



PACK ONE · JOINING A GROUP

Chamber Music

Playing with a few other people, and no conductor

Six sheets to print and take to a first rehearsal: which groups exist, how to read from a part, who starts and who ends, how to run an hour, how to balance and tune, and what to bring.

Nobody is in charge, so everybody is.



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Franz Schubert

He wrote most of his chamber music for friends to play in a front room — quartets, the “Trout” quintet, the octet. It was written to be played, not performed.

START HERE

You need only to read your own part.

Pack two goes further: score study, textures, phrasing together, and preparing a performance.

What is in here

Read it once in order, then keep sheets four and six in your case. Chamber music is the only kind of playing where the musical decisions are yours — these sheets are about making them together.

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HOW TO USE IT

Print single-sided and write on it. Sheet four is a plan for an hour — take it to the first meeting and let someone hold the pencil.

WHAT YOU NEED FIRST

Enough reading to get through a part slowly, and a working sense of time signatures and counting rests. Nothing beyond the Grade 1 theory pack.

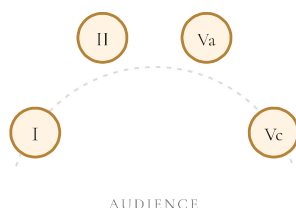
The groups

Chamber music means one player to a part, small enough to play without a conductor — from two people up to about nine. Beyond that somebody has to beat time and it becomes an ensemble.

THE STANDARD GROUPS

GROUP	WHO IS IN IT	WHERE TO START
Duo	Any instrument with piano; or two of the same	Sonatas, and almost every exam piece you have played.
String trio	Violin, viola, cello	Exposed — every line is heard. Mozart K. 563; arrangements.
Piano trio	Violin, cello, piano	Haydn trios are the friendliest way in.
String quartet	Two violins, viola, cello	The central repertoire. Early Haydn and early Mozart first.
Piano quartet / quintet	Strings plus piano	Schumann, Dvořák. The piano carries the harmony.
Wind quintet	Flute, oboe, clarinet, horn, bassoon	Five different colours, no blending — every entry shows.
Brass quintet	Two trumpets, horn, trombone, tuba	Arrangements of everything; loud, cheerful, portable.
Percussion ensemble	Three to six players, tuned and untuned	Counting is the whole game. Reich, Cage, arrangements.
Vocal consort	One or two voices per part, SATB	Renaissance madrigals — the original chamber music.

SITTING A QUARTET



First violin outside left, cello opposite — everyone should see every bow arm without turning their head.

HOW TO FIND A GROUP

Ask your teacher, your school music department, or a local music service. Violists, cellists and horn players are always wanted. If nothing exists, three friends and a photocopier is a group.

ONE TO A PART

In an orchestra a mistake hides inside sixteen violins. Here it does not, and that is the point: a term of quartet playing improves rhythm more than a year of solo practice.

NO CONDUCTOR

Tempo, dynamics, when to start and when to stop are agreed between you. Somebody usually leads a given passage, but leadership moves around with the melody.

Reading from a part

A part shows your line only. Everything you need to know about the other three is printed in shorthand — learn the shorthand and you stop getting lost.

MARKS YOU WILL FIND

MARK	WHAT IT MEANS	WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT
Bar numbers	Every bar, or every fifth, or at each system start.	If they are missing, pencil one at the start of every line before you play a note.
Rehearsal letters	A boxed A, B, C at structural points.	“From B” is quicker to find than “from bar 63”. Use them.
Multi-bar rest	One bar with a number over it — that many bars of silence.	Count them, and also listen for a landmark so you can recover if you lose count.
Cue notes	Small notes, someone else's line, printed before your entry.	Learn the sound of the cue, not the count. Write in who is playing it.
V. S.	<i>Volti subito</i> — turn the page quickly.	Plan the turn: pencil a bracket where your free hand starts, or photocopy one page.
Divisi / a2	Split into two parts, or both play the same line.	Rare with one player to a part — you meet it in string orchestra and choral music.
Tacet	You do not play in this movement at all.	Turn to the next movement before it starts, quietly.
D.C. / D.S. al Fine	Go back to the beginning, or to the sign, and play to <i>Fine</i> .	Mark the journey with arrows the first time you read it, or the group will split in two.

MARKING YOUR OWN PART

PENCIL ONLY

Parts are usually borrowed and always outlive you. Soft pencil, light marks, rub out what turned out to be wrong.

MARK WHAT YOU FORGET, NOT WHAT YOU KNOW

A part covered in reminders is unreadable. Circle the accidental you missed twice; leave the obvious alone.

WRITE IN THE OTHER PARTS

“with vla”, “after cello”, “melody here”. Knowing who you are with is worth more than any dynamic marking.

BREATHE AND BOW TOGETHER

Agreed bowings, breaths and page turns go in the part in rehearsal, not at the concert.

IF YOU GET LOST

Stop playing, keep looking at the music, find the next rehearsal letter or the next long note in your part, and come in there. Do not hunt for the exact bar while playing — one player quietly rejoining is invisible; one player guessing is not.

Starting, ending, breathing together

With no conductor, the group has to show itself the beat. It is done with breath and movement, and it is almost entirely decided in advance.

WHO LEADS WHAT

MOMENT	WHO SHOWS IT	HOW
The start	Whoever plays first, or the melody	A breath in, then a clear upbeat movement of the instrument on the beat before.
A new tempo	The player who owns the new material	The upbeat is taken at the new speed, not the old one.
After a pause	The player who ends the pause	Eye contact first, then breathe together. Never restart without looking up.
A ritardando	Usually the bass line	The lowest part decides how much slower; everybody follows the bass, not the tune.
The final chord	Agreed in rehearsal	One player lifts; everyone stops on the lift, not on a count.
Between movements	First violin, or the pianist	Settle, look round, wait for the room to be quiet, then breathe.

THREE HABITS WORTH BUILDING

- 1 **Breathe where the music breathes** — even on strings and percussion. A shared breath before an entry is the only signal every player understands.
- 2 **Look up at the ends of phrases**, not at the difficult bits. If you must read the difficult bar, look up in the bar before it.
- 3 **Move only where it helps** — a small, early, rhythmic movement of the instrument is a cue; swaying all the way through is noise.

COUNTING OUT LOUD

In rehearsal, count the empty bars aloud together at least once. It fixes tempo, subdivision and who arrives early — faster than any discussion about it.

SUBDIVIDING

In slow music, agree what you are feeling underneath — quavers or semiquavers. Two players subdividing differently will drift apart in four bars.

FOLLOWING, DELIBERATELY

When you have the accompaniment, place your note *with* the melody rather than trying to be exactly on your own beat. Somebody has to give way; it is whoever is not carrying the tune.

RUBATO IN A GROUP

Only one player can stretch a beat at a time, and everyone else must know it is coming. Mark it in the parts: *ten.*, an arrow, a comma.

How to run a rehearsal

A group with no plan plays the piece through four times and goes home. Sixty minutes, roughly like this, is worth three of those.

0 – 5 min	Tune, agree what you are working on today, and name the one bar that went wrong last time.
5 – 12 min	Play a whole movement without stopping, however bad. You are finding out where the problems are, not fixing them.
12 – 40 min	Two or three passages only. Slow, then in tempo, then once with the run-in before it. Stop when it works twice in a row.
40 – 50 min	The joins — starts, endings, tempo changes, the bar after each pause. These fail in concerts far more often than the hard notes.
50 – 58 min	Run the movement again, no stopping and no comments until the end.
58 – 60 min	Write down what to practise alone and what to start with next week. One line each.

HOW TO SAY THINGS

ASK, DON'T TELL

“Could we try it softer there?” gets a better result than “you're too loud”, and it is usually more accurate — the problem is generally balance, not one person.

NAME THE BAR

“The upbeat to 42”. Always say where you are starting *and* whether it is with or without the upbeat, then wait for pencils.

ONE PROBLEM AT A TIME

Tuning or rhythm or dynamic — not all three. Fix rhythm first; it is usually what made the other two sound wrong.

TRY IT, DON'T DEBATE IT

If two people disagree about a tempo, play it both ways once each and choose. Two minutes of playing settles what twenty minutes of talking will not.

WHAT WE FIXED TODAY

Balance, blend and tuning

Every dynamic in a part is relative to the other players. A *forte* accompaniment under a *forte* melody is still too loud — the marking tells you the character, and your ears tell you the volume.

KNOW WHICH JOB YOU HAVE, BAR BY BAR

ROLE	SOUND LIKE	TEST FOR IT
Melody	The thing a listener would hum. Slightly ahead in the ear, shaped freely.	If you cannot hear yourself over the others, say so.
Bass line	The foundation: tuning and tempo both come from here.	Everyone should be able to hear the bass at all times, even in a <i>piano</i> .
Harmony / inner parts	Warm, even, never on top. The colour, not the drawing.	If a listener notices your line, you are probably too loud.
Rhythmic figure	Crisp and quiet. Repeated quavers can be soft and still be felt.	Play it half as loud as feels right, then ask.
Counter-melody	A second voice answering the first — audible, but yielding at the tune's phrase ends.	Decide which of you owns each bar and mark it in.

TUNING IN A SMALL GROUP

Tune to one source. Piano if there is one; otherwise the oboe, or the cello's A. Not four separate tuning apps.

Tune from the top down. The A first, then the lower strings, then check octaves and fifths between players.

Chords, not notes. Hold the final chord of a phrase and adjust until it stops beating. The fifth and the third are where it goes wrong.

Re-tune after ten minutes. Instruments warm up and go sharp; wind more than strings.

The bass is right. When two players disagree, the lower part holds and the upper part moves.

BLEND

Match the attack. Notes starting together matters more than notes ending together — but rehearse both.

Match the length. One player's short quaver against another's long one sounds like a mistake, not a colour.

Match the vibrato or the lack of it. Agree it for sustained chords; wide vibrato under a tune muddies the harmony.

Piano players: lift the lid one notch. A fully raised lid buries a single string player. Balance from the room, not the keyboard.

Record one run. A phone at the far end of the room tells you more about balance in three minutes than an hour of guessing.

Your first rehearsal

Nobody expects you to play it well the first time. They do expect you to have the right part, a pencil, and some idea of how the piece goes.

BEFORE YOU GO

- ☐ Your part, printed, with your name on it
- ☐ Bar numbers pencilled at every line start
- ☐ Pencil and rubber — two pencils is better
- ☐ Listened to a recording once, following your part
- ☐ Practised the fast bars slowly, and the entries after long rests
- ☐ Music stand, if you were asked to bring one
- ☐ Tuner, spare strings, reeds, valve oil, mute
- ☐ Where it is, when it starts, and whose phone number

ON THE DAY

- ☐ Arrive ten minutes early and be warmed up before the start
- ☐ Tune before anyone asks you to
- ☐ Say what you play and how long you have been playing — then stop apologising
- ☐ Count aloud with the group at least once
- ☐ Ask for the bar number rather than guessing
- ☐ Silence while somebody is speaking; no noodling
- ☐ Write down what to practise before you pack up
- ☐ Agree the next date before anyone leaves the room

WORDS YOU WILL HEAR IN THE ROOM

From the top — from the beginning.

Letter B — the boxed rehearsal letter.

V. S. — turn the page quickly.

Give way — let the other part come through.

Tenuto — hold the note its full length, a little broader.

Upbeat to 42 — start on the beat before bar 42.

Tacet — you do not play in this movement.

Take it down — play it quieter.

Sub-divide — count in smaller units.

Second time bar — the different ending on the repeat.

AND ONE THING TO REMEMBER

Chamber music is a conversation. The best players in a group are not the ones who play the most notes correctly — they are the ones the others can follow.