

# Guide to Repertoire

The chamber music repertoire is both wonderful and almost endless. Some have better grips on it than others, but all who are responsible for what the public hears need to know the landscape of the art form in an overall way, with at least a basic awareness of its details. At the end of the day, it is the music itself that is the substance of the work of both the performer and presenter.

Knowing the basics of the repertoire will empower anyone who presents concerts. Here is a run-down of the meat-and-potatoes of the chamber literature, organized by instrumentation, with some historical context. Chamber music ensembles can be most simply divided into five groups: those with piano, those with strings, wind ensembles, mixed ensembles (winds plus strings and sometimes piano), and piano ensembles. Note: The listings below barely scratch the surface of repertoire available for all types of ensembles.

## The Major Ensembles with Piano

### The Duo Sonata (piano with one violin, viola, cello or wind instrument)

Duo repertoire is generally categorized as either a true duo sonata (solo instrument and piano are equal partners) or as a soloist and accompanist ensemble. For our purposes here we are only discussing the former.

Duo sonatas have existed since the Baroque era, and **Johann Sebastian Bach** has many examples, all with “continuo” accompaniment that comprises full partnership. His violin sonatas, especially, are treasures, and can be performed equally effectively with harpsichord, fortepiano or modern piano.

**Haydn** continued to develop the genre; **Mozart** wrote an enormous number of violin sonatas (mostly for himself to play as he was a professional-level violinist as well). **Beethoven** composed violin and, finally, cello sonatas that truly established the equality of the instruments, and most of the great Romantic and modern era composers have composed strong duo sonatas that not only serve to create entire recital programs but which can lend enlightening, highly intimate aspects to a chamber program involving larger ensembles.

### The Piano Trio (piano, violin, cello)

Next to the string quartet, the genre of piano trio boasts by far the most compositions, dwarfing in size the existing numbers of piano quintets and quartets. This is no doubt the responsibility of **Franz Josef Haydn**, who, in the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, used the piano

trio along with the string quartet to fully develop the Classical Style. Along the way, Haydn composed some 43 piano trios between 1760 and 1797, laying a path for the piano trios of **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart** (6) and **Ludwig van Beethoven** (13 comprising full trios, variations and individual movements). Of Beethoven's trios, the most significant are his three Op. 1's, the two Op. 74's including the one nicknamed "Ghost", and the final trio, the magnificent "Archduke" trio of 1811. Beethoven's trios constitute what is commonly regarded as the first viable "cycle" that can be performed, the ones listed here in two large concerts, which in essence cover the three main stylistic periods of the composer: Early, Middle or Heroic, and Late.

The genre was picked up and carried into the future by **Franz Schubert**, whose two trios composed at the end of his life are among the most treasured works in the repertoire. Not long after, **Felix Mendelssohn** composed two trios of extraordinary brilliance (the second during his final years) that are immensely popular and often performed.

**Robert Schumann** and **Johannes Brahms** each contributed three trios to the repertoire, and **Antonin Dvorak** composed his beloved "Dumky" Trio as a farewell to his homeland before he left for his famous stay in America, having just previously completed his heavily Brahmsian f minor trio.

The great Russian Romantics **Anton Arensky**, **Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky** and **Sergei Rachmaninov** composed passionate and memorable trios. Dvorak's countryman **Bedrich Smetana** composed a deeply moving piano trio early on as a memento to his deceased daughter, one of the first chamber works openly composed as an elegy.

The piano trio, as a genre, continues to this day, propelled through the 20<sup>th</sup> century by such composers as **Dmitri Shostakovich**, **John Harbison**, **Pierre Jalbert**, and many others.

### **The Piano Quartet (piano, violin, viola, cello, or piano plus string trio)**

Piano Quartets are immensely popular, exciting works that outnumber piano quintets in the categories of most popular and most-often performed. The piano quartet was more or less invented much earlier, by **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart**, who composed two (Eb major and g minor) which, since, 1786, have never left the stage.

The piano quartet was a favorite genre for the very-young **Felix Mendelssohn**, who composed three of great brilliance for the pianist especially. **Robert Schumann** then picked up the genre, composing one of the truly great piano quartets alongside his piano quintet in 1842.

The art of the piano quartet reached its zenith, however, in the hands of **Johannes Brahms**, whose three piano quartets stand at the pinnacle of the literature, each so strong, substantial and exciting that they are often called upon to close programs on a completely satisfying note.

Worthy of mention as well is the beautiful piano quartet of **Antonin Dvorak**, as beloved as any work in the repertoire, as well as the two magical piano quartets of **Gabriel Faure**.

### **The Piano Quintet (piano, violin, violin, viola and cello or piano plus string quartet)**

The Piano Quintet came into existence in 1842 when **Robert Schumann** composed the first one in history during his famous “chamber music year” when he wrote, rather suddenly and maniacally, a large amount of his chamber music output. The Piano Quintet is therefore a Romantic era creation. The Piano Quintet provides perhaps the most orchestral-scale chamber music in existence: most quintets could be played as symphonies, and some have been transcribed.

**Johannes Brahms** followed with his massive quintet, which underwent several transformations before arriving at its final instrumentation. Together with **Antonin Dvorak’s** second piano Quintet, Op. 87, the Schumann and Brahms form the Holy Trinity of piano quintets, the most often-heard.

There are many other popular quintets as well, such as those by **Erno Dohnanyi** (C minor and Eb minor), **Gabriel Faure** and **Sir Edward Elgar**, which all fall in the Romantic category. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, standout quintets include those by **Dmitri Shostakovich** and **John Harbison**.

## **String Ensembles**

### **The String Quartet (violin, violin, viola, cello)**

The string quartet represents the pinnacle of chamber music composition. Dauntingly difficult to compose, and equally hard to play, string quartet writing and performing are the ultimate tests for composers and string players.

Yet, perhaps because of its supreme challenges, the genre of string quartet offers chamber music’s largest repertoire. Imaginative string quartet programs can provide a universe of sonic possibilities; a full range of emotional experiences; music either absolute, biographical or nationalistic; music from the Baroque era to the present day. And much of it has been composed by a majority of the greatest composers history has ever known.

The two violins, viola and cello of a quartet represent the four human voice ranges of soprano, alto, tenor and bass. They form a perfect balance with an enormous range of pitch and color. All four instruments are capable, as needed, of singing lines, percussive rhythms, melting harmonies and even shrieking dissonance. The string quartet is the ideal vehicle for musical expression, and its extensive literature serves as an easy explanation for the enthusiasm and determination of composers through the ages to offer their best through the medium of the string quartet.

The general chronology of great quartet composers is as follows: **Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Brahms, Dvorak, Debussy, Ravel, Schoenberg, Bartok, Shostakovich, Britten, Carter**. Many are left off this list, however, your best guide to the literature is the programming suggestions of quartets you are interested to work with, coupled with listening to an ensemble's choices on the internet and reading up on their context and history. Almost everything can be heard and learned about online these days.

The genre of string quartet is also in possession of most of chamber music greatest cycles, that is, groups of string quartets by a single composer which, more often than not, tell the story of the creative life of the composer. **Beethoven's cycle** of sixteen quartets, composed virtually over his entire career, is one of the greatest musical stories ever told. It represents the transition from the classical age to the Romantic and beyond. Beethoven's five late quartets are among the most transcendental music ever composed; in short, they are life-changing experiences to which listeners simply must return once the music gets under the skin.

**Haydn**, the true father of the genre, composed some seventy quartets, each miraculous in its ingenuity, sophistication and entertainment value. **Schubert's** three late quartets are mammoth and mirror Beethoven's largest quartets; **Mendelssohn's** six quartets offer homage to both Schubert and Beethoven, yet are signature Mendelssohn. **Schumann** composed three quartets during his manic "chamber music year" of 1842, and **Brahms** eventually followed with three weighty quartets of his own. **Dvorak** began composing quartets early in his career but it's his six late ones that continue to be performed and are perennial favorites, including the "American", composed in Spillville, Iowa in 1893. Both **Debussy** and **Ravel's** single quartets virtually define the Impressionist style. **Bartok's** six quartets, comprising one of the great chamber music cycles, span the composer's creative life and are among the most visceral and ingenious creations of the twentieth century. **Shostakovich's** sixteen quartets are like private letters telling the story of his life under Stalinist oppression and are as riveting as great theater. And so the story of the quartet goes on and on, forming in many respects the very backbone of the art of chamber music.

And, as a footnote: the incredibly rich literature of string quintets, sextets and octets that follows can be easily performed by simply adding the appropriate instruments to an existing string quartet ensemble.

### **String Quintets (String quartet plus one viola, or one cello, or one double bass)**

Mozart: 6 Viola Quintets (String Quartet plus viola)

Mendelssohn: 2 Viola Quintets

Schubert: Cello Quintet

Glazunov: Cello Quintet

Boccherini: Cello Quintets (over 100!)

Brahms: 2 Viola Quintets

Dvorak: "American" Viola Quintet

Dvorak: Quintet for string quartet plus double bass

Brett Dean: Viola quintet

**String Sextets (pairs of violins, violas, cellos, or, string quartet and an extra viola and extra cello)**

Brahms: 2 Sextets (String quartet plus viola and cello)

Dvorak: Sextet (String quartet plus viola and cello)

Schoenberg: Verklarte Nacht (String quartet plus viola and cello)

**String Octets (two string quartets, or 4 violins, 2 violas and 2 cellos, or one string quartet plus 2 violins, 1 viola and one cello)**

Spohr: Double Concerto

Mendelssohn: Octet

Niels Gade: Octet

Shostakovich: Prelude and Scherzo for octet

**String Trios (violin, viola, cello, or violin, violin and viola)**

Mozart: Divertimento

Beethoven: String Trio Op. 3

Beethoven: 3 String Trios Op. 9

Penderecki: String Trio

Schoenberg: String Trio

Dohnanyi: Serenade

**String Duos**

Mozart: 2 duos for violin and viola

Spohr: Duos for 2 violins

Leclair: Duos for 2 violins

Prokofiev: Duo for 2 violins

Kodaly: Duo for violin and cello

Ravel: Duo for violin and cello

Barriere: Sonata for two cellos

Gliere: 10 duos for two cellos

## **Ensembles with Winds**

The wide variety of chamber music repertoire including winds, while not as large as for strings and piano, nevertheless was composed from the Baroque to the present and can add brilliant color to any chamber music program.

**Mixed ensembles of winds and strings:**

Bach: The Musical Offering

Bach: Brandenburg Concertos Nos. 1, 2, 4, 5  
Schubert: Octet (vn, vn, va, vc, cl, hn, bsn, cb)  
Beethoven: Septet (vn, va, vc, cl, hn, bsn, cb)  
Mozart: Clarinet Quintet  
Brahms: Clarinet Quintet  
Mozart: Flute Quartets  
Francaix: Octet

### **Wind Quintets (fl, ob, cl, hn, bsn)**

Reicha  
Francaix  
Ibert  
Poulenc  
Hindemith  
Janacek  
Barber  
Copland

### **Winds and Piano**

Mozart: Quintet for Piano and Winds  
Beethoven: Quintet for Piano and Winds  
Poulenc: Sextour  
Glinka: Trio Pathetique for piano, clarinet and bassoon

### **Winds, Strings and Piano**

Hummel: Septet  
Mozart: "Kegelstatt" Trio  
**Francaix:**

## **Piano Ensembles**

Piano ensemble music is some of the most exciting and sonically rewarding music that can be heard on the chamber music stage. The sound that emerges from two pianists on one keyboard or on two separate pianos is thrillingly orchestral. Many composers first arranged orchestral works for piano, four hands or two pianos, among them **Stravinsky**, whose *Rite of Spring* is a feast for the ears performed by two pianists.

Pianos/Pianists concerts can easily become audience favorites and may be repeated every few seasons for some time before the greatest repertoire has to be repeated.

Of special mention are the suites of **Rachmaninov** and **Arensky**, the duo sonatas of **Mozart**, the extraordinary late works of **Schubert**, and much music by **Schumann**, **Brahms**, **Dvorak** and

others. The *Variations on a Theme of Paganini* by **Witold Lutoslawski** for two pianos is one of the twentieth century's most exciting duo piano works, as well as **Bartok's** classic Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion.

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