

Topic Page: [Chamber Music](#)

Definition: **chamber music** from *Musical Terms, Symbols and Theory: An Illustrated Dictionary*

music performed by small ensembles of instruments, each having equal importance and singular parts. In comparison, orchestral music includes parts that are doubled by several sections in the group. Chamber music is intended to be played in a room (or chamber), as opposed to music meant for a church or theater. See also *ensemble*; *instrumentation*.

Summary Article: **chamber music**

From *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

Music intended for performance in a small room or chamber, rather than in the concert hall, and usually written for instrumental combinations, played with one instrument to a part, as in the string quartet.

Chamber music developed as an instrumental alternative to earlier music for voices such as the madrigal, in which instruments only played an accompanying role and had little freedom for technical display. At first often played by wealthy amateurs who commissioned professional composers, it developed through Joseph Haydn and Ludwig van Beethoven into a private and often experimental medium, making unusual demands on players and audiences alike. During the 20th century, the limitations of recording and radio encouraged many composers to scale down their orchestras to chamber proportions, as in Alban Berg's *Chamber Concerto* (1923–24) and Igor Stravinsky's *Agon* (1953–57).

Early developments The string quartet of Gregorio Allegri is believed to be the first example of its kind, while among English composers who wrote ‘fantasy trios’, or ‘fancies’, were William Byrd and Orlando Gibbons. In the 17th and early 18th centuries the harpsichord generally provided a harmonic background. The chamber sonata with a figured bass (improvised) accompaniment was established by the great Italian school of violinists – such as Vivaldi and Corelli. From the 18th century, a new type of chamber music was initiated by Haydn, in which members of a string quartet play on equal terms, with no additional keyboard instrument. Haydn also developed the classical sonata form in his chamber music. His quartets influenced those of Mozart, who in turn influenced Haydn's later works. The last quartets of Beethoven show many striking departures from the original classical framework and harmonic rules.

Later developments In the 19th century chamber music found its way into the concert hall, sometimes taking on a quasi-orchestral quality, such as in the work of Brahms. The early 20th-century French school of Impressionists, such as Debussy and Ravel, experimented with chamber music forms, and, during the period which followed, developments such as atonality and polytonality have found expression in chamber music. Twentieth-century composers of chamber music include Berg, Webern, Hindemith, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Kodály, Bartók, Ireland, Bliss, Tippett, Rubbra, Copland, and Roy Harris.

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