A Guide to Classical Concerts

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What is an orchestra?

An orchestra is an instrumental ensemble, usually fairly large with string, brass, woodwind sections, and almost always a percussion section as well. The term orchestra derives from the Greek ὀρχήστρα, the name for the area in front of an ancient Greek stage reserved for the Greek chorus.

The orchestra grew throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but has changed very little since the start of the twentieth century.

A smaller-sized orchestra, of about fifty players or fewer, is called a chamber orchestra.

A full-size orchestra, of about 100 players, may sometimes be called a symphony orchestra or philharmonic orchestra; these do not necessarily indicate any strict difference in either the instruments or role of the orchestra, but can be useful to distinguish different ensembles based in the same city (for instance, the London Symphony Orchestra and the London Philharmonic Orchestra). A symphony orchestra will usually have over eighty musicians on it’s lists, in some cases over a hundred, but the actual number of musicians employed in a particular performance varies according to the works being played and the size of the venue.

The typical symphony orchestra consists of four groups of similar musical instruments called the woodwinds, brass, percussion, and strings. The orchestra, depending on the size, contains almost all of the standard instruments in each group. In the history of the orchestra, its instrumentation has been expanded over time, with works by earlier composers such has Bach, Handel & Mozart writing for fewer instruments, than Beethoven, and later composers such as Tchaikovsky, Prokofiev and Debussy. This is partly because different instruments became more common more recently than others, and trends developed for larger scale works with a need to more instruments.

Although the orchestra expands and contracts, and all sorts of ‘guest’ instruments came in and out, a seating plan for players was established as follows (and remains this way today):

![Orchestra Seating Diagram](image-url)
Strings

There are more strings in the orchestra than all the other instruments put together, and they are often at the heart of the music.

**Violin**
The violin is the smallest member of the string family and is able to play the highest notes. It has four strings which are made out of wire or nylon. It is tucked under the chin and played with a bow made of wood and horse’s hair. The bow is coated with sticky resin and when it’s moved across the strings, it vibrates them, making a sound.

**Viola**
The viola is a bit bigger than the violin and makes a deep, rich sound. It has two jobs in the orchestra; it plays harmonies, but also gets great solos from time to time. It can be played by bowing, plucking and can also be strummed.

**Cello**
The cello looks like a violin - but bigger, and therefore isn’t held on the shoulder. Instead, it rests on a spike which sticks into the floor and is held between the players legs and played with bow. Because its body is bigger and its strings longer than the other instruments, the sound it makes is much deeper.

**Double Bass**
The double bass is the biggest string instrument in the orchestra, and a great instrument to learn if you want to play jazz. It got its name from the job it used to do. It used to ‘double the bass’ played by the harpsichord in 17th Century orchestras. Now it has its own music and even the occasional solo.

**Harp**
The harp has existed for hundreds of years and was played in Ancient Egypt and in Roman times. It has a big, triangle shaped wooden frame, which about 45 strings stretched from top to bottom. These are all different lengths and thicknesses, so they play different notes. (They are like the white keys on a piano) The strings are plucked by the harpist, so that they make a sound. It also has a series of pedals, which alter the strings changing the note slightly (to create the black keys on a piano).
Woodwind

This section of the orchestra got its name from the fact that many of its instruments were originally made from wood. Now they can be made from plastic, silver, gold - even platinum!

**Flute**

Sometimes the flute is made of real silver, sometimes of solid gold. To play, the musician holds the long tube of the flute in both hands and blows across a small hole at one end. The other holes can be opened and closed by pressing down different metal keys. The flute can make a shrill, piercing noise as well as being able to sing like a bird.

The flute player (or flautist) sometimes has to play more than just the flute. The *Piccolo* is like the flute but much smaller, the piccolo sounds very high. The *Alto flute* is longer than the flute, and a larger tube. This sounds lower than the flute.

**Clarinet**

The clarinet is played with a single reed, which is a very thin piece of wood that vibrates when you blow through it. A relative youngster in the orchestra, the clarinet is only about 300 years old. It is a long tube made of wood (or plastic) and has metal keys to press. The keys cover holes, and different notes are produced by covering different holes. Some holes are covered by the player’s fingers. The bottom of the clarinet is shaped like a bell.

The clarinettist is sometimes called upon to play the saxophone or the bass clarinet. The *Saxophone* was developed from the clarinet by Adolphe Sax in 1840, and has a curved next and bell. It is usually made of gold coloured metal. The *Bass Clarinet* makes a lovely, deep, rich sound.

**Oboe**

The oboe is usually made of wood (or sometimes plastic) with metal keys, and played by blowing a double reed (two pieces of reed joined together). The keys cover holes, and different notes are produced by covering different holes. Some holes are covered by the oboist’s fingers. Descended from an ancient instrument called a shawm, the oboe makes a beautiful sound. When an orchestra tunes up, the oboe acts as the guide for the other instruments.

The oboist is sometimes asked to play the cor anglais (literally: “English horn”). *Cor anglais* - very similar to the oboe but lower and mellower. It has a longer ‘crook’ which the reed sits in and a ‘bulb’ shape in it’s bell.

**Bassoon**

The bassoon is so long that it has to be bent in half. It is the lowest of the woodwind instruments. Made out of maple wood (or plastic) with a double reed, the bassoon is a very versatile instrument. It can play very low notes and still get quite high. It can also play very quick passages of music.

The basoonist is sometimes asked to play the contrabassoon. The *Contrabassoon* makes an even lower sound.
Brass

This family is easily recognisable. Brass instruments can fit in anywhere: orchestras, brass bands, big bands, pop groups. The brass family adds a huge amount of power to the orchestral sound.

Trumpet
The trumpet is the highest brass instrument. It is made from a brass tube that is bent about and opens into a shape called a "bell". The trumpet has three valves and makes a very loud, strong sound, which can be heard above the rest of the orchestra.

Trombone
The trombone is great fun to watch and to play! It is held with one hand while the other hand moves the slide backwards and forwards. The trombonist makes different notes by changing the shape of their lips, how hard they blow and by moving the slide - all at the same time.

Tuba
The tuba is the lowest and biggest brass instrument, and is held on the players lap. It has four or five valves, which when played change the notes. It is a very big metal tube which is curled around and has a very wide end, shaped like a bell. Even though it looks almost too big to play, it can actually play very acrobatic solos.

Horn
The french horn (or horn for short) consists of a very long brass tube, which curls round and round. Originally made from hollowed-out animals' horns, the horn was used for signalling. The player puts their hand in the bell end to change the sound of the instrument, and gets different notes by pressing down valves, which block off holes.
Percussion

A percussion instrument is something you hit. This group of instruments is sometimes known as the kitchen department.

Tuned

Tuned percussion instruments include the xylophone, marimba, glockenspiel, bells, crotals and many more.

The xylophone is made of bits of wood that are tuned to different notes. The player uses sticks, or beaters, to hit the wooden bars, sometimes as many as six at a time.

A percussionist has to play hundreds of instruments. Here are a couple more: The marimba, is like the xylophone but a lot softer and warmer sounding. The glockenspiel is made from metal bars and sounds very high.

Untuned

Untuned percussion instruments include the bass drum, side drum, anvils, triangles and jingles.

The bass drum makes a massive sound. Even when the full orchestra is playing above it, you can still feel its power. The drum is hit with a huge beater but can sometimes be played using the hand or fingers for special effect. Cymbals are made from metal, these can be big, small and even tiny. Snare Drum - the snare drum adds great power to moments of excitement. Bongos are often used in jazz, the bongos create a lively mood.

Timpani

The timpani, or kettledrums, are a percussion instrument, but they always have a special part written for them. They are made from parchment or skin which is stretched across enormous copper bowls and then hit with a stick. Each drum is tuned to a different note but modern timpani can change notes after being hit, by using a foot pedal.
Keyboards

Apart from being a solo instrument, the piano was originally used in the orchestra to add strength to weak bits of music. Since 1900 the piano has become more equal and, aside from playing along with the others, it often gets passages to play alone.

The keyboard player is often called upon to play other instruments. The Celeste has keys just like a piano, but the keys are connected to hammers which strike a graduated set of metal (usually steel) plates suspended over wooden resonators. If you’ve heard ‘The Sugar Plum Fairy’ from the Nutcracker, then you have heard a celeste playing.

A Synthesiser is an electronic keyboard and will make any sound you need!

Conductor

Who’s that waving their hands at the front? A conductor does a lot more that just keeping time. They have to know the music inside out and back to front. They shape the music the orchestra plays and lead them during performances. Conductors came into their own when the orchestra got too big to lead itself.
Orchestral Music

The core repertoire of any orchestra is based around symphonies, concertos, overtures, suites and choral works. The style of music written has changed considerably over time as the orchestra evolved and composers experimented with new ideas. The orchestra as a group has been prominent throughout the following periods in classical music history:

**Baroque (1600-1760)**
Baroque music shares a heavy use of polyphony and counterpoint (many lines weaving together) with the preceding Renaissance period, but has developed greater ensemble writing, music for virtuoso singers and soloists, and is best known for a great deal of ornamentation (flourishes) of musical lines.

Baroque composers include:
- Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643)
- Johann Pachelbel (1653-1706)
- Francois Couperin (1668-1733)
- Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741)
- Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)
- George Frederic Handel (1685-1759)

**Classical (1730-1820)**
Classical music has a lighter, clearer texture than Baroque and is less complex. It is mainly homophonic - melody above chordal accompaniment. Variety and contrast became more pronounced than before.

Classical composers include:
- Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)
- Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)
- Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

**Romantic (1815-1910)**
Romantic music shows a clear emphasis on emotional expression, expanded use of harmony and tone colour, the idea of the 'heroic' encouraged increasingly virtuosic writing.

Romantic composers include:
- Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
- Hector Berlioz (1803-1869)
- Johann Strauss (1804-1849)
- Frederic Chopin (1810-1847)
- Robert Schumann (1810-1856)
- Camille Saint-Saens (1835-1921)
- Max Bruch (1838-1920)
- Pyotr Illyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)
**Twentieth Century (1900-2000)**

Twentieth Century music was extremely varied and therefore has no defining style. Impressionism and Modernism were terms also linked to this time period, but didn’t really take hold. The composers of the time experimented with different paths, leaving a complex legacy.

20th Century composers include:
- Edward Elgar (1857-1934)
- Claude Debussy (1862-1918)
- Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)
- Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)

**Twenty-first Century (2000-present)**

Today’s composers continue to experiment with a wide variety of musical traditions and styles; some using a ‘standard’ orchestral set up and others using other non-classical instruments and electronics.

21st Century composers include:
- Peter Maxwell Davies (b.1934)
- Ludovico Einaudi (b.1955)
- Philip Glass (b.1934)
Frequently asked questions

If you have never been to a classical concert before, you may be interested in the answers to our most frequently asked questions below. If there is anything else you would like to know please email julia.cook@reading.gov.uk or ring 0118 9372065.

Do I need to know the music before I attend a performance?
No. Part of the excitement and experience of going to a live concert is having the chance to hear a great piece of music for the first time, or listening to a piece you haven't heard for a long time. Many films, TV and radio programmes use ‘classical’ music, so there's a good chance that you’ll recognise some of the music anyway. Some regular concert-goers find that they appreciate the performance more if they listen to a recording of the piece before the concert and some find that their enjoyment of the music is enhanced if they read the programme notes before the performance. These are available in the concert programme, for sale in the foyers.

What should I wear?
This is up to you. Some people like to dress formally for classical concerts, whereas others prefer to be more casual. There is no dress code, chose something that you feel comfortable in.

Can I bring my mobile phone or camera?
No photography or use of recording devises is allowed in the Auditorium at any time, and to avoid distracting the musicians or other audience members, we recommend that you turn off all mobile phones, pagers, bleeping watches and other devices before entering the venue.

When should I arrive?
If you wish to attend the FREE pre-concert talk, and learn more about the music being played, you need to arrive at around 6pm. The talks are friendly and informal and take place from 6.15pm until 7pm. The location for the talk will be displayed in the main foyers.

If you just want to see the concert, we suggest you arrive 20 to 30 minutes before the start to give you time to find your seat, relax, read the programme notes and welcome the musicians onto the stage. Refreshments are available before the concert and in the interval, so you may like to allow time to enjoy these as well.

What if I am late?
Ticket-holders who arrive after the concert has started will be shown to their seats during a suitable break in the programme to minimise distractions to the musicians and other audience members. For this same reason, if you have to leave before the concert ends, please do so between pieces.

When do I clap?
The audience welcomes the orchestra, conductor and/or soloists on stage with a round of applause. After that, applause is usually reserved for the end of each complete piece of music and to welcome the conductor back for the next piece. If in doubt, wait until everyone else starts and then join in.

How long is a typical concert?
A typical concert is approximately two hours long, with a 20 minute interval.
Why is the orchestra seating arranged the way it is?
The brass and percussion sections produce more sound and are always behind the woodwind and strings. Since there is a large section of strings playing together, they fan out to form a circle immediately around the conductor.

Why does the orchestra tune to the oboe?
Of all the instruments, the oboe holds the pitch the most consistently. Why is the tuning pitch an A? The A is an "open" string for the violins, violas and cello, and is a middle, comfortable register for all of the instruments.

Why do all of the bows move in the same direction in the string section?
This is so everyone in a section is playing the same phrasing of the music. Typically, the bowing is indicated in the music by the leader - the violinist at the front of the section to the conductor’s left.

Why are there so many more violins than other instruments?
Violins often tend to be the ‘melody’ instrument and other strings such as the viola generally play a more supporting role. In addition, the violin does not have the volume of the brass and percussion instruments, so more are needed.

When musicians share a music stand, who turns the page?
The ‘inside’ player generally turns the page for the ‘outside’ player who is the one closest to the audience.

Chamber Music

What is chamber music?
Chamber music is defined as one player per part - in other words, one first violin, one second violin, one viola, one cello, etc., in any number of combinations, such as duos, trios, quartets, quintets, etc. Occasionally chamber music ensembles are conducted, but most ensembles do not use a conductor.

How does chamber music differ from an orchestra?
Orchestras have multiple players per part, and are always conducted. In a chamber orchestra, "chamber" refers to a smaller orchestra than a symphony orchestra, but it is an orchestra and not a chamber music ensemble.

What kinds of ensembles perform chamber music?
Ensembles are designated by the number of players, with Duo for 2 players, Trio for 3 players, Quartet for 4 players, Quintet for 5 players, Sextet for 6 players, Octet for 8 players, Nonet for 9 players. These ensembles can be all string instruments (such as a String Quartet), all wind instruments (Wind Quintet) or a combination of any instruments.