**Chapter 14**

**Instrumental Chamber Music**

Instrumental chamber music refers to just about any music written for a group of 12 or fewer instruments. This music has been common since the Middle Ages but we began to distinguish it from large ensemble music in the Baroque era. Much chamber music was written for performance in a chamber—a living room, or salon. Since the music was written for a small space, it required fewer players and it was often written for amateur players who might play it at home as entertainment. Today, we hear chamber music in recital halls, church ceremonies, civic ceremonies, and informal street fairs.

Chamber music is often structured in forms like large ensemble concert music. For example, the form called string quartet is usually in four movements of contrasting tempos. It is about 20 minutes long and the movements might be in the forms sonata, theme and variations, minuet and trio, and rondo. That all should sound familiar to you—it is like a symphony. Except this time it is played by just four players rather than a full orchestra. The same is true of wind music. The forms are often the same, but rather than having many players playing the same part, each part is played by just one player.

Perhaps the most popular type of instrumental chamber music is the string quartet. This ensemble was developed in the Classical era and remains important today. It consists of two violins, one viola, and a cello. And, the string quartet is both an ensemble name and a name of a form of music. Composers like Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and Brahms all wrote a good deal of this kind of music.

Another kind of chamber music that is very popular with audiences and composers alike is the sonata. We have encountered this word before as a form of music often used as the first movement of a symphony or string quartet. In chamber music a sonata is a piece of music somewhat like the concerto in that it features the abilities of one or a small group of players. A chamber sonata is written for a small group of soloists and the solo sonata is for one player. These works have been written since the Baroque era. A sonata might be a one-movement work or it could have three contrasting tempo movements just like a concerto does. In the Baroque and Classical eras the indication “da chiesa” meant a sonata written for performance in a church and “da camera” meant for the chamber, or living room/salon. Most Baroque composers wrote sonatas but Antonio Vivaldi, Domenico Scarlatti, and Arcangelo Corelli all excelled at this form.

In the Romantic era the duo sonata became popular, perhaps because they could easily be played in a living room. The duo sonata is for two instrumentalists, almost always one of them a pianist. Just as in the art song, the piano part is an important and almost equal partner to the other instrumentalist.

The wind ensemble has been an important ensemble since the Middle Ages. In this chapter we distinguish it from the wind band by size. Wind ensembles of the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and Baroque eras were usually only four or five players of brass instruments or woodwind instruments. Today, we call these groups brass quintets and woodwind quintets. A brass quintet is made up of two trumpets, horn, trombone, and tuba and a woodwind quintet consists of flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, and horn. Much music has been written for these ensembles over the past 1,000 years and we hear them today in the recital hall, churches, as background music at events, and at ceremonial events.

In the Classical era a wind ensemble called the harmonie band was very popular—it was sort-of the Classical era’s iPod. You could hear these small bands of usually eight players on the streets playing the hit tunes of the day or in the homes of aristocracy providing after dinner or concert entertainment. Composers wrote forms called divertimento, partita, or serenade for these harmonie bands. These forms are multi-movement works that mix dance movements with sonatas, rondos, theme and variations, and other Classical era forms. There is a huge amount of music written for harmonie band but the music of Mozart for these ensembles is usually considered the best of the style.

Composers prior to the 20th century tended to write music for set instrumentation ensembles, meaning that they wrote for orchestra, choir, harmonie band, etc. This means that they didn’t choose what instruments to write for—they simply wrote for the instruments that were regular members of a particular group. In the Modern Period composers began to change this and wrote for ensembles that didn’t exist. In order to play their pieces, groups would have to be formed. We call this kind of chamber music mixed chamber music because it mixes strings, woodwind, percussion, brass, and keyboard instruments in nontraditional ensembles. A number of very successful professional mixed chamber ensembles have formed in the past 20 years, including Bang on a Can, Alarm Will Sound, the Absolute Ensemble, and eighth blackbird.

Chamber music has always been useful music; used for entertainment or ceremonial purposes. In the 20th century it also became important concert music for the recital hall.