



## ArtSmarts

2005-2006 Wells Fargo School Matinee Series

### ALEXANDER STRING QUARTET

March 27, 2006      11:00am and 1:00pm

Studio Theatre, Mondavi Center

Dear Teacher:

We hope you find this CueSheet helpful in preparing your students for the Alexander String Quartet school matinee. This guide, which is intended to complement the Instrumental Music Curriculum Guide, provides information about the Alexander String Quartet and their performance, historical background on chamber music and the string quartet, a music glossary, and some topics for discussion. Also included in the guide is a review of audience etiquette.

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# The Alexander String Quartet: An Artistic Presence



**The Musicians:  
Zakarias Grafilo (violin), Frederick Lifnitz (violin),  
Sandy Wilson (cello), Paul Yarbrough (viola)**

Since 1981, the Alexander String Quartet has performed in the major music capitals of four continents, securing its standing among the premier ensembles of its kind. Widely admired for its interpretations of Beethoven and Bartók, the quartet has also established itself as an important advocate of new music through more than 25 commissions and numerous premier performances. In 1999, BMG Classics released the quartet's nine-CD set of the Beethoven cycle on its Arte Nova label to tremendous critical acclaim. The Quartet has also recorded works of Mozart, Brahms, Mendelssohn, Schumann, and others on the Foghorn Classics label.

At home in San Francisco, the members of the Alexander String Quartet are a major artistic presence, serving as Ensemble in Residence of San Francisco Performances and as directors of the Morrison Chamber Music Center of Creative Arts at San Francisco State University. Recognized as innovative in education, the quartet is also the resident ensemble at major colleges. In 1995, Allegheny College awarded honorary doctor of fine arts degrees to the members of the quartet in recognition of their unique contribution to the arts. Honorary degrees were also conferred on the ensemble by St. Lawrence University in 2000.

The Alexander String Quartet was formed in New York City in 1981 and in 1982, became the first quartet to win the Concert Artists Guild Competition. They captured international attention in 1985 as the first American quartet to win the London International String Quartet Competition.

For the Mondavi Center school matinee performance, the Alexander String Quartet will perform compositions by Dmitri Shostakovich, Ludwig van Beethoven, Maurice Ravel, and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. *(For more information on these composers and to listen to samples of their work, please visit <http://www.essentialsofmusic.com/>.)*

For more information on the Alexander String Quartet, please visit <http://www.asq4.com/>.



# Chamber Music and the String Quartet

## Historical Development

Adapted from material at Encyclopedia Britannica Online

The term “chamber music” refers to music for small groups of instruments, each playing an independent part of equal importance. “Chamber” originally referred to a room in a house or palace in which the music was performed. Today, the music is normally performed in a relatively small room or recital hall with an audience of limited size. Music for voices is sometimes included.

From the limited size of the performing group comes a basic characteristic: it is intimate music of subtle and refined musical ideas as opposed to large-scale, rich displays of instrumental “color.” The small number of performers and instruments requires flawless balance of sound and precision.

### Classical Period, 18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries

The various combinations of stringed and wind instruments that were popular in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century gave way to the classical age of chamber music, which began late in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the string quartets of Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809). The string quartet – consisting of two violins, a viola, and a cello – has remained the most popular. The true chamber style of intimacy and elegance developed in Haydn’s later works as well as those of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) and ultimately those of Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827).

### Late Romantic Period, c. 1855-1900

In chamber music repertory of the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, only a few dozen works by composers other than Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) exist. A piano quintet, one string quartet, and a single violin sonata by César Franck (1822-1890) reveal that composer’s fondness for cyclical form, in which successive movements are thematically linked, and for a structure based on harmonic manipulation rather than melodic development.

The work of Antonin Dvorák (1841-1904) represents a combination of the finest romantic writing with a nationalistic flavor. Of about 30 works of chamber music, nine held an important place in the repertory; these include two string sextets, three quartets, two piano trios, a piano quartet, and a piano quintet. One of the string quartets, the *American*, Opus 96, expresses Dvorák’s impressions of American (including Native American) music.

Aleksandr Borodin (1833-1887), in the second of his two quartets, combined traces of Russian nationalism with expressions of pure lyricism. Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893), with three string quartets, a string sextet, and a big-scale piano trio, brought moments of orchestral sonority into his chamber music.

Johannes Brahms, however, dominated the period. All of Brahms’ 24 chamber-music works are highly successful; in all these works, Brahms’ characteristic balance of emotional and intellectual expression is clearly revealed. Rich sonorities, thick textures, and rhythmic complexity are present everywhere.

## The 20<sup>th</sup> Century

As in all times of stylistic change, considerable overlapping of styles occurred at the turn of 20<sup>th</sup> century. In chamber music, several composers born in the 19<sup>th</sup> century carried the modified late-romantic style into the 20<sup>th</sup>. Among the French composers were Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924), who, with 10 works, is remembered primarily for a refined and controlled style that is rhythmically subtle; and Vincent d'Indy (1851-1931), represented by about eight works, who reflected the style of César Franck.

The first step toward the new styles of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was taken in France by Claude Debussy (1862-1918); his one string quartet (1893) and three sonatas (late works) represent an impressionistic style. Somewhat similar are the string quartet and piano trio by Maurice Ravel (1875-1937), with a rich array of tremolos, forms based on repetition of melodic fragments.

The musical styles that have dominated the later 20<sup>th</sup> century are largely the work of three composers and their respective followers. The most influential was Austrian-born Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951). Two of his string quartets, Opus 7 and 10, are similarly post-Romantic in style, and the second includes a part for soprano voice. In his third string quartet, he fully developed his "12-tone style," a new method of composition based on a series of 12 tones.

In the *Lyric Suite* for string quartet (1927), Alban Berg (1885-1935), also an Austrian and one of Schoenberg's pupils, brought elements of romantic expression into the system. And another Austrian pupil, Anton von Webern (1883-1945), sought to develop utmost refinement and consistency, along with brevity. A string quartet, a quartet for violin, clarinet, saxophone, and piano, and a chamber concerto for nine instruments are the principal works that illustrate his methods of extreme economy in the use of all materials.

A completely different path was taken by the Hungarian Béla Bartók (1881-1945) in six string quartets and a trio, *Contrasts*, for piano, violin, and clarinet. In those works, the main thrust has been on harmony, rhythmic drive with many irregular rhythmic patterns (some of them based on eastern European folk song, in which field Bartók was an avid worker), and the development of new instrumental effects. Coupled with such technical elements are fervent expression and, in slow movements, great repose. The Bartók quartets are among the major chamber-music works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The third principal influence, that of the Russian-born Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971), was felt perhaps less in chamber music than in orchestral, for Stravinsky composed fewer than a dozen works in the field. Five song cycles for voice and small groups of instruments, several short pieces for string quartet, and a pantomime, *The Soldier's Tale*, for narrator and seven instruments are varied in content and style.

The German Paul Hindemith (1895-1963), with seven string quartets and more than two dozen sonatas and other works, favored polyphonic textures, an expanded harmonic scheme, and great rhythmic drive. His style in later works became less dissonant and was characterized by a general lightening of the thick counterpoint that had distinguished his work of the 1940s.

The French composer Darius Milhaud (1892-1974), in about 18 string quartets, four quintets for various combinations, and a number of other works, for a time espoused the principles of polytonality, the device of employing several keys simultaneously. Characterized by moods that are

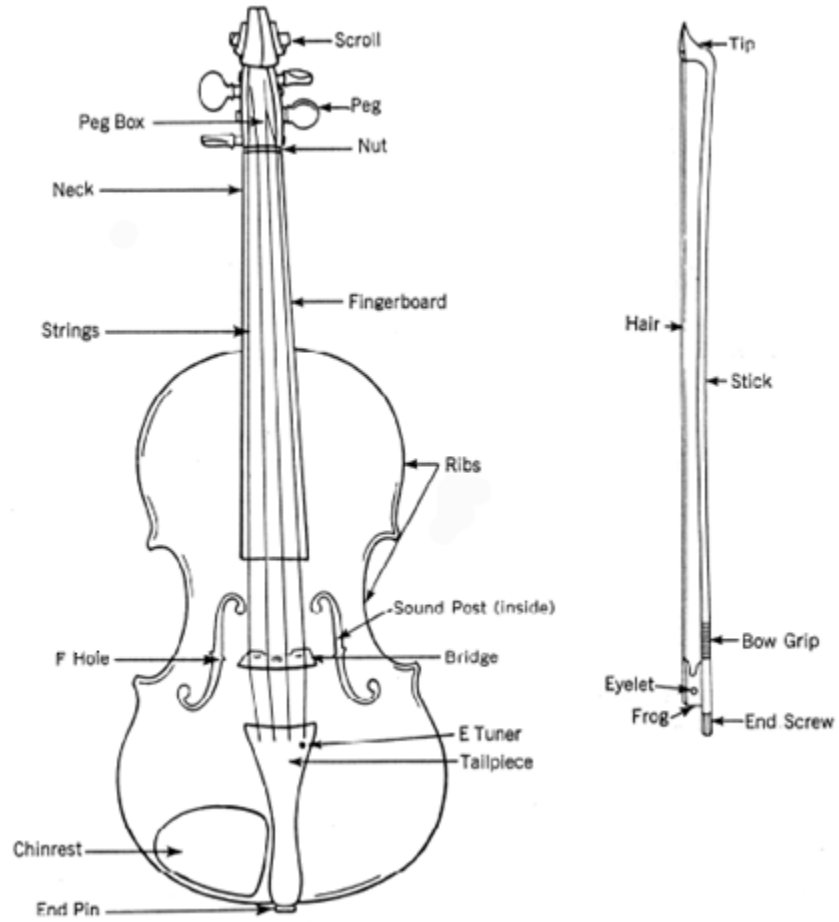
often pungent, humorous, and even satirical, his works reveal a mixture of dissonant counterpoint, rhythmic flexibility, and graceful expression. His 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> quartets, independent works in their own right, may be performed simultaneously to form an octet.

Two Russian composers, Sergey Prokofiev (1891-1953) and Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975), are represented in the repertory by about 20 works adhering to the forms and textures of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Both men embrace the new harmonic techniques without departing entirely from romantic expressiveness. Many of their compositions reveal a sense of humor.

Among the more prominent American composers, a few may be singled out for their notable contributions. Walter Piston (1894-1976), with four string quartets, a piano trio, a quintet for flute and strings, and a piano quintet, is perhaps the most eclectic; his works are distinguished by elegance and vitality. Roger Sessions (1896-1985), represented principally by two string quartets and a string quintet, has written in an austere, reserved, and strongly dissonant style. Quincy Porter (1897-1966) composed 10 string quartets, several quintets for various combinations, and smaller works; they are characterized by warm expressiveness. Contributions from Aaron Copland (1900-1990) include a piano trio; a sextet for clarinet, piano, and strings; a piano quartet; and a violin sonata. Those works include variously nationalistic allusions (including Jewish and Latin American).

Among composers representing the countries of Central and South America, three have risen to international prominence. In his many chamber-music works (10 string quartets, several piano trios, and a few sonatas), Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959) was the outstanding interpreter of Brazilian national idioms, including those of the indigenous Indians. Carlos Chávez (1899-1978) worked similarly with the idioms of Mexican Indians. And Alberto Ginastera (1916-1983), representing Argentina, stressed the element of rhythm in a style that is thoroughly contemporary.

# Diagram of the Violin



# A Music Glossary

Accelerando – Getting gradually quicker.

Adagio – Slow in tempo.

Allegro – Lively in dance and style.

Andante – Walking speed or medium tempo.

Col legno – Using the wooden stick part of the bow to strike the strings rather than playing with the hair.

Concerto - A musical composition for one or more solo instruments and an orchestra.

Counterpoint - Melodic material that is added above or below an existing melody.

Crescendo – A dynamic marking that instructs the musician to get gradually louder.

Diminuendo/Decrescendo – A dynamic marking that instructs the musician to get gradually softer.

Dissonant - Harsh or inharmonious in sound.

Harmonic - Of or pertaining to musical harmony as distinguished from melody or rhythm.

Harmony - A pleasing combination of musical sounds; the simultaneous combination of notes in a chord.

Idiom - The specific grammatical, syntactic, and structural character of a given language.

Key - A system of related notes in music, based on a particular note.

Melodic - Of or pertaining to, or containing melody.

Melody - A pleasing succession or arrangement of sounds.

Motif – A motif is a recurring subject, theme, idea that is developed throughout an artistic work.

Movement - A self-contained component section of a musical composition.

Octet - A musical composition written for eight voices or eight instruments.

Opus - A creative work; a musical composition numbered to designate the order of a composer's works.

Orchestral - Of or pertaining to a large group of musicians who play together on various musical instruments usually including strings, woodwinds, brass, and percussion.

Polyphonic - Having two or more intertwined melodic lines.

Quintet - A musical composition written for five voices or instruments.

Sextet - A musical composition written for six voices or instruments.

Sonata - An instrumental musical composition, as for the piano, consisting of three or four independent movements varying in key, mood, and tempo.

Sonority - Having the quality of a full, deep or rich sound.

Soprano - The highest singing voice of a woman or a young boy; a part written in the range of the soprano voice.

Symphonic - Harmonious in sound; having the character or form of long sonata for orchestra, consisting of four related movements.

Tempo - The speed at which the music is performed.

Tone - A musical or vocal sound with reference to its pitch, quality, and strength.

Trio - A musical composition for three performers.

# Think About It!

Talking with your teacher, friends and family about a performance after attending the theater is part of the experience. When you share what you saw and felt, you learn more about the performance. You can now compare ideas and ask questions and find out how to learn even more.

1. How would you describe the Alexander String Quartet performance to a friend?
2. What emotions did you have while you listened to the performance?
3. Did you have an understanding of classical music and/or chamber music before the performance? Did you gain more insights into classical music and/or chamber music as a result of this performance?
4. What did you like best and why? Was the program different from what you had expected? Was it different from other concerts you may have attended? Explain.
5. Describe some of the instrument sounds you heard from the Alexander String Quartet.
6. Do you prefer the intimacy of a string quartet to the larger sounds of an orchestra? When might you listen to a string quartet as opposed to an orchestra? Think of some settings: a wedding ceremony, a park bandstand, a lavish theatrical performance, a gallery opening, celebrating the Fourth of July at a Washington, D.C. celebration.
7. Did you learn more about any famous composers as a result of this performance? Who? What was special about their compositions?
8. Do you have favorite popular music artists who may have studied classical music and appreciate classical music? Who are they?

This CueSheet was written by Merlyn Potters, undergraduate coordinator,  
Department of English, UC Davis.

## ATTENDING THE THEATER

### *What is expected of student audiences at the matinee:*

- \* Enter the auditorium quietly and take seats immediately;
- \* Show courtesy to the artist and other guests at all times;
- \* Demonstrate appreciation for the artist's work by applauding at the appropriate times;
- \* Refrain from making unnecessary noise or movements;
- \* Please eat lunch before or after the performance to avoid disruption;
- \* Please turn off cell phones and pagers;
- \* Flash photography is strictly prohibited;
- \* Relate any information acquired from the pre-matinee discussion to the new information gained from the matinee.

### *What you can expect of your experience in a performing arts theater:*

A theater is a charged space, full of energy and anticipation. When the house lights (the lights that illuminate the audience seating) go down, the excitement level goes up! Theaters are designed so that the voices of the singers and actors and the music of the musicians can be heard. But this also means that any sound in the audience: whispering, rustling of papers, speaking and moving about, can be heard by other audience members and by the performers. Distractions like these upset everyone's concentration and can spoil a performance.

The performers on stage show respect for their art form and for the audience by doing their very best possible work. The audience shows respect for the performers by watching attentively. Applause is the best way for audience members to share their enthusiasm and to show their appreciation for the performers. Applaud at the end of a performance! Sometimes the audience will clap during a performance, such as after a featured solo. Audience members may feel like laughing if the action on stage is funny, crying if the action is sad, or sighing if something is seen or heard that is beautiful. Appreciation can be shown in many different ways, depending upon the art form and the culture(s) of the people in the audience. While the audience at a dance performance will sit quietly, other types of performance invite audience participation.