

Chamber music, ensembles & orchestra

Three words used loosely and often swapped by mistake. *Ensemble* is the umbrella word for any group. *Chamber music* is a way of playing — one player to each line, nobody in charge. An *orchestra* is a particular large ensemble, with several players sharing each line and a conductor to hold them together.

SIDE BY SIDE

	Chamber group	Ensemble	Orchestra
WHAT THE WORD MEANS	A way of playing, and the music written for it	Any group of musicians playing together — the general term	One named kind of large ensemble, arranged in sections
PLAYERS PER LINE	Exactly one. Your part is heard on its own	Either — depends which ensemble	Several share a line; strings often eight to sixteen a part
TYPICAL SIZE	2–9 players	2 to 100+	30–100+ players
WHO LEADS	Nobody. First violin or the group breathes the start together	Whoever the group appoints — leader, director or conductor	A conductor, with section leaders passing it on
HOW YOU KEEP TIME	By eye and ear — watch each other across the group	Varies with size	Watch the stick, follow your section leader
YOUR JOB	Carry your line. If you drop out, it is gone	Know which of the two rooms you are in	Blend in, match bowing and balance

CHAMBER GROUPS BY NUMBER

Duo	Two players. Violin and piano, or two guitars.
Trio	Three. A piano trio is violin, cello and piano.
Quartet	Four. String quartet: two violins, viola, cello.
Quintet	Five. Wind quintet adds horn to the four woodwinds.
Sextet	Six — often a string quartet plus two extra players.
Septet · Octet	Seven and eight. Usually mixed strings and winds.
Nonet	Nine. About the largest group still called chamber music.

ENSEMBLES YOU WILL MEET

String quartet	Chamber. The central group of the repertoire.
Brass band	Ensemble. Cornets, horns, trombones, tubas, percussion.
Choir	Ensemble. Many voices per part, directed not conducted-in-the-pit.
String orchestra	Orchestra. Strings only, several to each part.
Chamber orchestra	Orchestra — but small, 20–40 players, sometimes unconducted.
Symphony orchestra	Orchestra. Full strings, winds, brass, percussion, harp.
Big band	Ensemble. Saxes, brass, rhythm section; one player per part.

THE ONE TEST THAT DECIDES IT

Count the players on your line. One means chamber playing, whatever the group is called. More than one means orchestral playing, and your job becomes blending.

WHERE THEY OVERLAP

A chamber orchestra is both words at once: small enough to feel like chamber music, big enough to double the parts. Conductorless orchestras exist too.

WRITING FOR EACH

In chamber music every line is exposed, so give each player something worth playing. In orchestral writing you write for sections, and doubling is your colour.