

INFINITUS

TEACHER'S STUDY GUIDE

ABOUT THE PERFORMERS

Infinitus consists of three award-winning young musicians from Canada and the United States. Formed in 2002, their accomplishments to date include winning the Grand Prize at the Friends of Chamber Music Competition in Vancouver.

The group has been broadcast on CO-OP Radio in Vancouver and on CBC Radio Two, and also performed for the Dalai Lama. Infinitus also performs outreach concerts, and has regular performance appearances with the Sonic Boom Festival and Vancouver Chamber Players.



ABOUT THE GENRE

Although any combination of four string instruments can literally be called a "string quartet", in practice the term refers to a group consisting of two violins (the "first", which usually plays the melody line in the higher register of notes, and the "second" violin, which plays lower notes in harmony), one viola and one cello. The standard string quartet is widely seen as one of the most important forms in chamber music with most major composers from the late 18th century onwards.

A piece of music for four players of stringed instruments may be in any form, but if it is simply a *String Quartet* it is usually in

four movements, with a large-scale structure similar to that of a symphony. The form first came to be used after the middle of the 18th century. The quartets of Joseph Haydn (1732 – 1809) are in the form which was to become standard both for Haydn and for other composers: four movements, a fast movement, a slow movement, a minuet or trio and a fast finale. Because his example helped codify the form, Haydn is often referred to as "the father of the string quartet."

Ever since Haydn's day, the string quartet has been prestigious and considered a true test of the classical

composer's art. This may be partly due to the palette of sound being more restricted than with orchestral music, forcing the music to stand more on its own rather than relying on tonal color, or from the inherently contrapuntal tendency in music written for four equal instruments.

Quartet composition flourished in the Classical era, with both Mozart (1756 – 1791) and Beethoven (1770 – 1827) writing famous series of quartets to set alongside Haydn's. The quartet has ever since been a staple of the classical genre and is still a favored form for many composers today.

ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE

Rather than emphasize various composers, technique, or the music of different eras, Infinitus stresses listening skills: the identical but distinct parts of

a *canon*, the differences yet similarity in the movements of a *theme and variations*, the imagery and mood of a *Scottish lament*. In this way, the performance is geared

toward enhancing cognitive skills and musical appreciation for a general audience.

Program length: 45 minutes.

THEMES:

- Canon
- Cognition
- Cooperation
- Individuality
- Mozart
- Practice
- Skill
- Technique
- Theme
- Variation



THE MUSICIANS

Alex Cheung (cello) Alex graduated from the University of Michigan with a double major in cello performance and movement science. He currently is on the faculties at the BC Conservatory of Music and Prussin Music, and is a substitute with the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra.

Anthony Cheung (viola) Among his credits, Anthony is the National Winner of the 1998 Wendell Irish Viola Award and winner of the 1998 Chicago Viola Society Competition. A graduate of the

University of Michigan, he is now a freelance musician and one of the founding members of the Infinitus String Quartet.

John H. Littlejohn (violin) is a graduate of the Peabody Conservatory where he completed his Master of Music and a Graduate Performance Diploma in violin performance with Herbert Greenberg. John began studying the violin at age ten and is currently a faculty member at the Orpheus Academy of Music and the Austin Chamber Music Center in Austin, TX.



THE STRING QUARTET—WHY BOTHER?

A short essay by Greg Sandow, a critic, consultant, and a composer who has written two string quartets. (Reprinted with permission.)

Imagine you're hearing a lecture on classical music. "String quartets," says the lecturer, "represent the highest pinnacle of musical art. Only connoisseurs can hope to understand them."

What should you do? Walk out, I'd suggest, because that's how people talked a hundred years ago. There's nothing stuffy about string quartets. In fact, the two words that might best describe them are "intimate" and "fascinating."

Why intimate? Because they're not played by an 80-piece orchestra, or even by a 15-member brass band. Just four people – playing two violins, a viola, and a cello – sit on the stage, communing with themselves and the music. Back in the 18th century, the age of Mozart and Haydn, string quartets weren't even performed for an audience.

They were played at home, for entertainment. Entire families used to play string instruments in those days, and it's easy to imagine an 18th century housewife calling out to her husband as he left for work: "On your way back, Hermann, buy a new string quartet for us and the girls."

So if Beethoven's symphonies could be compared to epic novels, his string quartets are much quieter; they're much more like letters home. But why should we call them "fascinating"? Because each instrument has much more to do than an instrument in an orchestra. Think of your standard 80-piece symphony – strings are the backbone, but they don't tell the story alone. Trumpets and timpani offer drama; plaintive oboes supply a touch of pathos.

Not so with a string quartet. Four instruments take care of

everything. So none of the instruments ever stands still. The first violin might play the melody. But the second violin and viola turn the accompaniment into a dance with a life of its own. They sing, jump, and simmer; they might even offer comments. The cello, meanwhile, plays a bass line with substance enough to be a melody itself.

What kind of people play string quartets? A rock band, basically. And yes, that's a joke, but there are similarities. String quartets, first of all, are long-term propositions, just like the most successful bands. The same four players continue for years.

And just as rock bands come with more or less standard personalities – the flamboyant lead guitarist, the party guy on drums – so do string quartets. The first violin is the decisive leader. The cellist, too, can be

forceful, which makes sense: The cello sings with a majestic tone, and, by playing the bass line, carries the whole ensemble on its shoulders. What about the viola and second violin? They burrow into the inside of the music; they're much quieter. The second violinist, traditionally, would be someone who rarely speaks. The violist, who plays an instrument with a dusky, muffled tone, is equally silent, but much more sensitive.

And yet the four people get along. Or maybe they don't, but still they make music. Sometimes you'll find a quartet whose members wouldn't tolerate each other, if they weren't transformed by the magical chemistry of Schubert and Debussy. Funny, isn't it? Strip away that old fuddy image of string quartets, and you're left with drama – human and passionate.

THE PROGRAM

Mozart: Eine Kleine Nachtmusik

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was born on January 27, 1756. He is no doubt, one of the most influential composers in all of classical music. *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* ("A Little Night Music") was written when Mozart was twenty-six years old. It was one of his later works, and why and whom he wrote it for is unknown. What is known is that it is easily recognizable by the opening passage of the instruments. See if you can find the lyrical second theme sandwiched in between the technical fireworks!

Maclean: Seranata

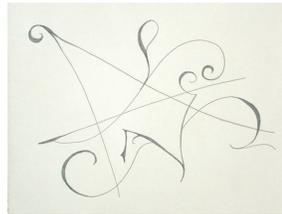
Michael Maclean holds degrees from Northwestern University and the University of Southern California. He continues to compose for numerous musical configurations. His *Seranata* for String Quartet is an example of underlying structure mixed with the passionate melody.

Ludwig: Birthday Variations

Not much is known about Claus-Dieter Ludwig. He was born in 1952. Ludwig's *Birthday Variations* follow the path of a traditional happy birthday tune and then twist it into four distinct entities. Try and see if you can still hear the tune throughout all of the changes!

Littlejohn: Blazing Grace

Composed by Infinitus' own John Littlejohn, *Blazing Grace* begins as a sumptuous arrangement of the traditional Scottish hymn 'Amazing Grace' but gradually shifts into a unique hip-hop version. The piece demonstrates how popular traditional music is given a particular spin by each succeeding era of composers. Rhythm and texture may vary, but themes remain constant.



Pachelbel: Canon

Johann Pachelbel was a Baroque period organist and composer. He wrote over two hundred pieces for the organ alone! However, his true claim to modern fame came with resurgence for interest in Baroque music. His *Canon* in D Major became wildly popular in the 1970s and is now one of the most familiar pieces in classical repertoire. It is quite fun to follow each individual voice and see how it interacts with the others.

Rossini: William Tell Overture

The famous overture from Rossini's opera is perhaps better known these days as *The Lone Ranger Theme*. The quartet play this for younger audiences as a participatory contest to see who can play their instrument the fastest.



Anderson: Jazz Pizzicato

Leroy Anderson was an organist, conductor, and composer. His music has become quite common in American culture. *Jazz Pizzicato* was originally written for string orchestra but can be performed by smaller ensembles (such as string quartet). The entire piece, as listed, is played only by plucking the strings. Things to listen for are the differences in timbre among the instruments, as well as who has the melody at what time.

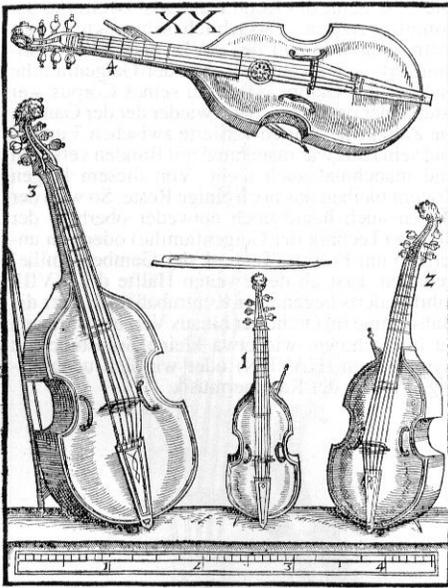
IMAGE AT LEFT:
"VIOLIN"

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Additional pieces

will vary depending on the age and sophistication of the audience. Elementary schools can expect more participation and generally shorter pieces than high schools who can anticipate transcriptions of pieces that are currently on the radio. Always popular with young audiences are various 'novelty pieces' such as *The Theme from 'The Simpsons'* or the *Hockey Night in Canada* theme music. These sorts of pieces may show up in the performance at any time.





INFINITUS

<http://www.infinitusquartet.com/>

HOSTING THE PERFORMANCE

Infinitus will arrive at your school approximately 15–30 minutes prior to the scheduled performance time. They require nothing more than three chairs with straight backs and no arms. If you have three, sturdy music stands for their use, so much the better, but they do travel with their own portable stands.

For school performances that take place in the gymnasium, the group will set up at one end or against the side wall on the floor. Students may be seated on the floor in front of or in a semi-circle around the group.

To begin the performance, please have a teacher or the principal introduce the group. The introduction need be nothing more elaborate than: "We are pleased today to have with us a group of musicians who will play for you, tell you about themselves and what they do, and give you some tips on how to listen to the music. Please welcome Infinitus." (pronounced: in-FIN-i-tuss).

The group will take questions from the students throughout the performance.



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