

A WIDER RANGE FOR CHAMBER MUSIC

JOHN REDFIELD

BROADLY speaking, chamber music may be said to have begun with the appearance of Haydn's first string quartet in 1755. The seventy-seven quartets due to him, the twenty-six of Mozart, and the sixteen by Beethoven, furnished the foundation for the superstructure which we today call chamber music.

During the three-quarters of a century from Haydn's first quartet to the death of Beethoven, the only instruments of the orchestra that could be called at all satisfactory were the bowed instruments. Boehm's first improvements on the flute appeared in 1832, but it was a score of years more before it attained its present approximate perfection. The first so-called "Boehm" clarinet, really due to August Buffet and Hyacinthe Klose, was exhibited by Buffet in 1839. It was in the following year that Triebert brought out *System No. 3* of the oboe, which serves as the foundation of the present day instrument. The task of bringing the bassoon to whatever degree of facility it today enjoys was accomplished chiefly through the labors of Jancourt between 1845 and 1875. It is not too much to say that the improvements in all these instruments were inspired by Boehm's work on the flute. The valve now in use on the horn was devised by Bluemel in 1827, the same year in which Beethoven died; it was several years, however, before valves for the horn reached their present state of efficiency.

Quite otherwise was the situation with respect to the bow instruments. The Cremona school of luthiers had reached its culmination in Stradivarius, and the hand of that master had already been stilled for more than a century before Haydn wrote his first quartet. Under such circumstances, with excellent bow instruments and quite inferior wind instruments to write for, it is not surprising that string instruments should have won the

allegiance of composers for small ensembles. The influence of the mechanical development of musical instruments upon the history of composition has never received the consideration which is its due. This is most curious, since the choice of instruments for which a composer shall write is determined solely by the comparative musical status of those employed in his day. It is the instrument maker who wields the whip over the composer and determines what music he shall make.

The past century's improvements in wind instruments render it no longer necessary for the composer of chamber music to confine himself to bow instruments. And this is true even if he wishes to write for a quartet of instruments of a single genus; for it is at present possible to assemble an effective quartet either of flutes, clarinets or double-reed instruments. Besides the orchestral flute in C, flutes pitched in G, a fourth lower, are now becoming quite common; and a flute in G, a fifth higher than the C flute, is available, at least in America. Two flutes in C and one each in high and low G form an effective quartet, although the compass does not extend quite as low as might be desired for a satisfactory bass. An abundance of clarinets will be found ready to hand for the composer. From the lowest to the highest, they include the bass, the alto, the basset horn, the B-flat, and the E-flat. Two B-flat clarinets, a basset horn, and a bass clarinet, provide a most engaging clarinet quartet. In the double-reeds, an oboe, an English horn, a heckelphone and a bassoon, constitute a quartet of a weirdness that should, upon occasion, make a most compelling appeal to the composer.

The composer of a quartet who today wishes to confine himself to instruments belonging to a single color family is at liberty to choose either strings, flutes, clarinets, double reeds or brass. In these mediums he will find at his disposal ample tonal material for an interesting composition. The strings will allow him a great range in compass and dynamics, and in flexibility of melodic line, but he will be handicapped by the usual proclivity of string players toward pyrotechnic mannerisms. The flutes will furnish him almost equal flexibility of line, but a more limited compass and dynamic range. In respect to compass, the clarinets will provide him notes of about the same gravity as the strings,

but the upper range of the clarinets will be materially less than that of the strings unless he substitutes an E-flat clarinet for one of his B-flats. But, in either case, the compass of the clarinet is adequate for a satisfactory quartet. In flexibility and dynamic range, the clarinets are approximately equal to the strings. The double-reeds offer about the same compass as the clarinets, but are decidedly inferior to either strings, flutes or clarinets in point of flexibility and in dynamic range. A quartet of horns or of trumpets and horns would provide sufficient compass and dynamic range, but would be decidedly inferior to the string quartet or to either of the woodwind quartets in compass and flexibility. The brasses would undoubtedly offer a greater variety of tone colors than the string quartet or than either of the woodwind quartets confined to a single family. With respect to variety of tone color, the quartets other than the brass would probably rank in the following order: clarinets, strings, flutes, double-reeds. The unique esteem in which the strings are conveniently held for quartet purposes is historical in its origin and is quite certainly largely extrinsic.

If the composer for chamber groups wishes to mix his colors, the variety of combinations is almost infinite. To discuss properly all the color combinations possible would require a volume. It may be permissible, however, to raise the question as to the most satisfactory woodwind quartet. Undoubtedly the most logical candidate for the position of high voice in such a quartet is the flute. Its extremely high range and its exceptional flexibility fit it preeminently for that position. The part of the low voice should perhaps be assigned to the bassoon. The single objection to it is the fact that its lower half-octave can speak only detached notes, and those rather slowly. The upper middle voice should undoubtedly be the B-flat clarinet. The tenor part must be assigned either to the bassett horn or to the heckelphone; there is no other woodwind now in use whose compass has a suitable lower limit. Both the bassett horn and the heckelphone are instruments with voices of remarkable beauty; it is unfortunate indeed that composers are not better acquainted with them. They fill an urgent need both in the woodwind quartet and in the woodwind choir. It is probably no overstatement to say that the

bassett horn is the most valuable of the clarinets; and the heckelphone is certainly of equal merit with the oboe or the bassoon. With the two upper parts in the quartet given to the flute and the B-flat clarinet, the lower parts could be assigned either to the bassett horn and the bassoon, or to the heckelphone and the bass clarinet; either of these combinations would furnish a very satisfactory woodwind quartet.

It is surprising that the harp is not used more in chamber music ensembles—as surprising as the fact that the piano is so used. With a harp added to either of the above woodwind quartets, it would be difficult to imagine any combination of five instruments offering to the composer as much in variety of tone color without departing from that refinement of utterance which is essential to chamber music. The slight but undoubted leaning toward monotony inherent in the string quartet would be obviated without unduly sacrificing the other virtues of the string combination. If it is desired to secure greater homogeneity of color among the woodwinds of such a quintet, a quartet of flutes or of clarinets as specified above, or a quartet of two flutes in C and in low G, with a bass clarinet, and a bassett horn or a clarinet in B-flat, together with the harp as a fifth instrument, will attain the desired result nicely. For a trio, a flute, a B-flat clarinet and a harp, or a flute in low G, a bassett horn and a harp could hardly be improved upon. During the latter part of his life Theobald Boehm played the low G flute by preference and almost to the exclusion of any other. For the role of polyphonic instrument in a chamber music ensemble, the harp is unquestionably more appropriate than the piano. Its character is in all respects in perfect keeping with the chamber music genius.

The cultivation of chamber music for the woodwinds is receiving increasing attention on every hand. At the present time there seem to be permanently organized and active societies confining themselves exclusively to the presentation of woodwind chamber music in Buenos Ayres, Amsterdam, The Hague, Rome, Madrid, Malmö, and Boston, with two such societies each in Paris and New York.

Perhaps the most striking chamber music development of the past generation is the quite exceptional popularity of the chamber

orchestra. This is undoubtedly due to two influences: first the increasing cost of maintaining orchestras of modern symphonic proportions; second, the loss of orchestral balance between the strings and brasses on the one hand and the woodwinds on the other. As the writer has shown elsewhere, the introduction of a larger number of brasses into the orchestra by Wagner was followed logically by an increase in the number of strings, but illogically the number of woodwinds remained practically unchanged. In consequence, the woodwinds are submerged in the modern symphonic orchestra except in solo passages. It was also further shown that to restore balance between the string, woodwind and brass choirs of the orchestra would necessitate the use of not less than thirty woodwinds in an orchestra of one hundred and fourteen.

Such a method of restoring balance in the orchestra has its advantages. But it possesses also the disadvantage of being expensive. An alternative method not involving increased expense is reducing the number of strings and brasses. I speak of "restoring" the balance of the orchestra because in the days of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, the number of strings and brasses was not great enough to submerge the woodwinds. From the reduction of the number of strings and brasses in the orchestra has arisen the modern chamber orchestra, or "little symphony" as it is sometimes called.

The prospect for the future of the chamber orchestra is most alluring. It meets so easily the musical needs of so many of the parties concerned. Composer, instrumentalists and public here find a common ground not beyond their abilities to attain. That this is true becomes clear when we consider the personnel necessary to the establishment of a chamber orchestra. It is probably impossible to set a definite maximum limit to the chamber orchestra, but one is at least safe in saying that it should be much smaller than the symphony organization. Perhaps one might even be justified in stating that the chamber orchestra should not exceed the following twenty-five players: five for strings, four each for flutes, clarinets, double-reeds and brass, a harp, and three for percussion. The five strings proposed are the usual string quartet with the string bass; the quartets of flutes,

clarinets, double reeds and brass are those suggested above. As for the percussive instruments their use is only in its infancy. I should favor a widely extended employment of skin and metal percussive instruments of both definite and indefinite intonation; not alone for climaxes, but for pianissimo effects as well—say muted trumpets and horns *gestopfed* against the background of a roll on the Chinese gong. I should like to see a full chromatic scale of the tympani for about two octaves and a half, with drums of indefinite intonation ranging in size from the *cassa grande* down to little hand drums, and with cymbals, gongs, triangles, tambourines, and castanets. Three percussion players can manage these instruments, for they will never all be in use at the same time.

Possibly all the twenty-five players enumerated above would never appear in the rendition of any one composition. Usually the number used for a whole program would be less than a dozen. But a dozen instrumentalists in a chamber music concert, as against a hundred instrumentalists in a concert of symphonic music, reduces the financial risk of the undertaking in the ratio of eight to one. The city not large enough to support a symphonic season could undertake a season of chamber music with a fair assurance of success.

The possibilities in this direction are already beginning to dawn upon enterprising communities. Kansas City not long ago organized a chamber music society of sixteen instrumentalists and conducted a successful season extending over a period of thirty-two weeks. The experiment seemed to have been satisfactory to all concerned. That many other American cities which find a symphonic orchestra beyond their purse will profit by the example appears to be a foregone conclusion. And in doing so they will put within reach of their respective publics a musical literature quite the equal of that for the larger orchestra, although of a somewhat different character and not so well known.

And for the smaller cities, how well this plan meets all needs. The public of these communities is assured an opportunity of hearing music of the highest possible character, the orchestral musicians living there are offered an occasional respite from the stifling tedium of daily theatre and other commercial playing,

and composers of chamber music are given additional chances of having their compositions performed.

Whatever may be the explanation of the situation, composers are certainly addressing their efforts more and more in the direction of chamber music. Perhaps the conventions surrounding the composer here are less fixed than in other fields of music and thus allow him a greater degree of freedom to follow his bent; perhaps the competition is as yet less keen than, for example, in operatic or symphonic composition. At any rate, the field of chamber music composition is today being cultivated with astonishing assiduity, and this is gratifying.