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Chamber Ensembles Multiply as Interest In Their Music Swells

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Intimacy of Concerts Attracts
Both Rock, Classical Fans;
Krummhorns & Sackbuts

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It was 20 below zero in Eau Claire, Wis., last Jan. 28, the wind was blowing hard, and a lot of people thought it was a good night to stay home. But Scofield Auditorium at the University of Wisconsin was packed. The program the audience had braved the chill night to hear was a performance of chamber music by the Annapolis Brass Quintet.

That's the kind of following chamber music is attracting these days. And as interest heightens in classical concerts by small groups of musicians, professional chamber ensembles are springing up across the country. "Musical America, a directory of the performing arts, lists 249 such groups this year. That compares with about 200 seven years ago and only 85 in 1965.

The ensembles charm audiences by offering classical music in a more intimate setting than an orchestra can. And many music lovers favor the clarity of a small ensemble's music, in which each part is played by just one instrument. At the same time, young fans and musicians tiring of rock are starting to discover chamber music.

"Audiences have grown tremendously, with the number of young people ever on the increase," says Isidore Cohen, a violinist who has played for 11 years in New York Beaux Arts Trio. "Ten years ago, we were taking almost all concerts offered us. Now we can pick and choose," he says. The Annapolis Brass Quintet, the group that lured Wisconsinites that cold night, played more than 300 concerts last year.

Record Sales

And the ensembles are selling records. "I haven't seen anything like it in my 23 years at Sam Goody," says Steven Steinitz, group manager of the New York-based chain of record stores. Years ago "we wouldn't order chamber-music records," he says. "Now some of them have become bulk items." And Thomas Shepard, an executive of RCA Records, adds that chamber-music albums have "attracted new, young buyers to the classical market."

Chamber music, in the broadest sense, has been around since the Middle Ages, when small groups of amateur musicians played for aristocrats in courts. By the 1600s, composers were writing music specifically for small ensembles, with a separate part for each instrument. In the 18th Century Haydn and Mozart perfected the string quartet—two violins, a viola and a cello—as the most common medium of chamber music. Beethoven, Schubert and Brahms also wrote some of their best music in the form.

Although chamber music evolved through the 19th and 20th centuries, some of the ensembles playing today are taking it all the way back to its roots in medieval times. The rhythmic, short melodies of early music—some of it from as far back as the 13th Century—seem especially intriguing to many rock fans. "Young people are very much taken with the simple tunes of early music," says Lawrence Benz of a New York group Calliope, which bills itself as a Renaissance band. New York Pro Musica, a group that has since disbanded, was the first to play early music professionally after music historians who searched out old scores had made it accessible.

Cranking the Hurdy-Gurdy

Some of the instruments of early days are making a comeback along with the music. At a Calliope concert one can expect to hear a sackbut (a medieval trombone), a hurdy-gurdy (a fiddle played by cranking a wheel) and an assortment of instruments with such unlikely names as krummhorn, rauschpfeife, rebec, vielle, kemence, pipe and tabor, serpent, nakers and psaltery. The ensemble spent \$10,000 putting together the collection.

Krummhorns and sackbuts may help, but getting recognition as a professional chamber ensemble isn't easy. David Cran of the Annapolis Brass Quintet says the group "sent hundreds of letters and played a lot of concerts for \$50" before winning its first contract as ensemble in residence at a music camp several years ago.

Now the group's usual fee is \$1,500 a concert, although it often plays for less. It is taking in about \$100,000 this season. But to do so, the performers must log tens of thousands of miles crisscrossing the country in their van.

Most professional ensembles can be hired for less than \$1,500, a big advantage when the cost of putting on an orchestral concert may run \$10,000 to \$20,000. Small ensembles "are more realistic in our times," says Michael Tree, violist of the Guarneri Quartet. "We don't have a truckload of costumes, and we don't pay a conductor," he notes.

But low fees mean tight budgets for the chamber groups themselves, and many of their members also must teach or play in orchestras. Indeed, many of the ensembles playing professionally are organized by orchestras. The Syracuse Symphony, for example, divides into 10 ensembles for cham-

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ber-music concerts. Orchestra members, who earn a minimum of \$8,200 a season, make an average of \$3,000 more for playing chamber concerts.

Other ensembles are associated with a university or conservatory. The arrangement "frees one from worrying too much about finances and provides a good balance of teaching and playing," says Bonnie Hampton-Schwartz, a cellist whose Francesco Trio is linked with both San Francisco Conservatory of Music and Stanford University.

On campus, musicians often find student interest growing. "Those who came here playing rock three years ago are suddenly turned on by Beethoven," says Larry Christopherson, music coordinator at York College of the City University of New York. Young musicians like the discipline that studying classical music brings, even to their rock playing, Mr. Christopherson finds.

Another explanation is offered by Harold Best, dean of the conservatory of music at Wheaton College in Illinois. "Though we have a symphony orchestra," he says, "students seem to prefer more and more the intimacy that chamber music provides. There is less depersonalization."

The intimacy attracts audiences as well as performers. "People prefer being in smaller groups," says Fred Zlotkin, a cellist with the Montclair Chamber Music Society in New Jersey. "There's a rapport between performers and the audience that's lost in a large concert hall."

Bunny Weinberg might agree. One warm day last fall she hired an ensemble called Primavera to perform for 40 friends in the garden of her home in Harrison, N.Y. "It was an idyllic afternoon, with the birds singing in the trees and the flowers so pretty," she recalls. "The best party I ever gave."

The blossoming of chamber music hasn't escaped notice in Washington, and help for hard-pressed ensembles may be on the way. The National Endowment for the Arts has decided to subsidize chamber music and currently is working up guidelines, according to Adrian Gnam, its assistant director of music. "Most chamber musicians are playing for the love of music, running deficits," Mr. Gnam says. "This shouldn't be so."