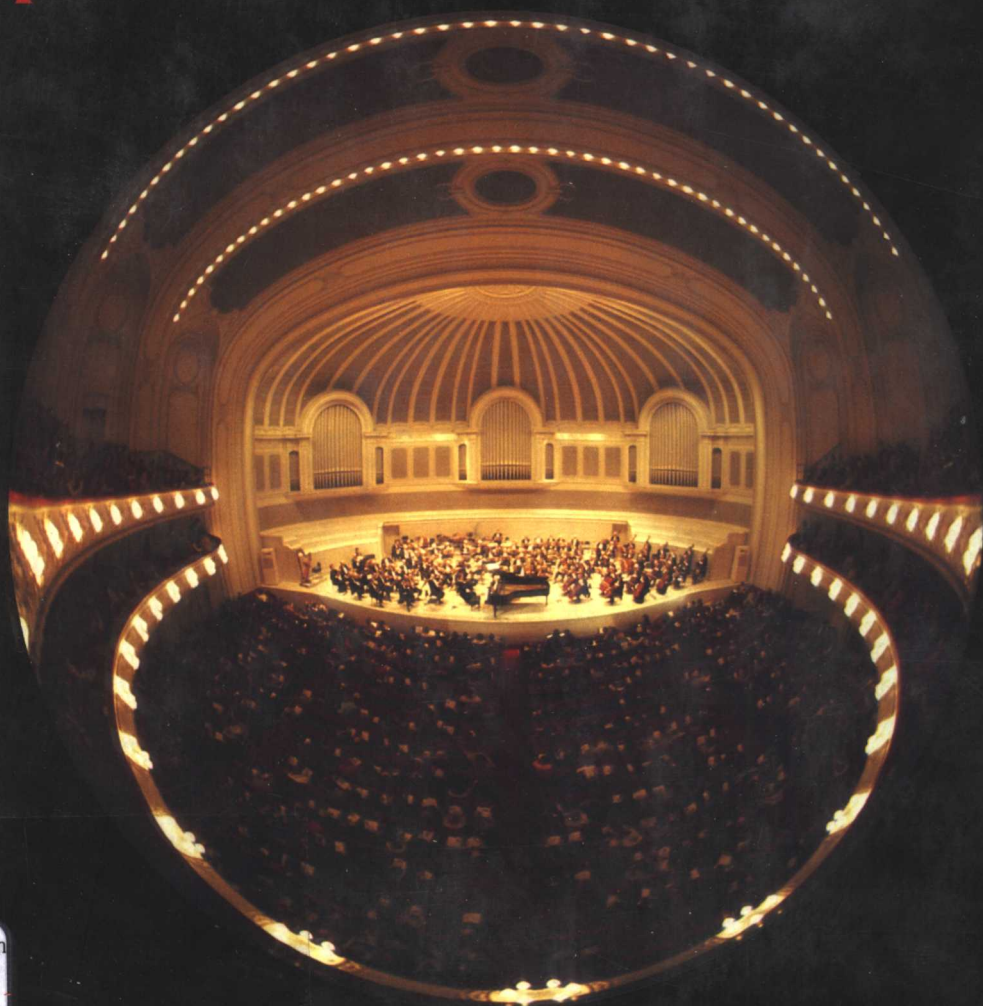


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The Orchestra

ORIGINS AND
TRANSFORMATIONS



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JOAN PEYSER, EDITOR

THE ORCHESTRA

Origins and Transformations

JOAN PEYSER

EDITOR

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS
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THE NEW AMATEUR PLAYER AND LISTENER

Introduction

For at least two reasons, the present time appears to be the right time to bring forth the book you now hold in your hands. One is the state of the orchestra itself. A gleaming, efficient ensemble that has achieved all it is likely ever to achieve in precision, virtuosity, and responsiveness, it brings more music to more thousands of listeners with each passing year. Another reason is the state of modern scholarship. Not only would it have been impossible to produce *The Orchestra: Origins and Transformations* without the benefit of modern musicology; the very conception of the book depends on ideas generated by cultural history, a relatively recent discipline. Our predecessors' works not only lack the musicological detail in evidence here; they also manifest little awareness of the social and historical forces that played a role in the orchestra's life.

To say that this book is unique in its coverage, its variety, and its currency is not to denigrate those which came before. Rather is it to emphasize that the moment for a knowledgeable summing up, for some kind of correct reckoning, has only now arrived. When Johann Mattheson, the most important music theoretician of the early eighteenth century, was writing, the instruments had not yet coalesced into the modern orchestra. Even long after they had, as recently as 1940, Adam Carse

encountered problems in his effort to collect historical detail. In his introduction to *The Orchestra in the Eighteenth Century* Carse wrote,

The searching historian must read page after page about the singing of the vocalists and the playing of the violinist or the flutist, and then be truly grateful if he is thrown a word about the orchestra. . . . What little can be gleaned about the 18th century orchestras and their playing has been scraped together and forms the basis and authority for what is written in these pages.

The reason that the present book should prove more useful, then, than those that went before is not that our authors are brighter than the others or more endowed with God-given insight. It is because it has only been in recent times that the depth and caliber of historical research have permitted the perspective that is critical to a genuine understanding of the orchestra's genesis and development.

The musical repertory of today's orchestra generally begins with Mozart and Haydn and ends with Mahler and early Stravinsky. In order to provide a rich background for our chronicling of events, we begin our story not in the classic era but in 1470, the date of the first surviving account of a large body of string instruments. Robert Weaver charts what happened between then and the last third of the eighteenth century when, according to George Stauffer, Mozart and Haydn breathed new life into an idiom then ridden with dry formulas. At this point our other authors pick up the many threads of the story and go on to bring their knowledge and imagination to the aesthetic, political, and economic factors that make up the historical tapestry in which the orchestra serves as the focal point. Tod Machover, a composer who specializes in computer music technology, contributes the last essay. Despite his remarkable accomplishments in this field, Machover concedes that "the modernist mode of purely electronic sounds is quickly passing." The most he foresees is "the incorporation of some electronic instruments into the vast resources of the orchestra." Such an innovation, it seems to this editor, would probably be coloristic at most and unlikely to change the orchestra in a substantive way. It would seem in no way to be comparable to the invention of the horn valve at the beginning of the nineteenth century, a device that transformed trumpets and horns into the chromatic instruments that enabled Wagner to compose the wandering inner parts for them that he did.

Although our overall approach is chronological, it does not follow that the ideas presented here can be neatly compartmentalized into old

and new, conservative and advanced. Take, for example, the notion of meaning in music, the question of whether music is always tied—consciously or not—to a literal idea, or if it is entirely independent, with its own idiosyncratic rules and owes nothing to any other art. Michael Beckerman argues eloquently that all music, even after its emancipation from a dependence on the voice, has kept its deep associations to words. Jane Fulcher, on the other hand, considers music to be an autonomous art that “maintains its distance from linguistic features.” In taking opposing viewpoints, our authors present a microcosm of the music world itself. In “The Star Conductor and Musical Virtuosity,” Rufus Hallmark attributes to Toscanini the following remark about Beethoven’s *Eroica*: “Some say it is Napoleon, some Hitler, some Mussolini. For me it is simply *Allegro con brio*.” Yet Toscanini’s view of Beethoven’s instrumental music as abstract is not shared by André Watts. In 1985, at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, the pianist coached several students in an open master class. Leaning over the shoulder of a young German working on the *Appassionata*, Watts pointed to some measures in the score and asked him what they meant. “Modulation,” was the reply. “Modulation? No!” Watts countered. “That passage means surprise.”

The Orchestra: Origins and Transformations is above all a reference work, and a glance at its table of contents will suggest its wide scope. In our tracing the history of the orchestra from its modest beginnings in the Renaissance to the awesome vehicle that it is today, a genuine effort has been made to find a middle ground between pedestrian listings and lofty philosophizing. Sometimes, in attempting to preserve the individuality of our writers, we may have veered toward one side or the other. But the middle ground is almost always visible, and the reader should come upon fact after fact that not only enlightens but delights. He will learn that at the beginning of the eighteenth century, concert programs were made up of eight to ten short pieces—not the three or four long ones of the present time—and that the only long ones were oratorios or sacred pieces presented in segments with other compositions intervening; that Haydn admitted to introducing that surprising drum stroke in the Andante of his G Major Symphony not for any structural reason or elevated aesthetic purpose but simply to compete for attention with Ignaz Pleyel, his own pupil and rival, in a contest generated by the London critics and followed assiduously by the public; that Mendelssohn, while working on the *Reformation Symphony*, may well have been the first composer to orchestrate measure by measure, “like an immense mosaic,” rather than in the then traditional way of filling in all the instrumental parts after completing the outer lines; that it was his deafness that forced

Beethoven to become a composer only, rather than both a composer and a performer. That particular specialization unfortunately became the model for composers who could hear.

We are reminded that during most of their lives, Mozart and Haydn heard their works performed almost as soon as they had composed them and that something unprecedented happened in the 1830s and 1840s: by traditional expectations their music should have dropped out of the repertory about that time. But the fact is that it did not. The intriguing point here is that it was more than a century ago—not recently, as many writers on music believe—that the modern canon of musical masterpieces began to take hold.

Along with the decrease in performance of new works, even older music than that of the classic period eventually made itself heard. Until only a generation ago music written before the eighteenth century was the exclusive domain of scholars; yet today, because of modern musicology, many conductors and chamber music ensembles specialize in so-called early music. Much of this material is presented not only in concert but preserved on recordings. Deutsche Grammophon's Archiv label, founded thirty years ago as a semischolarly one, now produces some of the company's best-selling discs.

Early music is not, of course, the only music of the past in which record companies work at cross-purposes with the living composer. The massive distribution of masterpieces in multiple performances forces today's composer to compete for the listener's time with Mozart, Schubert, Beethoven, Brahms, and Wagner—and that is a heavy burden for him to bear. Lance Brunner's illuminating essay is based on the premise that recording is the most important phenomenon in Western music since the invention of music notation in the ninth century. Less apocalyptic but reasonably substantive factors influencing creativity in music—criticism, performance fees, copyright, and so on—all figure in this portrait which brings the orchestra up to the present day. The irony is that it is now, when its capabilities are at their height, that the fundamental validity of the orchestra as a tool that bends and shapes according to composers' demands is increasingly under challenge. That challenge stems not from inherent limitations in the medium but from the state of the art of music itself.

For our most respected composers have not turned their backs on the orchestra. On the contrary, such gifted artists as Milton Babbitt, Elliott Carter, David Diamond, Jacob Druckman, Morton Gould, Leon Kirchner, Roger Sessions, and Charles Wuorinen have recently devoted much of their energies to composing orchestral works. But if one

acknowledges even a modicum of truth to the Hegelian concept that a change in quantity means a change in quality, then one cannot ignore the following facts: that in a much more crowded world there are probably fewer composers than there were in the eighteenth century, and that while Elliott Carter aspires to the composition of one work a year, Alessandro Scarlatti—and he was not alone—completed more than four thousand in his sixty-five-year lifetime.

This said, the orchestra, like the museum, should endure for a considerable time, mounting masterpieces from the past. As the museum occasionally presents an exhibit devoted to the works of a living painter, so will the orchestra program the pieces of a living composer. The danger, then, is not that the orchestra will decay before our eyes. It is rather that the kind of music for which it has served as a perfect vehicle may soon cease to be composed.

Following the age-old sequence of theory following practice, this book comes at the right time not only for the reasons articulated at the beginning of this introduction, but because seventy-five years have passed since the death of Mahler and more than seventy since the composition of *Firebird*, *Petrouchka*, and *The Rite of Spring*. In an age when packaged electronic entertainment attracts a large part of the total audience, that part demanding novelty in everything it does, the orchestra can still serve those who long for something from an older world. Given the proper circumstances—adequate funding and skillful direction—it should continue to please, to excite the imagination, to move the spirit, and to shape the minds of listeners for centuries to come.

Joan Peyser
June 1986

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THE ORCHESTRA

*Origins and
Transformations*

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The Consolidation of the Main Elements of the Orchestra: 1470–1768

Robert L. Weaver

The elements that compose what is currently called the “orchestra” coalesced about the middle of the eighteenth century into a complex yet remarkably stable tradition. That tradition, now over two centuries old, shows today a vigor that promises a life lasting into the foreseeable future. Although in Western musical history the orchestral tradition took shape later than others, such as those surrounding the liturgical choir, opera company, or oratorio society, it has assumed a dominance that justifies a major reference work devoted to the orchestra alone. In fact, it raises the question of why such a work has been so long delayed.

The word *orchestra* descends from the Greek term for the semicircular space where the chorus stood, in front of the main acting area of a theater. In Roman times it was a reserved section for wealthy patrons and senators, and in the Middle Ages, at least at the time of Isidore of Seville, the stage. Johann Mattheson used the term in the title of his treatise *Das neu-eröffnete Orchestre* (1713) but defined it in an interesting combination of terms as the space in front of the stage where the “Herren Symphonisten” sat (Becker, “Orchester,” in *Musik*). The first recorded use of *orchestra* to mean a group of instruments and not a place is found in Abbé François Ragueneau’s unflattering comment in his *Parallèle des Italiens et des Français* (1702) on the softness of the “orchestre de notre Opéra” (Strunk, 126, obscures the passage by using “band” as the trans-

lation of *orchestre*). This meaning took root first in France and then spread through Europe along with the rising cultural influence of France in the mid-eighteenth century. In Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Dictionnaire de musique* (1768), the meaning became attached finally and authoritatively to the players. The date of Rousseau's publication has therefore been chosen as the termination for the present essay.

The initial date of 1470 has been chosen because the earliest account of a large number of string instruments, which are the essential and aboriginal portion of the orchestra, occurred in that year. At a public festival in Breslau in honor of the marriage of the king of Hungary, Matthias Corvinus, there was heard the sound of many trumpets, and (whether simultaneously or afterward is not clear) "of all kinds of string instruments" (Spies, 3). Early in the next century, *concerto* appeared in Italy as a term denoting a group of instruments but not the size of the group. *Band* in France and England in the sixteenth century was normally used for the same meaning. For example, the king's musicians in London were entitled the Royal Band, and Les Vingt-quatre Violons du Roi, the Twenty-four Violins of the King (Louis XIII of France), organized in the early seventeenth century, were called the Grande Bande.

In the baroque era it was the practice to use *violin* (*violon* in French) or *arm-viol* (*viola da braccio* in Italian) to denote several or all of the members of the violin family, that is, violins, violas, violoncellos, plus others such as the tenor violin and bass (*violone*), which have become more or less obsolete. At the same time another family of bowed string instruments was described by the term *leg viols* (*viole da gamba*) because they were played by resting the instruments on the knee. During a time when there were so many string instruments, bowed and plucked (lute, theorbo, chitarrone, and so on), *string instruments* as a term was ambiguous; to use the word *violins*, meaning to include all members of that family, was more specific. Thus the Twenty-four Violins of the King included violins of all sizes. In the present essay the same meaning for *violins* will be maintained whenever historical context makes *string instruments* a too-inclusive term.

The elements of the orchestral tradition that gradually crystallized during the period 1470-1768 are these: (1) the instrumental members of the orchestra, their numbers, and their technological evolution under the formative demands of the orchestra; (2) forms that compose the repertoire of the orchestra, the musical logic by which these forms are embodied, and the musical language or rhetoric by which the forms and the logic are transmuted into human expression; (3) the function of the

instruments in the transformation of abstract ideas into orchestral sonority through the art of orchestration; and (4) geographical stability, which is intimately related to patronage and all forms of public support and to the concert and concert series.

MEMBERS OF THE ORCHESTRA

The primary element in the definition of *orchestra* is the number of instruments. The term is often used with no other meaning than a large group of instruments. Thus, Becker begins his article on the orchestra with a survey of instrumental groups in classical antiquity, Asia, and Africa, and the *Harvard Dictionary of Music* in various articles uses *orchestra* as the designation of a Balinese thirty-piece *gamelan gong kebyar* and a *kuencheu*, or Chinese opera “orchestra,” and speaks of the “orchestral” character of African music. To use it in this manner, while useful, nevertheless stretches the meaning unmercifully. Here the term is restricted to a musical organization that existed only in Western culture (except where it has been imported by other cultures) and only from about the middle of the eighteenth century to the present.

The size of the orchestra, moreover, is a crude criterion and is not a continuously evolving element through the history of music. All peoples in all times and places have known that in small spaces small numbers are appropriate, and in large, many. The “orchestra” mentioned in 2 Chronicles 5:12–13, consisting of cymbals, psalteries, harps, and 120 trumpets, would hardly be acceptable as an orchestra merely because of the number of instruments.

Not every instrument, no matter how common or popular it may have been, has gained a permanent place in the modern orchestra—the saxophone, organ, banjo, bagpipes, cromorne, and many others. The accepted instruments in the orchestra have arrived at standard constructions and ranges, but related instruments have been excluded. Thus, there is no tenor violin, although the instrument was common in the seventeenth century, between the violoncello and viola. Cornets, euphoniums, sousaphones, flügelhorns, and bugles are very seldom called for in orchestral scores. Some instruments present in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century orchestras have been abandoned—specifically, all sizes of lutes and harpsichords. The kinds of instruments, therefore, make the first distinction between the orchestra and other large groups of