully conceived as a set of characteristics: (1) play is voluntary; (2) it is purposeless (or rather, purposive without purpose); (3) it is special/set apart; (4) it is fun; (5) it has rules; (6) it is a process; and (7) it is creative. It is acknowledged, however, that the experience of play is highly complex because of its breadth and scope, which means that these characteristics need to be regarded flexibly, rather than rigidly: they may be interpreted as degrees of similarity within the context of any given instance or scenario of play whether that involves one or more individuals. The boundaries of play are thus very fluid and will be determined by numerous factors, including the individual(s) participating, the rules of an event, the type, time and place of the activity, the motivations of the player, their communicative signals and larger

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cooperative and self-reassuring and "red play" (negative) is disorderly, oppositional, destructive and counterproductive (pp. 164–66). Beyond this dualism, Karoff (2013) argues that play is inherently rhythmic because different "play moods" are produced and experienced during any one episode, which essentially involves new and/or familiar patterns of activity ("motions").

[10] Research indicates that creativity and play share common features because they involve using the imagination to "invent" or "transform" something (Gotlieb et al. 2019). According to Power (2011), there are cognitive similarities in being creative and being playful: "cognitive qualities of playfulness (such as fantasy, spontaneity, and ingenuity) are congruent with divergent thinking or ideation ..., which are widely accepted phases of the creative process" (p. 289; also see Russ and Wallace 2013; Van Fleet and Feeney 2015).

cultural–historical practices and ideologies. Likewise, the relationship between "real" and "play" worlds is context dependent. The ensuing section looks more closely at existing conceptualisations of play in relation to the context of music performance.

3. Music Performance and Play

One of the first attempts to specifically address the relationship between music performance and play was Eleanor Stubley's (1993) philosophical account of performance activity.[11] Her approach draws upon field theory and attempts to describe what goes on "inside" the action: "musical performance can be understood to create a space [field] for play when the motivation to make music is driven by the dialectic interplay of feelings which initiate and sustain play" (p. 278). Stubley articulates three kinds of play spaces in this field: physical (through which the body moves); invisible (where thought takes place) and that of the will or spirit (which represents the self). She explains that the boundaries of the field are influenced by rituals, styles and other conditions. Musicians are encouraged to explore these different play spaces in order to promote self-exploration in music performance.[12] Stubley also acknowledges that play cannot be foretold by the musicians (that is, anything can happen in the moment-to-moment unfolding of a performance), but she indicates that play may become highly repetitive in rehearsals.[13] For Stubley, then, "play" in musical performance can and does happen (not necessarily all of the time), but it has to be motivated by an individual performer through their interaction with the music that they are performing.

It is interesting to consider Stubley's perspective in light of the (general) characteristics of play outlined previously. She suggests that music performance play is likely to be voluntary because it is motivated by the performer, but it is not without purpose if there is a deliberate exploration of play spaces. It may be set apart from "ordinary" music making (that is "playing music"), whether physically and/or invisibly (in the mind), and it has rules, which she defines as "boundaries". What is not clear is the extent to which music performance play might be experienced as fun and creative, or how the process is initiated and sustained.

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[11] For wider research perspectives on play and music making, such as in the context of children's education, see Schwardron (1972) and Swanwick (1988).

[12] Interestingly, both Eberle (2014) and Henricks (2018) highlight one of the internal qualities of play as being driven by a commitment to "self-realisation", or being aware of the self through fulfilment of one's own strength and potential (Eberle 2014, p. 226; Henricks 2018, p. 165).

[13] Contemporary research shows that music making in rehearsal environments can, in fact, be very varied and creative, such as in distributed collaborations (see Clarke and Doffman 2017 on "distributed creativity") or "musical play" (St. John 2015). Moreover, there is an epistemic shift from communication (in rehearsal) to interaction (in performance) according to recent conceptualisations of small group music-making practice (King and Gritten 2017).

In a similar vein to Stubley's invisible (thought) play space, Reichling (1997) argues that imagination is central to play experiences in music making. For example, in relation to the interpretation of music in performance, scores of the western classical tradition are seen to represent a "play of [musical] motives", thus providing a metaphorical playground for performers: there is "space" and "time" to interact with them in many different ways.[14] The symbols used within musical notation are seen to act like toys: each professional player knows what they are, but how you "play" with them depends on your personal traits and whims at the time, as well as the "rules" of cultural–historical practices and ideologies. The practice tradition of western art music performance is highly regulated and free play is discouraged, so the boundaries of this kind of play will be different to those in other traditions (see Leech-Wilkinson 2016). The conditions of play do not operate independently, then, but are bound up within a much larger cultural context (also see Addison 1991).[15] Reichling's characterisation of play in music performance suggests that it is both fun (because of the idea of toys) and creative (because it uses the imagination).

Building on Stubley's physical (bodily) play space, Csepregi (2013) considers how the creation of musical tones in performance produces tactile effects, such as bodily impulses, and argues that spontaneous bodily impulses arise through playful activity: "the body is able to resonate to a stream of impressions and respond to them with fine movements" (p. 105). Interestingly, Csepregi remarks that those in a group setting might look for "reciprocal interaction" (p. 100) in their bodily impulses, thus suggesting that (physical) playful activity can involve co-performers. Up to this point, the literature on music performance and play has placed little emphasis on the role of co-performers. Indeed, the above researchers focus on explaining how individual performers engage with musical scores (effectively "playing" with them by interpreting their musical motives), the sounds they produce and the physical sensations they experience in response to these sounds (as if a type of object play). All of these perspectives are limited insofar as they overlook the possibility of play experiences being influenced by co-performers (or even, by extension, audiences). It is plausible to suggest that a shared field space exists in ensemble music performance, including rehearsal, which involves social play. In addition, existing research lacks the first-hand insights of performing musicians. The purpose of the ensuing empirical enquiry is to address these shortfalls.

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[14] Reichling (1997) regards space and time as real (actual physical space or actual clock time) or imagined (that which is imaginatively perceived).

[15] This perhaps helps to explain why performers continue to seek fresh (or creative) ways to "play" with a piece of music and why audiences enjoy hearing or seeing the same musical work performed by the same or different performers on multiple occasions. Discussion of the overlap between imagination and creativity is beyond the scope of this chapter (for a starting point, see Hargreaves et al. 2011).

4. Chamber Performers' Perspectives on Play in Rehearsal

To date, much of the research on how musicians interact (socially and musically) has been absorbed within music psychological research on group music making, where insights into coordination, communication and other aspects of ensemble work are examined empirically (see, for example, Davidson and Good 2002; Keller 2008; Bayley 2011; Bishop 2018). It is helpful to provide a brief overview of this research to highlight the range of topics that have been addressed. A number of enquiries examine the social aspects of rehearsal and performance, including the ways in which co-performers develop interpersonal relationships (King 2013), trust (Gritten 2017) and empathy (Waddington 2017; Cho 2019).[16] From a cognitive perspective, Keller (2008) exposes the primary mechanisms underpinning "joint action" in ensemble work, referring specifically to "adapting" (to enable strict musical timekeeping and strong synchrony), "attending" (where musicians "prioritise" their own sounds above those produced by the rest of the ensemble) and "anticipating" (the musician's ability to plan and predict other musicians' behaviours). Other studies reveal the way in which physical interactions between co-performers, including gestures, eye contact and bodily movements, provide vital cues or signals that facilitate coordination and enable musicians to relay expressive ideas (King and Ginsborg 2011; McCaleb 2014). Many of these and other systematic enquiries in the field have been informed by the views of performing musicians (see Leech-Wilkinson and Prior 2018 on "shape"; King and Waddington-Jones 2018 on "feel").

In order to study professional performers' perspectives on play in chamber ensemble rehearsal, it is necessary to consider the way in which performance preparation has been researched empirically to date, as this influences the approach pursued in the case study reported below. Typically, ensemble music rehearsals in the western art tradition involve individual musicians working together on a selected repertoire in preparation for a live public performance. As such, rehearsals are considered to be goal-led because there is a shared purpose (Ginsborg 2017). Numerous studies on both solo and ensemble rehearsal have examined the structure of practice and, in group contexts, the distribution of so-called "talk" and "play" (in this case, "play" refers to "playing music"; see, for example, Chaffin et al. 2002; Williamon and Davidson 2002; Davidson and King 2004; Clarke et al. 2016; Wise et al. 2017).[17] Although styles of rehearsal vary, it is acknowledged that musicians

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[16] Empathy is prosocial behaviour and arises when musicians feel like they "click" together (Waddington 2017), allowing moments of spontaneity and flexibility in musical interpretation.

[17] Clarke et al. (2016) examined the distribution of different kinds of talk during a rehearsal with ensemble performers working in collaboration with a composer to prepare a new piece. They identified four different kinds of rehearsal talk: "composition-talk" (that is, talk about the new composition in collaboration with the composer); "playing-talk" (that is, talk about how to play the

tend to balance run-throughs or continuous portions of playing music with focused work on "chunks" of material during individual sessions (Goodman 2000; Cox 1989; Williamon et al. 2002; Chaffin et al. 2002; Gruson 1988). In ensemble settings, researchers have analysed musicians' verbal and non-verbal discourse using a variety of methods in order to determine how they communicate and coordinate ideas in rehearsal (Goodman 2000; King and Ginsborg 2011; Clarke et al. 2016).[18] Portions of playing music are normally considered in relation to points arising in rehearsal talk.[19] What merits closer attention, however, is the activity that is not talked about: the rehearsal of continuous portions of playing music. The ensuing case study reports post-rehearsal reflections by performers about such portions of their rehearsals. Two perspectives are explored: first, how the performers understand "play" in relation to their rehearsals; and second, how the performers describe their experiences of "play" during continuous portions of playing music. The data are drawn from part of a large-scale performance project on play in chamber ensemble rehearsal (Todd 2020). This is one of the first qualitative studies in the domain to focus on the phenomenon of play in ensemble rehearsal and to seek performers' perspectives on what they experience beyond what they talk about in the rehearsal arena. The enquiry is highly exploratory. It should be noted that none of the participating performers were familiar with the research perspectives in the field and they were not given any information about how play has been conceptualised in the literature. Consequently, their understandings were based purely on their own experiences.

The study involved a purposive sample of six professional chamber musicians who were recruited for their extensive performance careers. The performers formed two chamber ensembles, each with the first author of this chapter who was involved in the enquiry as a clarinettist-cum-researcher.[20] Ensemble 1 included four string performers who were already in a well-established London-based ensemble that had been performing together for a decade. Together with the first author, the ensemble

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formed a clarinet quintet (clarinet, violin I, violin II, viola, cello). Ensemble 2 involved two participants who had never performed with each other before, but had equal amounts of experience as professional chamber musicians. These musicians formed a newly established clarinet trio along with the first author (clarinet, cello, piano).

Both ensembles completed a rehearsal and public performance as part of the study. The rehearsal was approximately three hours in duration and split into two equal halves with a short break in between. The performance took place after the rehearsal on the same day. Ensemble 1 rehearsed and performed Mozart's Clarinet Quintet in A, K. 581 and Ensemble 2 practised Beethoven's Trio in Bb, Op. 11 and Brahms' Trio in A Minor, Op. 114. The rehearsals were video recorded and the footage was subsequently viewed in its entirety before selected clips involving continuous portions of play (that is, extended run-throughs or sections that did not feature rehearsal "talk") were extracted from the beginning, middle and ends of each half of the rehearsal.[21] Once the rehearsal clips were compiled, individual interviews were set up at mutually convenient times with each participant via Skype. These interviews took place approximately seven working days after each rehearsal–performance day. The clips were issued to each participant two days prior to their interview to allow them to review and reflect upon the footage.

The interview questions were semi-structured and covered two areas. One asked the performers to comment on the term "play" (as distinct from "playing music"), especially how they understood this term in the context of professional chamber ensemble music rehearsal. The other asked participants to detail their experiences of playing music in the video clips, such as what they were doing and/or thinking, with reference to "play" if relevant or appropriate. Prompting questions were used, such as "what were you experiencing in the video clip?", and "did anything in particular stick out to you?" Each of the interviews was recorded and transcribed by the first author. The transcriptions were coded by two independent researchers using NVivo 12. The data were analysed thematically according to the steps outlined by Ascenso et al. (2017, p. 17): (1) the transcripts were read numerous times and details recorded in notes; (2) the notes were re-evaluated and transformed into emergent themes with quote references; (3) the themes were organised into clusters to create subordinate and superordinate themes; (4) the themes were then placed into hierarchical order.

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[21] The distribution of "talk" and "playing music" in the rehearsals was examined as part of the wider study (Todd 2020): more than 50% of the rehearsal time was spent playing music for both Ensembles 1 and 2 (over 90 min in each rehearsal). The six clips represented up to one-third of this time (up to 30 min).

4.1. Performers' Understandings of "Play"

The performers understood play in varying ways and, not surprisingly, found it difficult to define. They distinguished the idea of play from playing music (discussed below) and offered general descriptions. There was sometimes slippage in their descriptions between "play" and "playing music". One performer described play as a purely physical act, which seemed to be more about playing music than play per se: "I think play in the very basic sense is just a physical thing. You know, you're making sounds out of your instrument" (Cellist, Ensemble 1). Alternatively, play was defined as a "musical offering", wherein "it means to contribute, so you are bringing something to the game or the situation; in a rehearsal, it's a musical offering" (Violinist, Ensemble 1). It was also felt that the use of the word implied freedom along with a sense of purpose in a rehearsal: "I do love the fact that we use the word play for music because ... it's a freedom and a relaxation, but it's also with the aim of getting something done" (Cellist, Ensemble 2). Interestingly, one performer pointed out that they would not always use the term "play" in relation to their music-making activities: "I think for a more professional situation [for a concert or recording] I would use something like, perform, ... so play is maybe a little bit more innocent" (Pianist, Ensemble 2). Beyond these general descriptions, the performers highlighted a number of characteristics in their understandings of rehearsal play. Six superordinate themes emerged, each with two or three subordinate themes (see Figure 1). The themes will be discussed in turn below.
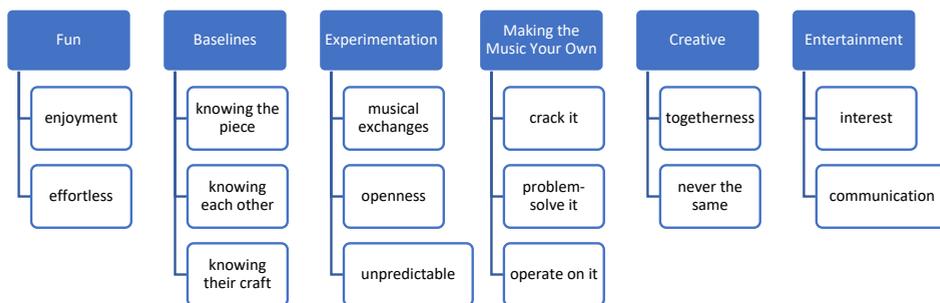

Figure 1. Performers' understandings of play in chamber ensemble rehearsal. Source: Graphic by authors.

4.1.1. Theme 1: Play Is Fun

The majority of the performers mentioned that play is about having fun, similar to the pervasive social and cultural experience of play: "playing is doing something fun" (Violinist, Ensemble 1); "it's about ... interacting with something and having fun with something" (Pianist, Ensemble 2). They recognised that playing an instrument is different to the wider notion of play, but indicated that these two

kinds of play could merge in rehearsal activity: "if you combine the two, then you're having fun playing" (Violinist, Ensemble 1). It was also implied that rehearsing could be playful, rather than serious: "a playful rehearsal is going to be better than a serious, grindy one" (Violist, Ensemble 1). The performers indicated that if rehearsal activity is fun, then it is also "enjoyable" and happening for its own sake, hence effortless: "trying is less effective than just playing" (Violist, Ensemble 1). The same performer also suggested that playing with others is more fun ("even better") than playing around with something on your own.

4.1.2. Theme 2: Play Has Baselines

According to these performers, opportunities for play in rehearsal arise only when certain rules, or "baselines", are in place. Three main kinds of baseline were described: knowing the piece; knowing each other; and knowing their craft. In each case, the baseline is determined by familiarity. In relation to knowing the piece, it was reported that play could happen either through *becoming* familiar with the piece or *because of* familiarity with the piece: on the one hand *(play through becoming familiar)*, "I really enjoy the sense of listening out for what someone else is doing and not making too many decisions. So, I quite like getting to know a piece through the huge amount of possibilities that you have" (Cellist, Ensemble 2); on the other hand *(play because of familiarity)*, "you know with something that you've lived with for a long time, we can play with it" (Violinist, Ensemble 1); and "I suppose it [play] is most likely to occur when it's a piece that we all know well and therefore you can change little things, little details spontaneously, without derailing anyone else" (Violist, Ensemble 1).

Similar points emerged in the interviews in relation to knowing each other, especially that play could happen *because of familiarity* with each other: "so, you kind of get to learn your repertoire of responses to the notation, and then on top of that you have flexibility with each other to kind of anticipate and respond to them in ways that are going to work. But, I definitely think [the chance to be playful] comes with knowing each other well" (Cellist, Ensemble 1); "I think there is a lot of space for [play] in the music and I think it comes much more easily when you've played together for a long time. I think that one of the things that long-term music partnerships enable you to do is to develop a baseline on top of which you can play" (Cellist, Ensemble 2). Since the second ensemble in this study was made up of musicians who had not played together before, the cellist's comment implies that play did not come to them easily.

The performers also mentioned that play relied upon solid craft; that is, knowing how to play one's instrument. Interestingly, developing craft was described as a challenging and continuous process of refinement which influenced opportunities to

play: "as a musician you never get to a fixed point where you can just do everything, you're always trying to refine what you do" (Cellist, Ensemble 1).

4.1.3. Theme 3: Play Involves Experimentation

The majority of the performers reported that play involved experimentation or "trying out" new musical ideas in rehearsal. Experimentation was described according to three features. First, it involved a musical exchange with another performer; that is, the performers implied that if there was no exchange, there was no experimentation, and thus no play: "experiment with a little ornament here [and] if someone responds, you know by echoing the same ornament, that definitely feels like playing" (Cellist, Ensemble 2). Second, experimenting was regarded as something unpredictable. One performer likened experimenting to playing with a ball—"you throw a ball to the other person and see if they throw it back" (Violinist, Ensemble 1)—while another also suggested that it was unpredictable because it resembled "throwing". "Everyone comes up with something kind of different to say and a lot of the time people will be playing with ideas during a rehearsal. They just sort of throw something and experiment" (Violinist, Ensemble 1). Third, it was pointed out that co-performers need to be open to one another in order for experimentation to happen: there should be a "willingness to be open; to receive other ideas or especially things that you haven't thought of before" (Cellist, Ensemble 2).

4.1.4. Theme 4: Play Involves "Making the Music Your Own"

Some of the performers reported a strong sense of responsibility towards interpreting music so as to "make it their own" (Cellist, Ensemble 1). They regarded "play" as a means to do this and likened the way in which they would "play with something" (in general) to how they would come to "own" a musical interpretation; for example, they suggested that they had to "crack it" or "operate on it" or "[problem] solve it", just as they would "turn something over" when playing with it (Violist, Ensemble 1).

4.1.5. Theme 5: Play Involves Being Creative

The majority of the performers described "play" as "being creative". They highlighted two features about this: first, that "being creative" is about doing things differently ("it's never the same"; Cellist, Ensemble 1); and second, that "being creative" feels like a "more generous kind of togetherness" (Cellist, Ensemble 2). To this end, the performers indicated that in order to be creative, they had to be open, willing and comfortable with one another so that they could "play" with new musical ideas. This perspective resonates very closely with references to having a baseline of knowing each other and ideas about experimentation.

4.1.6. Theme 6: Play Is Entertainment

A number of the performers suggested that play was important because it provided entertainment for both themselves and the audience. There were two motivations for using play to entertain. First, it provided interest when rehearsing familiar pieces: "if we know the parts super well ... you know with something that you've lived with for a long time, we can play with it and entertain each other and the audience actually" (Violist, Ensemble 1). Second, it strengthened communication about the music: "[play] is all about the music and the communication that you're trying to create between the players and the audience as well" (Cellist, Ensemble 1).

4.2. Performers' Experiences of "Play"

In reviewing rehearsal footage during the interviews, the performers provided commentaries about what they were experiencing when playing through sections of the music. Interestingly, upon completing an interview, one of the performers remarked that the sections of playing through were particularly crucial in their rehearsal preparation: "you can get most of the rehearsal done by just communicating while you're playing" (Violinist, Ensemble 1). Within their reflections, the performers highlighted portions of the clips that they considered to represent play (as distinct from playing music). They were not asked to label such instances, nor to define their precise boundaries, but rather to discuss what they were thinking and doing at these points.[22] Three different ways of experiencing play emerged, as well as special "moments" of play (see Figure 2).

The first "way" of experiencing play was about *initiating play*. The performers identified instances in the video clips where they deliberately set out to play with their co-performers, such as by "misdirecting" or "surprising" them (Cellist, Ensemble 1). To do this, they indicated that their "intention" was to realise the music in a different way to how they had previously: for example, it was "a little bit different to how [I] played it before" (Cellist, Ensemble 1).

The second "way" of experiencing play was about *anticipating play*. The performers reflected that they were aware of "anticipating" different situations during specific passages, so they felt like they were "getting ready" for something to happen, including the possibility of play (Pianist, Ensemble 2). During these experiences, they described that they were "processing" lots of information and

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[22] We did not set out to determine the frequency or duration of play activity within the clips, nor the extent to which co-performers' experiences of play coincided, which may be scrutinised more closely in future research. Wider analysis of the performers' reflections provided insight into the rest of their experiences during the clips, where they revealed emphasis upon the self (e.g., evaluating tuning, matching sounds), the ensemble (e.g., communicating), the musical interpretation (e.g., shaping, expressing intentions) and the rehearsal dynamic (e.g., feeling positive) (see Todd 2020).

"different situations" in their minds (Pianist, Ensemble 2) as well as listening out for acoustic signals ("relying a lot on my ears"; Pianist, Ensemble 2) to hear changes, such as in bowing, breathing and timing, and watching out for physical signals, such as someone trying to communicate through "leaning into you" or by "being drawn to certain people" (Cellist, Ensemble 1).
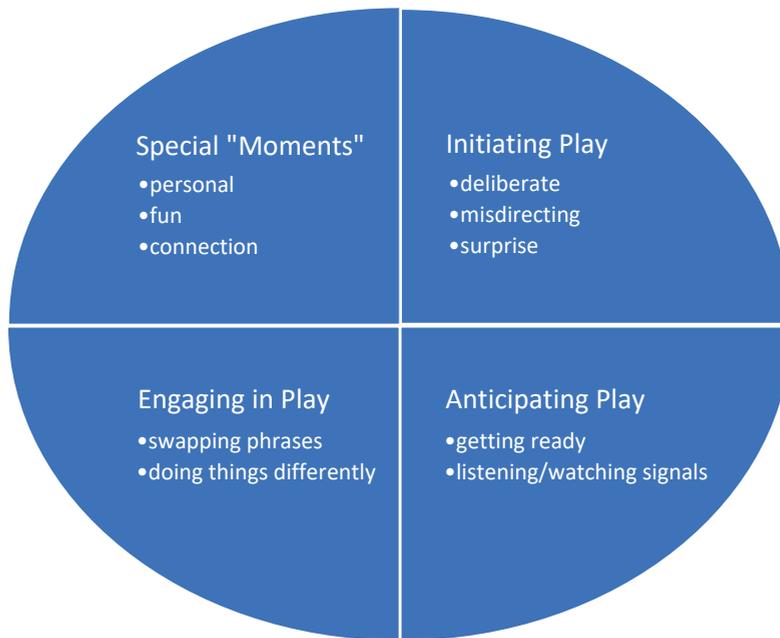

Figure 2. Performers' experiences of play in chamber ensemble rehearsal. Source: Graphic by authors.

The third "way" of experiencing play was about *engaging in play*. The performers in both ensembles indicated that they were playing about during certain musical interactions with co-performers, such as when "swapping over shapes and phrases" (Cellist, Ensemble 2) or "throwing" out ideas (Violinist, Ensemble 1). These experiences were described as particularly "satisfying" (Pianist, Ensemble 2), "nice" (Cellist, Ensemble 2) and "natural" (Violinist, Ensemble 1). Several other examples were identified during "dance-like" passages in the music, such as in relation to Mozart's Minuet movement (Ensemble 1) and Brahms's Trio section (Ensemble 2). In these sections, the performers indicated that they were being playful in their music making by doing things "a little bit different" (Violinist, Ensemble 1). According to this performer, playfulness was prompted by the experience of a build-up of energy in the music because of the repetition of phrases, as well as the idea of dancing with different co-performers: "you are dancing … you go off and do a variation

and then you come back and do the minuet; you've got a different partner, you trip over" (Violinist, Ensemble 1). Interestingly, several performers referred to the dance-like passages in similar ways, highlighting that they experienced a lot of "enjoyment" during them (Cellist, Ensemble 2). All of these experiences seemed to involve playful exchanges of music-interpretative ideas with co-performers across one or more phrases, typically by "swapping" or "doing things differently", and all of these experiences were considered to be highly positive.

The performers also detailed unique "moments" when they were engaging in play, which were fleeting but distinctive. For example, in Ensemble 1, the performers described a "little moment" of play that they depicted as "kinda fun" (Violist, Ensemble 1) and "personal" (Cellist, Ensemble 1). According to their reflections, this moment was triggered by a shared previous experience and arose because they exchanged physical information ("I catch the [cellist's] eye"; there was "a little giggle") as well as a musical idea ("we connect in the piece"). This particular moment of play, then, was characterised by a number of features: it was fun; it occurred spontaneously; it was fleeting; it involved co-performers overtly acknowledging each other's communicative signals; and it relied upon familiarity with each other (hence it was "personal") and the piece. One of the performers indicated that such moments provide "little touches of humanity" (Violist, Ensemble 1).

4.3. Cross-Comparing Empirical and Research Perspectives

Taken together, the majority of the performers' understandings and experiences of play in a professional chamber ensemble rehearsal overlap (albeit to varying degrees) with the characteristics identified in existing research perspectives on play. The performers, however, provided nuanced understandings and experiences within their specialist domain. For the purpose of cross-comparison, superordinate and subordinate themes from the empirical findings are aligned with related research perspectives and summarised in Table 1. The first three characteristics drawn from the research perspectives are the most difficult to align with the performers' understandings. Regarding the first characteristic, that play is voluntary, Stubley (1993) indicates that music performers play because they are motivated to do so (hence it is voluntary; Huizinga [1938] 2016); however, these performers suggested that they did so because it felt effortless or natural. Effortlessness is related to the activity of the will in an interesting way (indeed, does one feel more wilfully engaged when an activity is effortless?), so it has connections to voluntariness. Naturalness may also be linked to voluntariness through its connotations of spontaneity and free will. There is some degree of similarity between these characteristics then, although the connection is complex.

Table 1. Cross-comparison of characteristics of play according to (general) research perspectives and professional chamber performers' perspectives in the context of ensemble rehearsal. Characteristics are aligned to reflect degrees of similarity: red symbols denote alternative perspectives; blue arrows indicate some overlap.

Characteristics of Play		
Research Perspectives		**Performers' Perspectives**
1. Play is voluntary: people play because they want to and not because they have to.	⬌	Play is effortless: it is more effective than trying; it is natural.
2. Play is purposeless: it exists for its own sake; thus, players do not have a specific purpose or reason for engaging in it.	⊗	Play has two purposes: making the music your own and entertaining each other.
3. Play is special/set apart: it is recognised that play is not "ordinary" life, even though it might mimic it.	⬌	Play is special/set apart: it can be set apart from "playing music"; it can provide connection in special moments.
4. Play is fun: it is acknowledged that fun might involve a range of feelings, including enjoyment and tension.	⬌	Play is fun: it is enjoyable, positive, satisfying and/or personal.
5. Play has rules: rules, implied or explicit, which help to organise play and provide fixed boundaries for play in that they only apply in a certain time and/or place.	⬌	Play has baselines: it depends on how well you know the music; how well you know each other; and how well you know your craft (e.g., instrument; rehearsal strategies).
6. Play is a process: it involves experiencing different "elements" and patterns of "motion" and "mood".	⬌	Play is a process: it involves doing things differently by initiating surprises, being ready to anticipate changes and/or engaging with others through swapping or throwing musical ideas.
7. Play is creative: it often lies within the realms of pretence and uses the imagination.	⬌	Play is creative: it involves experimentation and openness.

Source: Table by authors.

The second characteristic, that play is purposeless, has already been challenged in previous research as mentioned above (Eberle 2014), as well as contradicted in Jane Ginsborg's (2017) stance on rehearsal as goal directed. What is interesting, however, is that the performers outlined two highly specific purposes about play in the context of their rehearsals: that it is about "making the music your own" as well

as "entertaining" each other. In this case, play is characterised as a mechanism to facilitate the musical distinctiveness and freshness of the ensemble: it is, in effect, the x-factor of the rehearsal (and, probably by extension, the performance too). The third characteristic distinguishes play from "ordinary" life, which, in the context of a chamber ensemble rehearsal, alludes to the more functional aspect of "playing music". There was a sense in the performers' interviews that the special "moments" of play that they identified in the video clips were somehow set apart from other activity because they provided "touches of humanity". In this case, then, whether regarded as "ordinary" or not, there was something different about these playful moments, so they represented an alternative side of being human to that otherwise experienced in the context of a professional chamber rehearsal, perhaps reflecting something of an artificial boundary between the "real world" (rehearsal) and "play world" (special moment) (see Henricks 2018).

The performers' perspectives strongly aligned with the fourth, fifth and seventh characteristics of play as defined in research, i.e., that play is fun, has rules and is creative. With regard to the fifth characteristic, the rules ("baselines") were implicit in the actual rehearsal even though they were made explicit in the interviews. The general "rule" among the performers was that they would not play until the music was learned or the parts secured. Interestingly, this "rule" influenced, to an extent, their experience of play as a process (the sixth characteristic), for this was regarded as essentially "doing things differently" via initiating, anticipating or engaging in (expressive) music-interpretative changes that presumably stemmed from a mental representation of "how the music goes". The performers' activity, then, centred on playing with the musical score along the lines suggested by Stubley (1993) and Reichling (1997); yet this was dependent upon their own and their co-performers' senses of stability about the interpretation of the score (musical) and familiarity with each other (social). Researchers provide a range of rich descriptions about the process of play, although these performers highlighted the first (initiating or anticipating) and last stages (engaging) in their experiences. Anticipating is the first "element" in Eberle's (2014) conceptualisation of the process of play and a key component of Peter E. Keller's (2008) cognitive analysis of "joint action". Keller's research indicates that anticipation is a continuous mechanism that is necessary to achieve synchrony all of the time in group work. It is not possible to determine from these data if or how performers' experiences of anticipation vary between playing music and play, but the anticipation of *being able to play* seemed to be important.

5. Conclusions

So, how do 21st-century professional chamber ensemble performers understand and experience play in their rehearsals? Based on the post-rehearsal reflections provided by the performers in this enquiry, it is evident that typical characteristics

of play as conceptualised in research are featured in the context of professional chamber ensemble practice during portions of rehearsal involving continuous music playing (see Table 1). Play is particularly important in this context because it serves as a mechanism to enable the performers to make the music their own. Professional performers indicated that play is set apart from the "ordinary" world of rehearsing—which effectively represents the workplace—into a realm that is effortless, special, fun, creative and even entertaining. It is the phenomenon that is experienced when co-performers go beyond their baseline and explore music-interpretative ideas and sounds together in order to make them different. Moreover, it allows professional performers to experience "touches of humanity" in their work. Indeed, as Sicart (2014) claims: "to play is to be in the world. Playing is a form of understanding what surrounds us and who we are, and a way of engaging with others. Play is a mode of being human" (p. 1). As such, play in professional chamber music rehearsal may be conceived as an aspiration for an ideal situation, and without it, performers may struggle to find fulfilment.

To conclude, this chapter has provided preliminary insight into the phenomenon of play within professional chamber ensemble music making, specifically in the context of rehearsals in the western art music tradition. The performers' post-rehearsal reflections provided valuable empirical perspectives on how they understood and experienced play, revealing shared characteristics with broader research conceptualisations of play. This study establishes a platform on which to build further research to examine and critique the parameters of play in group music-making contexts. It is important to recognise that play activity can and does exist within the relatively formal constraints of professional chamber ensemble rehearsal and that it occupies a vital place within the practice. Future research will need to establish the extent to which these behaviours translate or transform in performances (see Doğantan-Dack 2008) and, if so, whether or not they are consistent and retain their characteristics. Moreover, there is scope to investigate the ways in which performers of different ages, levels of experience and genre specialisms play in their music making. Such work has implications for performance studies, education, psychology and other disciplines where the analysis of people's play behaviours in small group work may contribute towards greater understanding of socio-cultural relationships and creative pursuits, especially where play may be at the heart of the activity. 21st-century chamber musicians can benefit socially, emotionally and musically through making play a regular part of ensemble rehearsal: it may be fun, enjoyable and entertaining, but is also highly creative and free in character, allowing group members to explore music-interpretative ideas and sounds within their ensemble and ultimately helping them to "make the music their own". Play may bring about different kinds of experiences for those participating in it, whether special playful moments forged through personal connections or feelings of "being

human" amid the hard graft that necessarily takes place in the rehearsal arena. So, we encourage chamber musicians to aspire to play as much as possible in order to enrich their music making, and we believe that this may lead to higher levels of satisfaction and fulfilment for those engaging in rehearsal activity.

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