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An Overview of the Development of Chamber Music

Instrumental music designed for home use has existed since about the middle of the fifteenth century. It became customary in Germany to supply folk-song melodies with two or three counter-melodies, to expand and elaborate the whole, and to arrange the result for groups of instruments; original melodies were given similar treatment. The instruments were not often specified, but on the basis of many paintings of the time one may assume that groups of viols of various sizes predominated.

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, others for lute alone. The typical chanson was characterised by contrasts in musical texture and often in metre; 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 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.

Toward the middle of the seventeenth century the two types of composition – one derived from 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.

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, a kind of musical shorthand, 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 "realised" 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.

As early as 1622, the Italian composer Salomone Rossi had begun to specify two violins and chittarone (a large lute) in his dance sets; and soon similar combinations were adopted generally. A work written for two violins and bass (continuo) became known as a *sonata a tre* or "trio sonata" – even though four instruments (the three strings and the lute or harpsichord) were usually involved in the performance. Later in the seventeenth century works for one instrument and continuo appeared also and were called variously solo sonatas, duos, or *sonate a due*. The combinations of violin and continuo or cello and continuo were favoured, and sonatas for those combinations took regular places in the chamber-music field.

Works for two violins and continuo (with harpsichord and bass understood) virtually dominated the field until the middle of the eighteenth century. About that time the custom of serenading became popular; small groups of instrumentalists strolled the streets of Austrian and Italian cities, performing serenades and divertimenti. The keyboard instrument realising the continuo proved unwieldy and was soon abandoned. To the three remaining strings 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.

Meanwhile, as the continuo principle gradually approached obsolescence, the harpsichord (which was superseded by the piano about 1770) took on a new function in chamber music. In works with continuo, it had been an accompanying instrument, improvising its part according to the directions indicated in the figured bass; now the keyboard instrument became dominant in new combinations that included one to four strings. The most important of these is the piano trio (piano, violin, cello), the repertory of which includes works from Haydn to the present. Various combinations of piano and one instrument loom almost as large. Toward the end of the eighteenth century and extending through the 19th, the combinations of piano quartet (piano trio plus viola) and piano quintet (piano and string quartet) give rise to a small but significant repertory ornamented by composers such as Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, and many others.

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 (violin, viola and two cello) all by Schubert; and the *Horn Trio*, Opus 40 (violin, horn, and piano), by Brahms. Composers of the twentieth century have written works for instrumental groups to which a voice is added.

Classical period, c. 1750-1825.

The 83 string quartets (of which seven are single-movement arrangements of orchestral pieces titled *The Seven Words of Our Saviour on the Cross* and known as *The Seven Last Words*) by Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) constitute a series in which virtually the entire history of the string quartet is represented. Most of them appeared in sets of six, each under a separate opus number. The earliest sets, Opus 1 and 2, express merely the superficial and diverting elements of Rococo style – the fanciful, ornamental style that was prevalent in the eighteenth century. From Opus 3 onward the four-movement form is regularised, and in

Opus 9, thematic materials begin to reveal details that point to the future. Opus 17 discloses a virtuosic element in its first-violin parts, and lower voices are given only a small share in the thematic work. The latter process comes to full expression in Opus 20, for now cello and viola are entrusted with thematic statements and the quartet style is close at hand.

After a nine-year interval (1772-81) Haydn introduced a "new manner" (his phrase) in the quartets of Opus 33; this resulted in the establishment of the principle of thematic development. Motive manipulation is basic to the texture, and the fully developed sonata form appears. Also in Opus 33 Haydn introduced the scherzo in place of the minuet, but did not continue that practice in later quartets.

The 33 quartets from Opus 50 onward (excepting Opus 51, *The Seven Last Words*) include the masterworks on which Haydn's reputation is so firmly founded. Of them 18 (Opus 50, 54, 55, 64) were composed during the time (c. 1786-90) Haydn was in close contact with Mozart and are characterised by an increasing use of chromaticism to produce poignant effects. The 15 quartets written after Mozart's death (Opus 71, 74, 76, 77, 103) return to the optimistic style that was innate, and they reveal an ever-increasing expressiveness and mastery of detail. Haydn also composed more than 30 piano trios, eight violin sonatas, and over 60 string trios. While those works contain attractive melodies, they represent a minor aspect of the composer's activity.

Of the 26 string quartets written by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-91) the qualities of the last 10 are such that they have virtually overshadowed the 16 earlier works. Six of the 10 reflect Mozart's first attempts to work in Haydn's 'new manner' and reveal how successfully he adopted the principle. The last three, dedicated to King Frederick William II of Prussia, a competent cellist, show Mozart's ability to adapt to the interests of his potential patrons. Here the cello parts reveal something of the virtuosity required of the first violin. Taken together, the last 10 quartets are among Mozart's masterpieces. Of Mozart's eight string quintets, three rise to supremacy. The *String Quintet in C Major*, K. 515 (K. stands for Köchel, a cataloguer of Mozart's works), is a model of strength and delicacy, filled with moods reflecting grace and good humour, but also high dramatic tension. Its companion in G minor, K. 516, is characterised by the same strength but is the embodiment of anguish. Two years later Mozart composed the *Clarinet Quintet*, K. 581; now moods of grace, humour, and cheer prevail. The addition of the woodwind instrument enabled Mozart to achieve a high level of brilliance and colour throughout; the Clarinet Quintet is one of the monuments of the literature.

Exactly half of Mozart's 32 violin sonatas were composed before his 10th birthday; in them the violin parts do little more than accompany the piano. The last 16 move gradually to a true ensemble texture, which is fully attained in K. 454, K. 481, and K. 526. Two piano quartets, contrasting greatly in mood, are alike in containing a balance between piano and strings. His seven piano trios are somewhat like the violin sonatas in gradually reaching a true ensemble texture. Of the seven, one in B flat major (K. 502), one in E major (K. 542), and one in E flat major for clarinet, viola, and piano (K. 498) rise to greatness in variety of moods, balanced forms, and perfection of detail.

In the works of Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) chamber music composition takes a central place. His 17 string quartets constitute the backbone of the repertory. The first six take points of departure from the quartet style of Haydn's later works, but far exceed them in strength, occasional boisterousness, and variety of material. Five quartets of Beethoven's middle period represent a great increase in size, depth of expression, and formal freedom. The six last quartets include works that transcend conventional forms and textures. Development techniques and contrapuntal devices play more important roles here; forms are imaginative and fluid, movements are often thematically related, and a range of expression that uncovers new depths of the soul is here disclosed. Beethoven's other chamber music, like the quartets, reveals a gradual increase in the power of the motive to generate thematic sections. This is especially true in the *Three Piano Trios, Opus 1*; *the String Trio in C Major, Opus 9, No. 3*; and the *String Quintet in C Major, Opus 29*. Particularly in the scherzo movements, which Beethoven employs in place of minuets, he generally begins with a one-bar motive, from which most of the thematic material is derived. The Septet, Opus 20,

together with many of the violin sonatas, the cello sonatas, and a few miscellaneous works, occupy an intermediate stage in this development. Some are based on long melodies that are developed, others on short motives that are manipulated. In virtually every case, however, a masterpiece results.