



Chamber Music

A brief chronology

Learning and Access Resource



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Chamber Music

This resource has been developed for **you**, as a connoisseur of music and lifelong learner. You are warmly invited to explore the chronology of **chamber music** and its development over time, as demonstrated in Melbourne Recital Centre's program. Feel free to mix and match the concerts you choose to attend, to fully experience the variety of significant chamber music works performed by our featured artists.

The [Salon](#) is particularly appropriate for the presentation of chamber music, as a flexible and intimate performance space. Depending on the configuration of the performing ensemble, the audience can be seated in theatre or cabaret style, or in the round, for an up close and personal listening experience. The natural resonance of the timber lined walls in the Salon serve to achieve audible clarity of independent parts within ensemble performance.

Overview

“In its beginnings, music was merely chamber music, meant to be listened to in a small space by a small audience.”

-Gustav Mahler

Chamber music is often described as a musical conversation between friends. Each 'friend' or performer has their own 'voice' in the group, thereby contributing an independent instrumental or vocal line to the ensemble. The term **chamber music** originates from European society in the 1700s when music was written for small ensembles (usually 2 to 9 players) to be performed within a chamber space in a home or court, but the concept and practice of small ensemble playing has been with us from music's beginnings. Significantly, chamber ensembles are not conducted and performers rely on each other to create musical cohesion. In the Classical period (1750-1820), chamber music was traditionally performed in the room of a palace for the aristocracy, as opposed to a concert hall setting. Whether in Classical or modern-day settings, chamber music is intended to create an intimacy between the performers and audience.

Renaissance Period 1400 – 1600

During the period 1400 to 1600, the function of Western music was in sacred or secular contexts. Polyphonic vocal music of the time was written and performed primarily for worship in the Catholic and Protestant churches. The chamber players of the Renaissance were skilled amateur travelling performers or *troubadours* who entertained the aristocracy and upper middle classes with songs and music for dancing. The most popular and highly developed secular vocal form is the madrigal.

Baroque Period 1600 - 1750

As one of the foremost composers of the Baroque period (1600-1750), Johann Sebastian Bach created one of the most significant musical works in Western music history, 'The Well-Tempered Clavier' (1722), a set of 48 preludes and fugues for solo keyboard in all diatonic keys. The theoretical settings of these keyboard works provided the harmonic foundation for the development of Baroque ensemble music. Vocal and instrumental chamber music during this period was often performed by amateur musicians for the entertainment of the upper class and aristocracy, as in earlier times.

Classical Period 1750 - 1820

In Classical times, chamber music was performed by high-level amateur musicians or professional court musicians. European society was highly sophisticated and secular music provided an important function as entertainment. For the Viennese in particular, music was an important part of daily life and many leisure hours were devoted to music-making. Technological advances such as the development of the printing press and publishing houses meant that music became more widely available to the educated middle class. Haydn and Mozart created an extensive body of repertoire for chamber ensembles based on Classical characteristics and structures i.e. sonata, theme and variations, and rondo forms. The string quartet was prominent as an instrumental ensemble during this time and quartets were played by amateurs with a high level of skill and technical ability.

Romantic Period 1820 - 1910

The Romantic period began around 1815 and stretched through to 1910. In the nineteenth century, Romantic extremes of emotional expression and intensity, and developments in the craft of instrument-making meant there was an increased demand on amateur musicians for virtuosity in their playing. The invention of the pianoforte influenced composers such as Beethoven and Schubert, who were already experimenting with tonality and rhythm for expressive purposes. As music became increasingly difficult for amateurs to play, there was an increase across Europe in professional chamber groups and a move towards solo virtuoso performers for entertainment for paying audiences.

Twentieth-Century Period

Developments in twentieth-century music, although not easily characterised, may be described as experimental, original and innovative. Composers such as Stravinsky, Schoenberg and Carter, openly challenged traditions in melody, harmony, rhythm and form, and devised radical and new playing techniques for instrumentalists. Whereas string quartets and wind quintets may have dominated chamber music repertoire of previous centuries, the twentieth century demonstrated that no group was standard; instead, chamber music was written for new numbers and combinations of Western instruments, and the use of voice and percussion became more prolific.

Present Day

Chamber music is no longer performed exclusively for the entertainment of the upper classes and is music for all.

In the modern day, eclecticism may be the commonality in music for small ensembles. Eclecticism can be heard and seen in flexible ensemble configurations, the fusion of live music with storytelling devices and multimedia, the exploration of soundscapes and improvisation, and the use of uncommon or non-traditional instruments.

As a 'conversation' between friends, chamber music has become an exploration of 'new ways to say new things'. Contemporary performing ensembles certainly demonstrate a respect for historical and authentic playing techniques, and these can be heard in programs where traditional musical forms and structures are juxtaposed with original timbres, melodic and rhythmic elements drawn from indigenous or non-western musical elements. Professional chamber musicians can demonstrate the highest levels of multi-tasking as active performers, arrangers and composers of new music. Today's accomplished instrumentalists may travel frequently around the world to develop skills and knowledge in music of other cultures, and to study performance techniques and improvisatory styles on multiple acoustic and/or electronic instruments.

Your experience of contemporary chamber music may involve the sounds and rhythms of world music, or introduce you to storytelling devices in response to current social issues and themes.