Angela Answers

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What Makes an Ensemble Exceptional?

BY Angela Myles Beeching

Dear Angela: My ensemble is good, and we've been told we have real potential. But we haven't yet found our own distinctive sound or approach. Any advice on how we can begin to uncover what makes us unique?

Finding your own distinct artistic voice is a tall enough order for individuals. For ensembles, it gets even more interesting. To get started, consider what makes an ensemble's sound and performance truly remarkable—and unmistakably its own. Beyond the requisite high level of technical and interpretive skills, there are four factors at play:

Distributed "Juice": This is about having an equilibrium of temperaments and ego strengths. When an ensemble achieves this quality, the listener's attention is drawn to first one member, then the next, because they're captivated by what each player contributes in turn. There's a give and take, a balance of egos and energies, of power and personalities. And there are no weak links.

Playing to the Edge: In the best ensembles, there's a refusal to play it safe because there's a mutual commitment to growth. The group's members dare to test new ideas, to explore, discover, and try out what's at the edge of each player's imagination. They take risks in performances to see what they are truly capable of, so each performance is alive with new possibilities.

The "It" Factor: Extraordinary ensembles don't sound like anybody else. This is the byproduct of the group having a distinct, shared sound ideal. It's the result of the group's curiosity, wit, and collective inspirations—the magic of the chemistry that's catalyzed among its members. It's in how they create space for and support one another, playing off their strengths and honoring each other's vulnerabilities. This makes for performances that are unforgettable.

Cohesion: There's also a palpable sense of connection that the best ensembles radiate. This unspoken spirit of the group is communicated loud and clear to audiences. That felt group energy is the creative bond, the trust that supercharges the whole. Each member contributes to it and, of course, individuals are at times highlighted in any performance. But the real commitment is always to the whole, to the entity that is created collectively.

In other words, in an ideal ensemble, the sum is always greater than its parts.

To develop your ensemble's artistry, here are six prompts to reflect on. Use these to challenge yourselves to take your performances to the next level. Consider . . .

- When you record rehearsals, what specifically are you listening for?
- Experiment in rehearsals by fine-tuning a phrase, listening closely for each of these: color, texture, energy, balance, gesture, and direction.
- Do you have a shared ideal sound you're going after (that's not borrowed from your musical heroes)?
- Are you able to put your ears in the far corners of the room to get a sense of your group's projected sound?
- Do you have a mentor to occasionally play for—someone whose objective feedback you trust?
- How might you cultivate a group dynamic that promotes artistic discovery and experimentation for all, one in which each member feels valued, respected, and yes, loved?

Tap into that potential!

Angela Myles Beeching is a career consultant and the author of Beyond Talent: Creating a Successful Career in Music. *Angela works with individuals, ensembles, and organizations to facilitate positive change.*

