

# Quapaw Quartet Presents *Meet the String Family*

## Instruments of the String Family

There are three string instruments played by the four members of the Quapaw **Quartet**: Two violins, one viola, and one cello. The full orchestra includes two additional string instruments, the double bass and the harp. Except for the harp, these instruments are played by the right hand, either with a bow or plucking the strings with your fingers. [See short examples of all five instruments on YouTube played by college students at the University of Texas: String instruments of the orchestra [www.youtube.com/watch?v=RxFNHeXKmrY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RxFNHeXKmrY) May 22, 2011.]

The violin, sometimes called the fiddle, is the smallest of the instruments in the string quartet. It is played by resting the belly of the instrument on your left shoulder, placing your chin on the chinrest, and holding the neck, or the skinnier part, of the violin in your left hand. Violins play the highest notes because its strings are the shortest and thinnest of all string instruments.

The viola is the medium-sized instrument in the string quartet and plays lower notes than the violin. This is because its strings are longer and thicker than those on the violin. It is held the same way as a violin and looks exactly like a violin except for that fact that it is slightly larger.

The cello (also called the violincello) is the largest instrument in the string quartet and plays the lowest notes. Cellos have a pin at the bottom so they may be played by standing them up on their ends without damaging them. This pin is called an endpin. A player holds a cello by placing it between his or her legs while holding the neck in the left hand.

The double bass (not generally in a string quartet) is also called an upright bass or contrabass. Its notes are even lower than the cello. Because of its large size, the double bass is played by either sitting on a stool or standing next to the instrument, holding the neck in the left hand and standing it on its end. The double bass also has an endpin to help support it. (Find the endpin in the picture.)

### The String Family



The cello and double bass are actually much larger compared to the violin and viola than it looks like in this illustration.

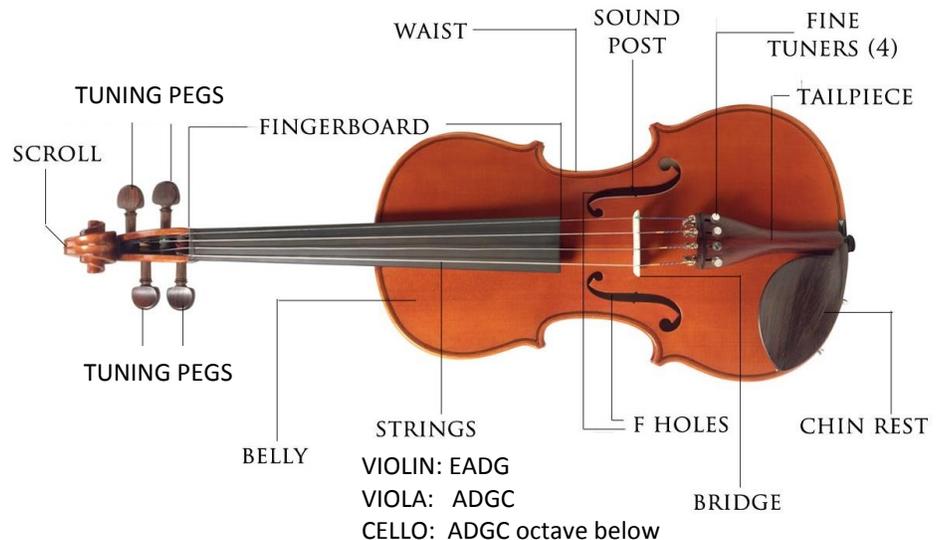
# Parts of the String Instruments

String instruments have two sections: The belly and the neck. The neck is made up of the scroll, the pegbox, and the fingerboard. The carved scroll makes the instrument more beautiful. The pegbox is the home for four tuning pegs, to which each of the four strings is attached. The pegs are used to tune each string. The player places his or her left hand on a string and presses down on the fingerboard to create a certain **pitch** or note. Pressing a string at different spots creates different pitches. The longer the distance between the finger and the sound post, the lower the note.

You will find the f-holes, bridge, tailpiece, and chinrest on the top part of the belly. The belly has a top and bottom soundboard from which most of the sound is projected. On a cello or double bass, the endpin replaces the chinrest.

The f-holes also project sound. The bridge holds the strings up so they can

vibrate and produce sound. Look at the diagram to find: 1) Where the strings attach to the tailpiece and, 2) The fine tuners which can be used to tune the strings very accurately.



## Articulations (or ways of playing the same note, but making different sounds)

There are many different ways (or techniques) to play a string instrument. These techniques have Italian names because Italian composers were first to experiment and create these sounds. You can play the instrument with a bow or you can pluck the strings (like a guitar) called *pizzicato*. Normally, the bow is drawn over the strings half way between the end of the fingerboard and the bridge. But composers write on the score if other techniques are to be used. In *sul tasto*, the bow is played over the end of the fingerboard to create a soft, thin sound. *Sul ponticello* means to draw the bow close to the bridge, creating a scary, screechy sound. *Col legno* means to strike the strings with the wooden side of the bow by: 1) Bouncing the bow or 2) Drawing the wood over the string, each creating a soft, but very different sound.

Two other articulation styles are *legato* and *staccato*. These two are opposites. *Legato* means "connected" in Italian or like a smooth melody. It tells a musician to play the music without space between the notes and several notes are played in one draw of the bow. *Staccato* in Italian means "separated" so there is a tiny break in sound between the notes.

## Composers of the Quartets Being Performed

**Ludwig van Beethoven** was born in 1770 into a very musical family in Bonn, now the capital of Germany. He played the piano exceptionally well at an early age. He performed his first piano concert in public at the age of seven. By twelve years old, he was already composing music. As a young man, Beethoven went to Vienna, Austria, to meet Mozart (his musical idol) who told his wife that this brilliant pianist would change how people thought about music for centuries.



When he was 26, Beethoven noticed an annoying ringing and buzzing in his ears which his doctors couldn't cure. Twenty years later, he was almost completely deaf. He gave up his career as a pianist and conductor, but composed some of his grandest music when he was partially or completely deaf. Audiences loved the sound of Beethoven's music during his lifetime and the symphonies he wrote continue to be extremely popular with today's audiences.



**Franz Schubert** was born on January 31, 1797, in Himmelpfortgrund, Austria. As a child, he played the piano, violin and organ. He was also an excellent singer and when he was eleven, he earned a scholarship that awarded him a spot in a famous chapel choir as a boy soprano.

Schubert wrote many songs, piano pieces, string quartets, symphonies, and a three-act opera while working as a school teacher. At age 21, Schubert left teaching to pursue music full-time. He had difficulty making enough money to live as a musician but he continued to write many compositions.

Unfortunately Schubert became very ill and died when he was only 31 years old. In the last year of his life, he wrote some very important compositions. Audiences appreciated his music much more after he died. Although he saw more than 100 of his works published, his greatest piano and chamber works were not published for decades after his death. The *Symphony No. 9* was performed in 1839 and the very famous "*Unfinished*" *Symphony (No. 8)* was performed in 1865.

**Bedřich Smetana** was born in 1824 in Bohemia, a part of the Austrian Empire. Today, it is part of the Czech Republic. Smetana began his musical training early in his childhood. He had his first piano performance at the age of six. In 1848, he became involved in a nationalist uprising to create an independent country. When it failed, he fled to Sweden where he wrote many works using Bohemian folk themes. Smetana returned to Prague 15 years later when the political conflict had died down.

Like Beethoven, Smetana became completely deaf and turned to only writing music. He wrote a work called '*My Fatherland*' that musically described Bohemia. It quickly became a favorite in his country and around the world. Smetana died in Prague when he was 60 years old.



# Two Historical Periods of the Music

**Classical (late 1700's and early 1800's):** Classical composers, such as Beethoven and Schubert, wrote works according to an accepted set of rules. They wrote **melodies** based upon short ideas called themes. Within a piece of

music, a composer used multiple themes and often repeated the same music that was played at the beginning (exposition) again at the end (recapitulation). During the middle section (development), the composer modified the themes which made the music more dramatic.

Many symphonies, string quartets, and operas were written during the classical period using this technique, known as sonata form. Like music of this era, buildings and rooms in them were plain and **symmetrical** (being the same on either side and slightly more ornate in the middle).



**Romantic (mid to late 1800's):** Architecture of this era added rounded walls and porches to make buildings look grander. Painters pictured elegant people, scenes from their national history or nature and showing various emotions, such as peacefulness, fear, anger or love.

During the Romantic era, composers (such as Smetana) did not stick to all the rules of the Classical Period. They often incorporated the folk music of their homeland, which sometimes resulted in long, flowing and beautiful melodies. (On YouTube, listen to the long, beautiful melodies in the *Moldau*, from *My Fatherland*, Rafael Kubelik, and see scenes of Hungary.)

Composers used contrasting loud and soft **dynamics** and thin and thick **textures** in the music to show feeling and emotion. They used **harmony** that sometimes clashed with the melody to increase the feeling of tension.



## Vocabulary

*architecture* - style or design of a building

*Classical* - an era of art and music making with focus on form and balance from about 1750 to the early 1800's

*composer* - a person who writes music

*dynamics (in music)* - how loud or soft the music is

*harmony* - a musical term for notes used in a musical piece that provide background for the melody

*melody* - a long passage of music forming a theme that you can recognize as in a song

*Romantic* - an era of art and music making which reflected strong emotions and feelings from the early 1800's to the early 1900's

*texture (in music)* - the way the melody, rhythm and harmony combine in a composition

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