



## **Shanghai Quartet Two-Week Ensemble Residency Program Chamber Music Definitions for Kids**

### **What is Chamber Music?**

Chamber music is instrumental music for a small number of instruments ranging in size from one player to groups of a dozen or more. Chamber groups, or ensembles, perform without a conductor. Chamber music is written with one player for each part, and generally all parts are of equal importance. It is called chamber music because it was originally meant to be played for private performances, typically in a room (or chamber) of someone's house.

### **What is a Chamber Ensemble?**

An ensemble is a group of musicians who perform together. Chamber ensembles can vary in size and instrumentation and take their name from the number of players in the group as well as from instrumentation. For example, an ensemble of three string players is a string trio. An ensemble of five brass players is called a brass quintet. A pianist, violinist and cellist who perform together are called a piano trio, although many ensembles with mixed instrumentation will simply be called "duo" (two players), "sextet" (six players) and so on.

Because chamber ensembles perform without a conductor, it is essential that the players communicate and cooperate with one another in order to stay together. They do this by watching and listening to each other closely and signaling to each other through small, subtle cues as they perform.

### **What is a Quartet?**

A quartet is a group of four musicians who play instruments or sing together. A quartet is also a piece of music that is played or sung by four people.

### **What are the Instruments in a String Quartet?**

A string quartet consists of two violins, a viola and a cello. These instruments are all built in a similar way, made of many pieces of wood which are glued together. The body of the instrument is hollow, creating a resonating box for the sound. Four strings made of animal gut, nylon or steel are wrapped around pegs at one end of the instrument and

attached to a tailpiece at the other. They are stretched tightly across a bridge to produce their tones or pitches. All are played with bows.

The **violin** is the smallest member of the string family and the highest in pitch. It is held under the chin, resting on the shoulder. The violin can be soft and expressive or exciting and brilliant. In a string quartet, there is a first violin and a second violin. The first violin has the melody most often, but there is often interplay between the two violinists.

The **viola** is a stringed instrument that looks like a violin but is slightly larger and has a deeper tone. Its four strings are tuned lower than those of the violin. It has a darker and warmer tone quality than the violin, but is not as brilliant.

The **cello** is a large stringed instrument that is played while sitting down. It is held between the player's knees and rests on the floor on an endpin or spike. The cello has a mellow, deep, resonant sound and usually carries the bass, or lowest, part in the music.

Some well-known string quartets performing today include the Juilliard String Quartet, the Shanghai Quartet, the Tokyo String Quartet and the Emerson Quartet. They have all made recordings that are available at local record stores and at some libraries, including the Detroit Public Library. Each season the Chamber Music Society of Detroit presents some of the world's great string quartets. To learn more about the quartets appearing on the Chamber Music Society's 2008-2009 season, please visit our website at [www.ComeHearCMSD.org](http://www.ComeHearCMSD.org).

### **What is a Piano Trio?**

A piano trio is a chamber ensemble consisting of piano, violin and cello, or a piece of music written for that combination of instruments. After the string quartet, it was probably the most popular ensemble favored by 18th- and 19th-century composers of chamber music.

There are many piano trio recordings available at local record stores and libraries, including the Detroit Public Library. A well-known piano trio performing today is the Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson Trio for which the Chamber Music Society of Detroit has named an international trio award that it presents every other year.

### **When was Chamber Music first written?**

The history of European classical music may be divided into six major periods: Medieval, Renaissance, Baroque, Classical, Romantic and Modern. These periods correspond to general periods of Western cultural, social and art history.

Music written for small instrumental groups dates back to the Middle Ages and Renaissance, beginning almost 800 years ago in the 13th century. These pieces, called motets, were not written for specific instruments and were played by whichever instruments or voices were available. In the Baroque period, from about 1600 to 1750, composers wrote trio sonatas for violin, cello and keyboard. These sonatas were the forerunners of the body of quartets, trios and other ensemble music produced during the Classical Period. Most of the best known present-day repertory of chamber music begins with the Classical ensemble repertoire.

### **Which Composers have written Chamber Music?**

Most composers from the past through contemporary times have written chamber music, often in addition to other kinds of classical music. The two giants of the Classical era [1750-1820], Haydn and Mozart, both wrote trios, quartets, quintets and other chamber music. Haydn, born more than 20 years before Mozart, is often credited with developing the style and form of the modern string quartet.

Major 19th century Romantic composers who wrote chamber music include Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, Dvorak, Mendelssohn and Franck.

Chamber music flourished throughout the 20th century in a rich variety of styles and new instrumental combinations. Some of the many 20th-century composers from Europe and America who have written chamber music are Debussy, Ravel, Messiaen (France), Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Stravinsky, (Russia), Schoenberg, Webern, Berg (Germany), Bartok (Hungary), Copland, Barber and Adams (United States).

Many, if not most, living composers write chamber music today. The Chamber Music Society of Detroit sometimes commissions composers to write new pieces, and presents premieres (or first performances) of new music. In recent years, the Chamber Music Society of Detroit has commissioned or premiered pieces by Ellen Taaffe Zwilich, Charles Wuorinen, Richard Danielpour, Stanley Silverman and Gunther Schuller.