

Tuesday July 31, 7:30pm
Gillingham Auditorium, CMU Biological Station
Classic Chamber Music, Old and New

Program Notes

Chamber music is often called the “music of friends”. Originating in the Renaissance era, chamber music began with musicians gathering in someone’s home and was traditionally played on consorts (an early type of string or mixed small ensemble). Early chamber music featured only one or two players to a part, a characteristic which has remained true of chamber music throughout history. This focus on individual players creates an intimacy as the musical lines converse with each other in a way not possible in larger ensembles. As chamber music progressed, it moved from homes to concert halls and palaces, becoming both the focus for gatherings, and also the background music for these events. Chamber works in the Renaissance and Baroque eras were commonly commissioned by patrons. Suites of dance-like pieces for two to six players were the most frequently requested compositions.

The Baroque era marked several advancements in chamber music. Composers of Baroque chamber music introduced the trio sonata, a musical form featuring two treble instruments and a bass instrument. Baroque composers did not always specify the type of instrument to be used for these parts. Rather, they gave the performers flexibility to choose combinations of instruments, resulting in a variety of different sounds each time the work was performed. Treble lines were commonly played by a flute, oboe, or violin and bass lines were played by a violone (an early type of double bass) or bassoon. Underneath these treble and bass lines was a common feature of Baroque music, the figured bass line which provided the harmonic structure. Similar to other Baroque music, chamber music was contrapuntal, with each instrument playing the same melodic material at different times, creating a complex and dense texture. Despite the contrapuntal nature of chamber music, Baroque chamber music treated each instrument of the trio sonata as equal, with no one performer acting as a solo player.

As the Baroque era transitioned into the Classical era, chamber music continued to advance. Composers of the Classical era, such as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) and Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809), began focusing on melodies and a lighter and more elegant sound rather than the dense counterpoint of the Baroque era. Chamber music quickly became a frequently performed musical style. Chamber works exploded in number, and the string quartet emerged as one of the most recognized chamber music groups of the Classical era. Advancements in the structure and production of musical instruments like the modern-day violin, viola, and cello and also the transition from the Baroque harpsichord to the new pianoforte offered a plentiful supply of new instruments and combinations of instruments. Composers began to experiment with new tonalities, innovative musical structures, and unusual combinations of instruments which stretched the limits of chamber music. *(continued on next page)*

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) pushed the limits of music far beyond any composer before him. Known for dissonant harmonies and extreme use of rhythm, Stravinsky is said to have revolutionized 20th Century music while staying within tonality. However, his *Concerto in Eb "Dumbarton Oaks"* is unique as a chamber piece. Composed to be a chamber concerto, Stravinsky called the composition "a little concerto in the style of the [Bach] *Brandenburg* concertos". While still exhibiting his distinctive sound, Stravinsky adds elements of the *Brandenburg* concertos to his *Concerto in Eb "Dumbarton Oaks"* through the passing of textures from one group of musicians to another, not unlike counterpoint in Baroque music. Maintaining the integrity of chamber music, Stravinsky treats each instrument in his *Dumbarton Oaks* chamber concerto as an individual and equal player.

Chamber music holds such a popularity among performers and listeners, many large orchestral works have been arranged for chamber ensembles. Maurice Ravel's (1875-1937) *Mother Goose Suite* was originally composed for full orchestra with winds and brass. Tonight's performance features an arrangement for woodwind quintet, with each player in the ensemble acting as an equal member. Gustav Holst's (1874-1934) *St. Paul's Suite* will also feature a much smaller string ensemble than the traditional full string orchestra it was composed for.

Chamber music challenges players beyond the demands of a full orchestra, by requiring them to blend their technical abilities with other players to create a unified sound. Chamber music, regardless of its place in history, continues to highlight individual players, and remains a type of music enjoyed by both amateur and professional musicians.

~ *Laura Schipper*