

## *Chanticleer Festival 2000*

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### 7. PARTNERS: OBBLIGATO LINES AND JAMMING

My ancient and well-thumbed "Dictionary of Musical Terms" by Theo. Baker, Ph.D, bought in some flea market a million years ago for (it appears) \$3, defines an obbligato part as follows: "**Obbligato** (Italian). Required, indispensable. An **Obbligato** part is a concerted (*and therefore essential*) instrumental part; the term is specially applied to an instrumental part accompanying and *vying with* a vocal solo, very numerous examples of which may be found in the music of the 18<sup>th</sup> century." [italics mine]

One of the particularly lovely things for me during these two weeks of the Chanticleer Festival is seeing how our companions work their way in and out of this ensemble, like the lines in a baroque trio sonata, the answering voices between solo instrument and orchestra in a Mozart concerto. The companions are those of the women of "Salvatore Greco and his All-Girl Band": Elizabeth's husband Rubén, Jenny's friend Scott, and Caroline's husband Bob. For me it's fascinating and thought-provoking to see how these relationships - one relatively young, one nascent, one of almost 30 years - work within this context.

It's a context which could be fraught with difficulty. In one sense we musicians are no different from anybody else: we're human and have frustrations, satisfactions, and challenges with our jobs and lives, just as anyone does. Johann Sebastian Bach was a genius, but he got up every day and went to work making and composing music: it was his job, and his life. In exactly that same sense, our job IS our life, or at least an essential part of it. This is not the case for some people, and in that sense, we are - or can be - different.

It is true, the practice of this job which is our life demands of us a kind of singleminded devotion and discipline, hours spent every day alone with our instruments and often together with our collaborators, hours more doing the professional stuff which almost all of us must do to make our livings and our musical communities.

To this music, and to our collaborative relationships, if they are good, we give all that we give (ideally) to our romantic or life-partners: imagination, intellect, passion; heart, soul, and faith. I can imagine - I KNOW - that it could be hard for such a romantic or life-partner, especially a man partnered with a woman musician, not to feel jealous of our relationship with our music, or threatened by it. This can be true even if the partner is an artist or musician himself, or herself. It's easy to see why: in my mind at least, there is no question that the only thing quite so intimate as that musical relationship is the romantic one, and vice-versa.

We have these times, as does anyone committed and passionate - be they musician, painter, firefighter, psychologist or whatever - of exaltation and the corresponding, balancing loneliness that comes afterwards. At those times we feel especially strongly the need to connect, to communicate, and it is almost as though no connection or communication, no matter how intimate, is enough.

For those of us who are performers, after the concert is over and that sense of extraordinary connection with an audience is terminated by the final call on stage, there can be a sensation

almost of bereavement, of terrible loneliness. That feeling can create a special challenge for those who are with us. If they are artists themselves, or people who have a passion in life, the advantage is that they have a way to understand some of what's going on. Undoubtedly they too will have these moments, and so then the challenge for us is to be with them – or be brave enough to leave them alone – as they are, and do, for us. Perhaps this is one place where the obbligator part is "vying with" – contending with – the other line.

I know a very special musician, who is not only a fine oboist but a passionate woman of great thoughtfulness and musical vision, one of those who has elected to make her musical life here in México. She says that, after long consideration, she has determined that for her it is better to be alone after a performance. It is tempting, she says, to be with a partner in that situation, because after performing there can be that acute sensation of loneliness and apartness; but in the end for her it is often better to be solitary, to listen to other music or replay the concert in her inner ear, or cry, or just lie on the floor and be with the sensation itself, and breathe.

I think there's a connection here with that sense which I described earlier in this "Chanticleer serial", that we are never really alone, as lonely as we might sometimes feel ourselves to be: because there is this invisible partner there which is the music. It must be the same, in its own particular way, with any overriding passion: history, farming, poetry, driving a truck. You come to realize, in those moments in which you might feel yourself to be most agonizingly alone, that you are not. Rather, you are part of some great river of continuity. My own personal river of continuity is made up of every itinerant musician or jongleur who went to sleep, by the side of the road or in a good hotel room ... not alone, but with the music with which he or she had made a kind of vow of mutual sustenance. Maybe it was after transporting some anonymous concert listener to a personal epiphany, maybe it was after the partygoers joyfully danced until dawn, maybe both at the same time. We entertain and we take people out beyond themselves for a few minutes or hours ... an honorable profession if not always seen as a respectable one!

The ones who seem to end up being good partners for musicians are people who, as part of their love for the musician, cherish the music and the dedication to it which are an inseparable part of that musician's life. Strong in themselves, they don't feel threatened by that dedication. For sure, they respect it, but they also have a sense of humor about it. They don't view our commitment as some sort of sacred cow, and they sometimes might even get a little irritated, from time to time, by some of what it entails.

One thing is in common among all of them that I've known: they seem to be people who appreciate the continuing, long term passion that is music and are warmed, at some level much deeper than blind adoration, by having a partner who's elected that life. Often they are musicians or artists themselves. Sometimes, miraculously, they are in some whole other walk of life but nevertheless –because they are passionate about what they themselves do, or about living, or both– they understand.

They also, in some mysterious way, have a sense of the little things that really help. That "helpfulness quotient" seems to be defined not as unqualified adulation but rather by assistance with carrying things, or a good idea about another concert venue or connection to make for publicity; coming up with food or a good laugh or a back rub at the right moment. Just as important seems to be that they have their own passions and interests, their own work and

preoccupations which they share with us; and we give our own back rubs or foot massages and come up with our own ideas, and care about what they do as they care about our music.

Well, you say, isn't that the description of any good partnership? And the answer is Yes, absolutely; just that it seems that it can be a bit more difficult when one of the partners might be travelling a lot, and getting a lot of applause, and needing to spend long hours working alone to merit that applause.

Robert Green, Caroline's husband, is quiet and reserved, wry but never cold; has a dead-on intuition about people and a great faith in humanity leavened with a generous dose of knowledge about its failings. There's a spark there which blooms into fullfledged warmth and often hilarious humor when we become friends a couple of years ago, during the first "Crosscurrents" tour in Indiana. Slight, wiry, dark, with some wings of salt in the pepper hair, he's a lateblossoming distance runner who ran his first marathon just a few years ago and continues to run every other day at some amazingly early hour of the morning, often with Arlo the Big Daddy dog until running started to give Arlo joint problems.

Chanticleer Farm is a working farm, no gentleman farmer's playpen. There are tractors and barns and bales of hay, crops to get in, to harvest, and to bring to market. Bob does all this work; he and Caroline have done it together and with their three sons as each came of age, for most of the last 25 years. Hard to think of a more complete partnership. He is a renaissance man with degrees in sculpture as well as psychology; his real degrees, I think, are in life and people. In addition to running Chanticleer Farm for all this time he's also been the CEO of a business.

It is Bob who years ago designed and built the acoustic shell which helps to make a success, sonically speaking, of the final Chanticleer Festival Farm concert. Every August he gets all of the humongous pieces of plywood out of one of the barns and brings everything down to the lake on the tractor, and assembles the shell for the 10<sup>th</sup>, the 15<sup>th</sup>, the 20<sup>th</sup>, and now this year for the 24<sup>th</sup> time, with whatever help happens to be available. As he did last year, Rubén helps. And this year there is a new pair of hands: Scott, violist Jenny Smith's friend, who's driven down from Montana to see Jenny as well as some family who conveniently live within a few hours' drive.

Rubén Mendoza, Elizabeth's husband, is a real Central American mesomorph, sturdy, durable, with glinting dark eyes and a truly wacko sense of humor coupled with great affection and tenderness. I suspect you would not want him as your enemy; at the very least he would annihilate you with practical jokes and that devastating quick tongue and sense of humor. Like Bob Green, he is also extraordinarily practical and capable, and like Bob, he has an inordinate fondness for ice cream, Oreos, and chocolate in general. He's basically a computer guru who – fortunately for future generations of Information Management people and for the rest of us who must deal with them – teaches computing. I imagine that he's probably an excellent teacher, rigorous but with a leavening of that wonderful humor.

Around ten days after we all arrived at Chanticleer Farm, we heard the good news that Salvo's luggage had finally been found and would be delivered that afternoon. Returning from a concert, we all burst into the kitchen – Salvo in the lead – hoping that it had arrived. And YES! Standing in the middle of the kitchen was a suitcase. Salvo was very calm. He went to the

suitcase, he opened it, he started to look inside ... and then he said, "But this is not my suitcase!" Oh NO, we all said, not another chapter in this saga of woes.

"Yeah well," said Rubén drily, waiting on the sidelines with that wonderful gleaming smile, "YOURS is over here. That's one of ours." Knowing from Salvo's description more or less what the lost bag looked like - and happening to be in the house when the suitcase was delivered - he'd devised this last substitution punch-line for the lost luggage story. We all collapsed laughing.

You never know how a new person, especially one who arrives after all these dynamics have had a chance to establish themselves, will fit in. Scott, Jenny's friend and an environmental scientist, meets us at Brown County State Park (remember the Period Instrument?) well into the second week of the festival. He shows his colors by arriving with a bottle of wine, a cooler of ice, and a cool newfangled corkscrew that almost opens the bottle by itself. Brown County is a "dry" county (you cannot buy even beer there) and so his offering is particularly appreciated by the musicians during the post-concert gathering in Rubén and Elizabeth's room!

He goes on to see his family and arrives at the farm a few days later, in time to help Bob and Rubén assemble the acoustic shell and with general preparations for the farm concert. He's quiet and shy at first but then starts fitting right in with the morning coffee and dogwatching crowd on the porch. One of my prize snapshots of the farm concert is of Scott on the tractor, bringing chairs back from the final farm concert on the lake. There is a big grin on his face: it's his first time ever driving a tractor.

I've felt for some time that the music we make and the ensemble relationships we have are - or can be - models for our other relationships, and I find myself thinking a lot, in the time since the festival, about that notion. A few days before I went to Cuba to play in early October, I had my first real rehearsal with Cuauhtémoc Trejo, principal flute of the Orquesta Sinfónica of Guanajuato and a wonderful musician. We'd been wanting to collaborate since I got here last year with the Fulbright. Since then we've had reading sessions together a couple of times, which convinced us that we really did want to work together. This was our first real rehearsal, and what happened brought me back to thinking about what I learn from this ensemble music context.

When you're reading, you generally don't stop unless you are really not together. You may not pay much attention to finetuning dynamics or phrasing, or to matching sound, because that's not the idea: you're there to have fun and not to really develop an interpretation. When Cuauhtémoc and I had those reading sessions together, we were just enjoying the pure fun of playing together with what came naturally, two good musicians with good reading skills and good ears and a desire to have fun with music together without giving much more thought or effort to the undertaking.

In other words, we were jamming.

When you start to truly work it's different, and this is what happened with Cuauhtémoc and me that day. We warmed up with a CPE Bach Sonata, just to get acquainted with it. Then we started in on the Poulenc Sonata, that miracle of airy grace and sensuous flute sound, a piece each of us knows well; and here is where the differences between jamming and rehearsing started to manifest themselves. Now, when we hear that maybe he's directing the phrase a little

differently, or wants to take a little more time, or whatever, we stop. I listen to him playing his part and vice versa. We talk, we try different things.

It's a risk, and I am acutely conscious of it as we start with this ... how do I know how he'll react when I say "Could we go back to measure 35 so I can hear how you're doing that?" (I worked with someone once who protested scornfully at every "wasted" minute spent on listening to a phrase more than twice, an attitude I later came to think of as the first-strike approach to rehearsing.) And for his part, how does he know how I'll react if he asks me to stretch a little here, or says he has the feeling maybe I'm dragging a little there?

Scary or not, we really start working together, as Salvo and I did on the Mozart B-flat major fiddle sonata in Richmond, Indiana; as Caroline and I did on the Bach G-minor Sonata last year. The difference is palpable. For me, the excitement is several notches higher. Now the gears are starting to mesh at a level that they couldn't before, because now we've elected to really work together. As with all good ensemble work, as it was with the Chanticleer Quartet, the process of working out how the music might go is extraordinarily delicate. At this early stage it's exploratory: we're two experienced ensemble players with mutual respect, getting involved with some music we both love. As this musical relationship evolves, over the course of just a couple of hours it is warmed by enthusiasm and trust.

This process is totally practical and utilitarian: as Theodore Lettvin, my greatest teacher, used to say, "When in a difficult ensemble spot, agree on a tempo, count out loud together, and DON'T GO TOO FAST." Good advice for more things than music!

How does this make sense, that you can have more fun and be more excited when you are working than when you are jamming? How could it feel more rewarding to really work at something than to just have fun?

Each has its own excitement, but for me with that working process there is a sense of being grounded and integrated which is qualitatively distinct from good jamming. Good jamming - YES! - has a kind of pure exhilaration which is delightfully irresponsible: you do the absolute best you can at that moment but there are many little details you may let slip because quite probably you will never play that piece again with that same person.

Absolutely, there are those inspired jamming sessions - like Rubenstein and the Guarneri: according to the folklore they just sat down and read the Brahms Quintet for fun. They felt so at home, so good, that they came back a couple of days later and made that extraordinary recording. It has a freshness and energy so incredible that it's hard to imagine how it could have gotten any better with hours of rehearsal.

If the folklore is true, then personally I think the wonderful musicmaking that happened had to do with the fact that they were all remarkable musicians. Here you have a great quartet already fully formed (although young at that time) plus a great pianist, all with a tremendous love for that piece of music and for ensemble music in general. Like a great love affair, perhaps, between two people who know what they want, and know that this romance most likely will not continue; but who nevertheless dedicate themselves to having a profoundly wonderful time while it lasts. That to me is great jamming.

What excites me most is finding a way to combine the freshness and excitement which jamming can give you, with the intimate detailed knowledge of the music and of your ensemble

partner(s) which the long-haul working process can generate. So far I haven't been able to imagine anything more exciting.

I suppose that you can choose to not hear what's coming into your ears, the things that you know are not quite right. But when that's the case, at some level you have chosen to be - without any value judgement attached - jamming as opposed to collaborating. If you think that you ARE collaborating, listen harder, or imagine how it could be better. If you can hear a way that it could be better and you're not doing anything to help that happen, you're jamming, you haven't yet chosen to do the work - with all its inherent risks - of collaborating.

I think if you HAVE chosen to do that work, your ears are in gear at some different level and you are saying stuff like, Hey, I feel as though you need me to move along more there; or, I am wondering if there is a way that we could do that *rallentando* (gradual slowing) without any loss of intensity, or, Do you need me to give you more room to breathe in that spot? Or, I feel that we're not quite together in measure 42, could we play that slowly so we can listen to it?

I think something like this CAN happen when you are jamming, but it's more apt to be something that takes place internally in each player according to his or her individual musicianship and ears: hearing that another player needs a little time there, or that you could push the tempo a little more there. It's less likely to be a situation in which you stop and listen, and talk, and listen again.

No question, it is more exertion to be working than jamming. You have to choose, in the first place, to acknowledge that there is difference, and then you must choose to work with it. Inherent in this process is the possibility of disagreement, perhaps of tension if that's what difference inevitably signals for you. For many of us, depending on the context, this can be alarming.

However, there are a couple of antidotes to that alarm, if you choose to see them. First, there is the utterly unbreakable allegiance to the music: that sense of being in service to something larger than yourself to which you owe your absolute best effort. Second, after a time you come to trust the process itself and you know that difference does not signify disaster. In fact, the very process of working out those differences can become an extraordinarily gratifying experience in and of itself.

For me this process has been a model for human relationships. I have learned to learn from it and to trust it, and it continues to delight me with its wisdom.

When we're in a relationship, of whatever kind, isn't it the case that we're in service to something larger than ourselves, which is the relationship? We can choose whether we want the jamming, sightreading kind of involvement: we don't stop to craft a phrase that's intimately shared, beyond what just occurs naturally between two sensitive and caring musicians doing the very best we can at that moment. Or we can choose that longer-term involvement, which is working on the music, with its inherent promise of the tension that comes from engaging with any process, and the richness that can come from being with the process over the long haul, bringing to it a deeper kind of imagination.

I love to sightread - just jamming - and have had some incredibly wonderful times doing that. For me as a musician, both kinds of activity are rewarding. But looking back on my personal

history I see that I have tended to gravitate to the working relationship, the collaborative rehearsing which leads to performance. This, for me, is making it REAL.

As I've thought about it over the last few months, it's a critical difference.

It has to do with a commitment to the music but also with a commitment to the audience, the listener. Because we are transmitters, we are the interpreters, the ones who take those dots on the page or that 12-bar blues which lives in memory alone, that John Coltrane lead sheet or that Brahms quintet - and translate them, bring them alive in sound, to connect compellingly with the ears, through the very pores, of our listeners.

There is enormous effort and energy involved in that, no way around it.

For me, this is a central part of that service which we render to the music, that thing which is larger than ourselves: *BRINGING IT TO AN AUDIENCE*. It is unequivocally not the same to play for an empty room. The music, that invisible ensemble partner, knows when there are listeners present.

I had a long conversation with my friend the oboist about this matter, and asked her, "Why do you think collaborating is more exciting than jamming?" She said, "Well for one thing, when you're really working together you're putting more of yourself into it!"

Caroline Klemperer, when we talk about this, says that for her the key to the human partner relationship is the same as the one for the relationship between her and music: that they keep evolving. Music keeps inspiring you to enlarge yourself, to grow and evolve, so as to make possible in your playing the sounds you hear in your head.

She goes on to say that the violin is always there, always ready, always welcoming and always honest. With a human partner, she says, there's another set of expectations, of needs, another imagination at work: another individual who's not always necessarily ready or welcoming, who sometimes needs reassurance or coaxing in order to be honest. In other words, another evolving being.

I think, Here again music serves as our example. Our relationship with music can teach us how to be good mates: always welcoming but always honest, always willing to stretch a little beyond where we are right now. *ALWAYS EVOLVING*. As with working versus jamming, sometimes this is scary but I know that in the end it is extraordinarily gratifying.

I ask myself, What's the analogy with the human partner relationship? Maybe the listeners in that relationship are the participants in it, playing a double role as musicians do - both playing and listening, transforming and being transformed, teaching and learning, at the same time. Fortunate, I think, those who have the desire and imagination to craft a way to do this over the long haul. Like chamber music, it is a kind of miracle.

In the months after the Chanticleer Festival, my mind continues to chew on this material. It's almost Christmas before I feel that I've gotten to the kernel deep inside for which I've somehow been searching all this time.

Now I am thinking, At some deeper level beyond music, all of this has to do with personal integrity, and the acknowledgement we give to it. Why would a musician pick a farmer for a partner, or a sculptor, or a scientist, or an anthropologist, or an information management person ... or vice versa, for that matter? I used to believe very strongly that only artists made good

mates for artists. Now, especially after this Chanticleer time, I am not so sure. Now I am wondering if it doesn't have more to do with the degree to which both people in a relationship feel animated by the idea of collaborating rather than just jamming.

I think now, Each of us has something to contribute, whether it's playing the piano or the violin, helping people of different nations to communicate better, making wonderful meals, what have you. The US poet Thomas Lux, in his marvelous poem *An Horatian Notion*, talks about this idea, and says

"...

You need to love the thing you do - birdhouse building,  
 painting tulips exclusively, whatever - and then  
 you do it  
 so consciously driven  
 by your unconscious  
 that the thing becomes a wedge  
 that splits a stone and between the halves  
 the wedge then grows, i.e., the thing  
 is solid but with a soul,  
 a life of its own. Inspiration, the *donnée*,  
 the gift, the bolt of fire  
 down the arm that makes the art?  
 Grow up! Give me, please, a break!  
 You make the thing because you love the thing  
 and you love the thing because someone else loved it  
 enough to make you love it.  
 And with that your heart like a tent peg pounded  
 toward the earth's core.  
 And with that your heart on a beam burns  
 through the ionosphere.  
 And with that you go to work."

In the end what each of us owes to our life is to LIVE IT -- to be artists of our lives - and it is a debt of honor.

No question, our individual passions are central and essential to us as individuals - without that how could any real partnership be possible? But, could it be that what's really important to the success of our collaborative relationships is the insatiable curiosity about, and passion for, that continuing evolution of which Caroline speaks, regardless of what our individual passions might be?

In November, I return to Chanticleer Farm for another "Crosscurrents" tour with Caroline Klemperer and Sam LeSane. A few hours before I leave Indiana on the first leg of my journey back to Guanajuato, I have a wonderful surprise ... Jenny calls and we have time for a quick telephone visit, during which she gives me a moving and joyful piece of news: she and Scott have decided to marry.

NEXT... Part 8: [RECAPITULATION](#)