

An Introduction to the Orchestra

What is an Orchestra?

An orchestra is a group of musicians, men and women, who play instruments together from all four families: strings, woodwinds, brass and percussion. 250 years ago, orchestras were small with perhaps 25-40 musicians. Through the years, as cities grew and life-styles began to change, an overall impulse to "think big" developed. Composers also began to think bigger, using larger musical forms and demanding grander sounds. Today a symphony orchestra can vary in size, but usually has between 65 and 110 members.

How do the various families of instruments produce sound?

The instruments used in a symphony orchestra fall easily into three categories. Sound is produced by; 1. Striking a solid object to make it vibrate (percussion); 2. Plucking or bowing a string to make it vibrate (strings); or 3. Making the air in a tube vibrate (winds). The wind instruments are divided into two groups: brass and woodwind. Thus we have four choirs of instruments in a symphony orchestra.

Does each musician play a different part?

No. About two-thirds of the orchestra consists of the string players who are divided into five sections: First Violins, Second Violins, Violas, Cellos and String Basses. Each string section plays one part as a group most of the time. The woodwind, brass and percussion players each have individual parts, as does the harpist.

How does a band differ from an orchestra?

A band consists of woodwind, brass and percussion instruments with no strings. Sometimes a string bass is included in a band.

Interesting facts...

- The orchestra, in its present form, is only about 200 years old, but there were large bands of instruments in Egypt and India 2,000 years ago. Until 1600, it rarely mattered what instruments played what part.
- In their present form, the oldest instrument is the trombone; the newest orchestral instrument is the clarinet. (The saxophone is a newer instrument which is used in bands and occasionally in orchestras.)
- The string instruments have not changed in basic construction since 1685.
- The orchestra used to stand to play until the late 1700's. This stems from the days when only royalty could afford orchestras and no one was allowed to sit in the presence of the royalty.
- Conductors weren't used until the early 1800's. The music just kept going once it started, with fewer changes in tempo (speed) and dynamics (loud/soft), lead from the first violins or keyboard position.
- The first major "modern orchestra" composer was Joseph Haydn.
- Professional orchestras of 90 - 100 players weren't established until around 1840. The oldest American orchestra is the New York Philharmonic (1842).