



CHAMBER MUSIC

More or Less....

String Trios, Quintets and beyond

by Tom Rosenberg

It is generally agreed that the string quartet is the ultimate chamber music idiom. While there are surely those that differ with that assessment, I confess that I agree from my perspectives as both a listener and a performing artist. Many of the greatest composers from Haydn to the present day have tried their hand at quartet writing. Many have succeeded in giving us their best creations, some of which are regarded to be some of the greatest creative work of human kind.

When asked about repertoire for other combinations of strings, most musicians can come up with a relatively small list of trios, quintets, sextets and more. However, in reality, there is a lot of music for string ensembles that are not quartets. Although the most well known examples are in general the best pieces for those combinations, a lot of the lesser-known works are quite good. These pieces are particularly useful to use with student groups. Much the same as there are pieces used as “preparatory” concertos and sonatas for string players, these lesser known chamber works can provide all of the same challenges and educational benefits as the great masterpieces without the pressure of having the performance compared by audiences to performances and recordings of great and famous ensembles. In addition, whereas audiences of chamber music too often and unfortunately tend to want the “standards” and might be leery of going to concerts with works they don’t know, student groups do not have that pressure.

Knowing about these pieces, or at least knowing where to look to explore the possibilities and obtain parts can be enormously helpful to a coach in choosing repertoire for a group. For example, if the group happens to be a quintet with two violins, one viola and two cellos, the work that will come to mind is Schubert’s *Quintet in C*. But, perhaps the group is not really ready to tackle that type of monumental masterpiece, or some members of the group have already worked on it. Most students don’t know that piece very well, and might be just as happy to play the *Quintet* by Dotzauer or Berger, or perhaps one of the thirty-odd cello quintets by Onslow (!) or one of the over one hundred by Boccherini (!!!). In other words, there is a ton more music out there to choose from than is generally thought to exist, and a lot of it is great learning material for student ensembles.

String Trios:

The number of trios that are well known by a lot of musicians is small compared to the string quartet literature. Nonetheless, there are several standards, most notably the five trios Beethoven wrote before his *Opus 18 String Quartets*. After that, many people get stumped about the repertoire and often skip forward to the *Serenade* by Dohnanyi. For me, there is one really great masterpiece for string trio that is often overlooked: Mozart’s *Divertimento in E-flat, K.563*. This is a magnificent six-movement piece that is technically difficult and surprisingly virtuosic, especially for the viola

and cello. So what else is there for student groups to explore? Of the better-known composers, there are two trios by Schubert and over twenty by Boccherini. There are also trios by Haydn, Reger, Sibelius, Strauss, Villa-Lobos and many, many more.

The most common variation on the standard string trio is the version with *two violins and viola*. Dvorak’s *Terzetti* (op. 74 and 75a) are probably the best known of these works, but there are other choices. The trios by Kodaly and Fuchs are wonderful but difficult. Other composers include Frank Bridge, Martinu, and arrangements of other notable composers such as Beethoven’s *Opus 87 Trio for Oboes and English Horn*.

If the group consists of *two violins and cello*, there is music by Haydn, Boccherini, Borodin, CPE Bach, Mozart, Pachelbel, Tartini, Vivaldi, Hoffmeister and others. There are even trios for *two violas and violin*. Have a look into the trios by Hummel.

String Quintets:

The most common version of five string instruments is *string quartet plus an extra viola*, also known as the viola quintet. There are a number of wonderful works for this combination. Most notable are those by Mozart (6), Brahms (2) and Dvorak. More overlooked but excellent pieces include those by Beethoven (Op. 29) and Mendelssohn (2). Beyond that, there are many works by quality composers that can be great choices for student groups. Some of the more notable composers who wrote for this combination include Boccherini, Bruch, Bruckner, Martinu, Nielsen, Respighi, Spohr (7) and Vaughn Williams. There is also an excellent *Quintet for three violins, viola and cello* by Loeffler.

When it comes to *string quartet plus an extra cello*, also known as the cello quintet, nearly everyone knows of the Schubert previously mentioned. Few works in any genre can compare favorably to that amazing piece, but the next best known is probably the Glazunov and Boccherini’s *A Major Quintet* with the famous last movement. However, there really is a lot of music written for this combination, and most of it compares favorably with the last two works mentioned. Besides the over 100 quintets by Boccherini, the music of George Onslow (1784-1853) has a lot to offer. He wrote over seventy works of chamber music including many cello quintets. His cello *Quintet in C Minor, Op. 38* is especially interesting. Known as “The Bullet Quintet”, it was written after a hunter apparently shot him in the head while he was sketching music themes in the woods. The piece chronicles the drama of the event and his recovery! Other notable composers include Bax, Borodin, Goldmark, and Milhaud. The quintets by Berger and Dotzauer are also interesting and there are two arrangements of the Brahms *Piano Quintet* for cello quintet. That work was originally a cello quintet, but Brahms re-wrote it for piano quintet and destroyed his manuscript of the string quintet version.

If there is a double bass involved, the most famous and best

work is the *Op. 77 Quintet* by Dvorak. Some other pieces can work substituting a cello part with a bass. This can work well in the music of Haydn and early works of Mozart such as the “Early” Quartets and Divertimenti. There are also quintets by Boccherini (3), Dittersdorf (6), Milhaud, Hindemith and the Rossini *String Sonatas*.

In many cases, where to get the music is as big a problem as what to choose. Thanks to the internet, there are now many easy ways to find music, and much of it can be free if you have a printer and internet access.

All one really needs to do is type in queries such as “string quintets” or “string trios” to find a tremendous amount of information. To purchase music and get specific editions quickly and reasonably, one website I find very useful is www.sheetmusicplus.com. Besides having a huge selection, throughout the year they have excellent sales on various editions such as Henle and Barenreiter. One site in particular is extremely useful and well known. The IMSLP/Petrucci Music Library has free downloads of a vast amount of music (both scores and parts) that are in the public domain. This includes many well-known masterpieces, but also includes many of the more

obscure works by less famous composers. The site is www.imslp.org. Once there, simply click on the Petrucci Music Library box and you will be sent to an amazing site that might actually convince you that computers aren't all bad!

Tom Rosenberg teaches chamber music and cello from his home in Saint Paul. He received the Master Studio Teacher Award from MNSOTA in 2004 and has been named Arts Educator of the Year by the Michigan-Indiana Arts Council. A winner of the McKnight Performing Artist fellowship, he is a member of The Isles Ensemble, The Schubert Piano Trio and a free-lance cellist performing with groups such as the Minnesota Orchestra and Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra. He is on the faculties of the University of Minnesota, Macalester College and Carleton College where he teaches cello and coaches chamber music. Since 1981, he has been Artistic Director of the Fischhoff National Chamber Music Competition for which he was a co-recipient of the 2007 Indiana Governor's Arts Award. www.tomrosenbergmusic.com. ♪