Musicians are well aware of the evolution of various genres; what the string quartet might have meant to Haydn was changed in Mozart’s hands, transfigured by Beethoven, rendered nearly impossible for Brahms, and seized by such subsequent composers as Schoenberg, Reger and Bartok as a challenge and a place to stake their claims composers to be reckoned with. Less familiar, however, are the stories of other ensembles: what might be the significance of a composer choosing to write a string trio, or a piano quintet, or a clarinet quintet?

The course offers a survey of chamber music by ensemble, exploring the changes found over the period from the late 18th century to early modernism in ways composers undertook to write for various groups of musicians. While the string quartet will be included, the course will take up other well-established groupings of instruments, including string trios, quintets and sextets, piano trios, quartets and quintets, wind quintets, and various mixed ensembles such as quintets for clarinet and strings.

The course will consider questions about how the makeup of an ensemble can shape the way the music is made, and what the selection of a particular ensemble might tell us about the position of a work in a composer’s oeuvre. We will also discuss the changing nature of performers, audience and venues for whom these works were written, and how they are encountered today. Repertoire will include the familiar (Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Brahms), the less familiar (Franck, Reger, Schoenberg, Hindemith), and the truly unfamiliar (Gernsheim, Schmidt, Schmitt, Pierné, Furtwängler, Schnabel).