

Introduction To Orchestration

by Artemus

The term “orchestration” can be defined as a description of the general way in which a harmony is played, or more specifically, the instrumentation used for a piece of music. More commonly, orchestration is understood to be the composition, transcription or arrangement of music for performance by an orchestra. The latter definition is the subject of this introduction.

It is important to realise, especially when score-reading, that the orchestra as it is presently known has evolved over time since the 17th century, with a number of different instruments being introduced whilst others were replaced as instruments developed. For example, Mozart's establishment of the clarinet and the disappearance of basso continuo; the prominence of the horns and its increasing emphasis with Beethoven and Wagner, especially as the horns became fully chromatic instruments with the introduction of the valve in the early 19th century; the expansion of the orchestra during the Romantic period with the influence of Berlioz and Schoenberg and the increasing use of the percussion up to the present day.

The present day orchestra offers such a diverse range of sounds and composers are at liberty to finely tune the instrumentation to their requirements. Essentially, a standard orchestra is comprised of the four families, or choirs; strings, horns, woodwinds, and percussion, but the composition of instruments for each section can vary depending on the demands of the music and auxiliary instruments, such as piano, organ, or guitar can often be introduced. Orchestration can be applied not only to original compositions but also to embellish modern songs as part of an arrangement.

The practice of orchestration is an exacting and expansive one, demanding much in the way of musical literacy and experience. The requirements and recommended skills highlighted in my previous introductory article, “Introduction to Arranging”, all apply and with regard to orchestration, a few more specific skills are indispensable.

The most fundamental knowledge required is that of the orchestral instruments; their ranges and, more importantly, their tonality and dynamic qualities, not only as single instruments but as groups of instruments. Most textbooks on orchestration will offer a substantial study on all of the orchestral instruments. However, knowledge of the instruments involved is simply the basal foundation for beginning orchestration – the alphabet of the orchestra. The art of orchestration stems from the knowledge of how the various instruments work *together*. It is imperative to understand that the orchestra comprises of human musicians, it is the grandest, most organic musical instrument. Composing for an orchestra as merely a multi-tonal instrument without limitation would only lead to exasperation. Scores should be written with the musicians in mind and all parts should exhibit a coherent form. For example, brass and woodwind instruments need opportunities to warm up and playing within extreme registers is strenuous. String sections must also be coherently phrased for bowing and general continuity.

Integral to orchestration is **balance**, both horizontally (instrumentation) and vertically (compositional). This skill is acquired through understanding the qualities of both individual instruments, the instruments as ensembles and how combinations of instruments can (and cannot) work together. Compositional colour and texture can be rendered through the knowledge of how harmonies sound with different combinations of instruments and how the different families of the orchestra can help define the contour and development of the music.

In terms of practical musicianship and writing orchestral music, developing an ear for the way in which parts are orchestrated – the ability to score the sounds that one wishes to create – will save both time and frustration, as well as ensuring the music is balanced, logical, and original.

These skills are accrued with experience through study, score-reading, and listening. It is my recommendation to not only study and listen to many orchestral works, but also to experience and enjoy the grandeur of live performances. The experience can serve to inspire creativity as well as enlighten oneself to how orchestration is achieved, also impressing the importance of understanding the human capacity of orchestral music.

Orchestration is an art in itself, not merely the tool for artistry and although it is a demanding skill to hone, the level of depth and creativity afforded ensures that the rewards are great.

Further reading

- [1] Adler, S., *The Study Of Orchestration*, **2002**, 3rd ed., W. W. Norton & Co., New York
- [2] Berlioz, H., *A Treatise Upon Modern Instrumentation And Orchestration*, **1858**, Novello, Ewer and Co., London
- [3] Carse, A., *The History Of Orchestration*, **1964**, New ed., Dover Publications, New York
- [4] Davis, R., *The Complete Guide To Film Scoring*, **1999**, Berklee Press, Boston
- [5] McKay, G., *Creative Orchestration*, **1963**, Allyn & Bacon, Boston
- [6] Rimsky-Korsakov, N., *Principles Of Orchestration*, **1964**, New ed., Dover Publications, New York
- [7] Walker, P., *Orchestration*, **1969**, Lowe and Brysone Ltd., London