

## History of Chamber Music

*What is chamber music?*

*It is ensemble instrumental music for up to about ten performers with typically one performer to a part.*

Since circa 1450, there has been instrumental music designed for private playing. These pieces used many instruments and (in Germany) it was common that the folk songs would contain 2-3 countermelodies to expand and elaborate the whole, and to arrange the outcome for groups of instruments. Although the pieces were never written for particular instruments, we can, through art/paintings, reasonably guess that the viol was a predominant early chamber music instrument.

A more important source of later chamber music is to be found in the arrangements of sixteenth-century chansons (songs of French origin composed usually for four voices on a variety of secular texts), some for voices and lute, and others for lute alone. A generic convention of a chanson was that they used to use contrasting metres and also contrasts in musical texture; the effect of the whole was that of a short composition in several even shorter sections. That sectional form retained in the arrangements later became a striking feature.

### The Chanson

*The chanson travelled to Italy about 1525, became known as canzona, and was transcribed for organ. The earliest transcriptions differed from the French arrangements in treating the original chanson with greater freedom, adding ornaments and flourishes, and sometimes inserting new material. Soon original canzonas for organ, modelled on the transcriptions, and for small instrumental ensembles, were composed. One such type, characterised by elaborate figurations and ornamented melodies, became influential in England late in the seventeenth century and played a role in the works of Henry Purcell.*

*Parallel to the developments that led from the vocal chanson, in France, to the instrumental canzona, primarily in Italy, was the development of the dance suite. Early sixteenth-century dance tunes in all countries of Western Europe usually had appeared in pairs: one was slow, stately in mood and in duple metre (i.e., with two beats to the bar); the other fast, lively in mood, usually in triple metre, and often melodically similar to the first. Through much of the sixteenth century, composers in the several countries sought to expand the dance pair into a unified dance suite. Suites based on variations of one movement appeared in England; suites in which each of four dances had its own rhythmic character, melodically based on the first dance, were written in Germany; sets of dances with no internal relationships to each other were common in Italy. The most influential steps were taken in France by composers for the lute or the clavecin (harpsichord). Consisting essentially of four dance forms that were then popular – the allemande, courante, sarabande, and gigue – the suites they composed were based on contrasting tempos, metres, and rhythmic patterns. The French version of the dance suite became the prototype for later chamber-music forms.*

It was not until the middle of the seventeenth century that two types of composition – one a mature version of the canzona and composed in sectional form, the other derived from the dance suite and consisting of several movements – appeared as works for small instrumental ensembles. In Italy small groups of stringed instruments were often employed in Roman Catholic churches to perform appropriate music; thus canzonas came to be widely used for church purposes. For church use the dance movements were omitted and what came to be called a church sonata (sonata da chiesa) resulted. And a set of *sonate da chiesa* composed in 1667 by Giovanni Battista Vitaii marked the beginning of the form as a separate entity.

*\*(extra)\**

*In the same year Johann Rosenmüller, a German composer working in Venice, published a set of *Sonate da camera* cioè *Sinfonie* (Chamber Sonatas, that is, symphonies), each*

*consisting of four to six dance movements with an introductory movement (sinfonia) not in dance style. The development of chamber music for the remainder of the century centred upon these two types, sonata da chiesa and sonata da camera.*

The first half of the seventeenth century was marked by considerable variety in the constitution of chamber-music groups. Compositions were commonly for one to four viols, or for combinations of viols and woodwind instruments, most often with a figured bass accompaniment, employed in virtually all music of the period about 1600 to 1750, in which the composer wrote a bass line and inserted figures and other symbols under certain notes. The figures indicated the nature of the desired chord to be improvised over the note – whether major or minor, whether in normal or in inverted position, and so on – and the figured bass line was designed to be "realized" or played by a harmony instrument (such as a lute, organ, or harpsichord), often with a melody instrument (bass, cello, or bassoon) to reinforce the bass line. The bass line with its figures and the two instruments performing it were called basso continuo or simply continuo.

Works for two violins and continuo (with harpsichord and bass understood) virtually dominated the field from circa 1620 until the middle of the eighteenth century. About that time the custom of serenading became popular; small groups of instrumentalists roamed the streets of Austrian and Italian cities, performing serenades (divertimenti). In instrumental music, a viola was added to fill out the harmonies, the bass was replaced by a cello, and the string quartet emerged. Composers of serious music then adopted this new combination of two violins, viola, and cello, and from about 1750 the string quartet took its place as the principal medium for chamber music. Owing its development largely to the Austrian composer Joseph Haydn, it has reigned supreme to the present day. About 1760, other combinations for strings alone began to play important but relatively smaller roles in the field: the string trio (violin, viola, cello), string quintet (quartet plus a second viola), and string sextet (quintet plus a second cello) are chief among them.

Finally, works for individual combinations exist in considerable number after about the 1780s. Representative compositions of that non-standard group include the clarinet quintets (string quartet and clarinet) by Mozart (K. 581) and Brahms (Opus 115); the *Septet*, Opus 20 (violin, viola, cello, bass, clarinet, bassoon, and horn), by Beethoven; the Octet, Opus 166 (as in the septet plus a second violin), the *Trout Quintet*, Opus 114 (violin, viola, cello, bass, and piano and the String Quintet in C Major Opus 163 violins, viola and two cellos all by Schubert; and the Horn Trio, Opus 40 (violin, horn, and piano), by Brahms.