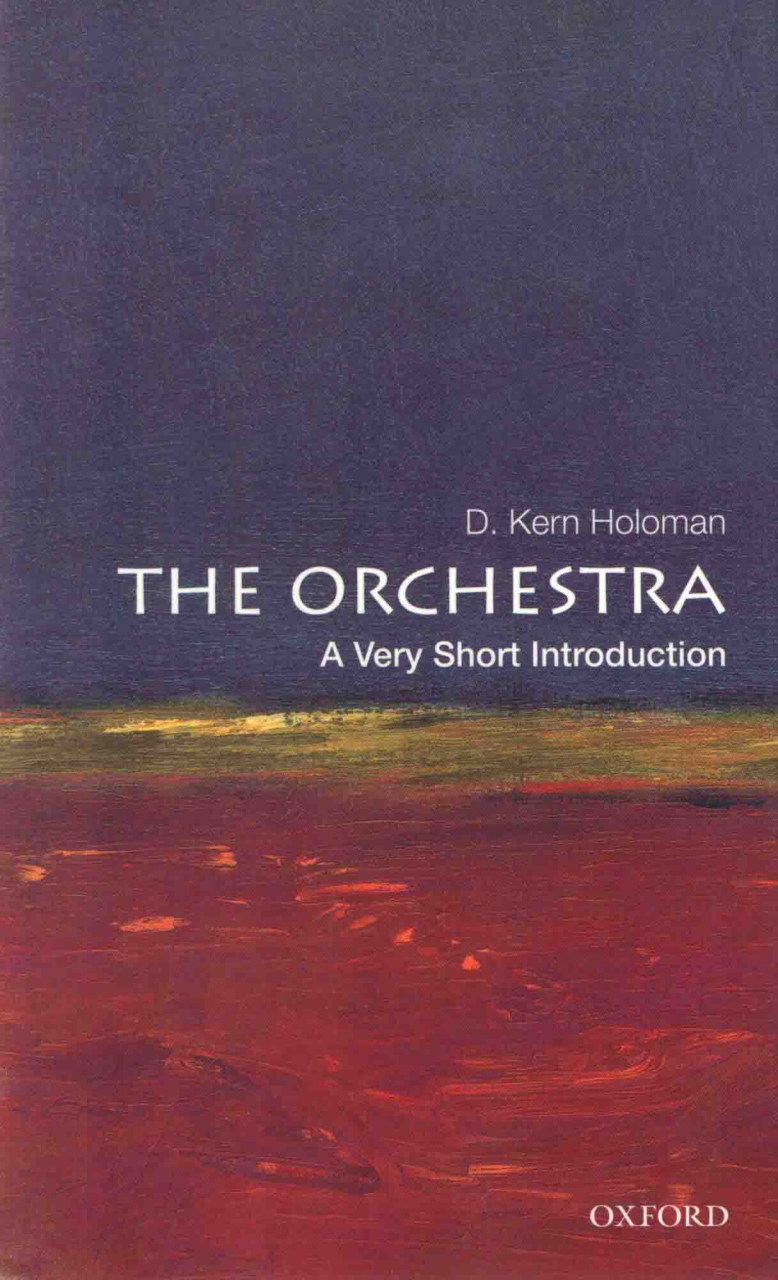
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THE ORCHESTRA
A Very Short Introduction
OXFORD

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Published in the United States of America by
Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Holoman, D. Kern, 1947–
The orchestra : a very short introduction / D. Kern Holoman.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-19-976028-2 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Orchestra—History. I. Title.
ML1200.H65 2012
784.2—dc23 2011053216

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed in Great Britain
by Ashford Colour Press Ltd., Gosport, Hants.
on acid-free paper

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Chapter 1
Philharmonia

The philharmonic society, a local coalition of players, listeners, and financial backers, was established to sponsor public concerts of orchestral music. In due course it owned buildings and inventory. From the very first it was a locus of civic pride, holding much in common with the other institutions that anchor urban systems—hospitals, libraries, playhouses, zoos, public gardens.

In the early philharmonic society the identity of the orchestral players was of less consequence than the sponsoring of the concerts. Musicians were engaged from existing theater and court orchestras, a simple enough transaction during Lent (and in some places Advent), when the theaters were closed. Their stipends represented a welcome, if token, addition to their primary income. A philharmonic's defining mission was, and remains, to present orchestra concerts in a dedicated space, on consideration of a paid ticket. Concerts came in series, or seasons, perhaps six or eight at a stretch. Subscribers were impressively loyal, buying out the better seasons year after year and passing their right to subscribe on to their heirs.

"Going to Symphony was the summit of the musical experience," writes Alan Rich of the half century, roughly 1930 to 1980, when the symphony orchestra dominated the menu of leisure interests. More even than opera, seen as an extravagant, somewhat trivial

plaything of the oligarchs, the philharmonic society crowned its culture. It was dignified, elevated in purpose, prone to stimulate the intellect. The orchestra hall came to be a recognized locus of the elegant things in life: going to symphony embraced fashionable clothing, fine dining, at length the purchase of records and record players. It was endlessly inviting, and cheap at the price.

The symphony orchestra had grown from that of Beethoven's time—a dozen in each string section, with pairs of woodwinds and brass and a percussionist or two—into the industrial-strength aggregation of today's philharmonic of 110 or more. The outward look of the institution became fixed, standardized, its equipment proudly symbolizing the furthest advance of the Age of Industry, its costume that of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert.

Such a perception masks the lightning-paced modernity of the twenty-first-century philharmonic, where the critical issues facing classical music play out every week. The questions are as old as the institution itself: how and even whether to advance the repertoire, how to enable artist musicians to achieve the social equality their gifts and long investment demand, how to weather competition from within and without. How, for that matter, to adapt to sea change in the world order. Who's listening, and why?

In September 2009, at the start of the symphony season in Detroit, the conductor Leonard Slatkin proposed having his orchestra play with its back to the audience ("Listeners are distracted by seeing the faces of the musicians; [they] will tire of looking at backsides and focus purely on the music"), cutting Rachmaninov's Second Symphony to twelve minutes, beginning Beethoven's Fifth in bar 6, after a motto opening so familiar as to have become, Slatkin says, banal. That same year saw the emergence of a YouTube Symphony Orchestra, auditioned by videos posted on a server, voted on by the "YouTube community," and brought to Carnegie Hall for a concert conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas on May 20, 2009. The concluding work, commissioned for the next San Francisco

Symphony season, was *Warehouse Medicine* by Mason Bates, a disc jockey purveyor of "electronica" with a PhD in composition, who controlled a rack of electronics in the percussion section and wore a T-shirt. (Bates went on to be 2010–12 composer-in-residence with the Chicago Symphony.) Slatkin's challenge seemed wacky, while the YouTube venture seemed inevitable. Yet both moments provoked response as to what is meaningful in art music . . . which is what philharmonia was about to begin with.

Emergence of the symphony orchestra

The band that accompanied Monteverdi's opera *Orfeo* of 1607 was symphonic in complexity if not in size: two groups of five strings, some brass players (trombones, trumpets, wooden cornetts), a pair of recorders, and a wagonload of underpinning keyboard instruments, harps, and lutes. The opulent court orchestra for Louis XIV at Versailles was the 24 Violons du Roi, the *grande bande*, with six violins for the uppermost part, four violas each for three middle parts, and six bass instruments—source of our concept of string sections in the dozens and half-dozens. (Flutes, oboes, and trumpets-and-drums were summoned as needed, along with the keyboards.) Jean-Baptiste Lully, arriving at court in 1652, demanded and was granted a smaller and more polished group, the Petits Violons.

The *collegium musicum* exercises—"amicable musical get-togethers"—in the Leipzig of Telemann and J. S. Bach drew fifty or sixty musicians, students and professionals alike, twice a week to a coffeehouse. Here it appears that in addition to the ubiquitous cantatas for soloists, chorus, and orchestra in vogue at the time, the substance of Bach's orchestral music was featured as well. By the end of Bach's life it was the series of orchestra concerts that mattered to an enthusiastic public, stimulating the organization of a Grosse Concert-Gesellschaft, where the sponsors were local merchants and the venue was a tavern, the Three Swans.

The conservatory movement in Italy—conservators of children, i. e., orphanages—had since the late 1500s been generating musicians in sufficient number to establish a veritable ecosystem of well-trained players (and singers and composers). The pioneering English music historian Charles Burney describes the merry cacophony of one of the Naples conservatories in 1770, where

> On the first flight of stairs was a trumpeter, screaming upon his instrument till he was ready to burst; on the second was a french-horn, bellowing in the same manner. In the common practising room there was a *Dutch concert* [blab school, or better, free for all], consisting of seven or eight harpsichords, more than as many violins, and several voices, all performing differing things and in different keys.

Vivaldi's orchestra of young women orphans from the Ospedale della Pietà in Venice, where he was appointed *maestro di concerti* in 1716, was not dissimilar in structure and capability from Lully's in France—but for the obvious attractions of gender and age: "I vow to you," wrote the French tourist Charles de Brosses, "that there is nothing so diverting as the sight of a young and pretty nun in white habit, with a bunch of pomegranate blossoms over her ear, conducting the orchestra and beating time with all the grace and precision imaginable." Here Vivaldi's staggeringly large repertoire for orchestra, and chorus-with-orchestra, was born—in a church on Sundays and holidays, the "finest music" before "a vast audience": "'Tis the rendezvous of all the coquettes of Venice, and such as are fond of intrigues have here both their hands and hearts full."

In pre-Revolutionary Paris, a Lenten series called the *concert spirituel*, founded in 1725, was presented in the Tuileries Palace to ticketed subscribers. Listeners and the newspaper journalists took sides in sometimes noisy battles of taste; Dr. Burney reported that a certain M. Pagin, best pupil of the violinist Tartini, "had

the *honour* of being hissed at the Concert Spirituel for daring to play in the Italian style, and this was the reason of his quitting the profession." Behind the scenes the profit motive, expressed in the buying and selling of the monopoly for public concerts, drove artistic decisions. The original series came to an end when the royal family was confined in the Tuileries Palace after 1789, by which juncture the transition from sacred music for chorus-and-orchestra to a secular orchestral repertoire was done: Haydn's six "Paris" symphonies, Nos. 82–87, were hungrily consumed at the Tuilieries and offshoot series like those of the Masonic Lodge (Concert de la Loge Olympique), where in 1785 Marie Antoinette attended the premiere of the Haydn symphony subsequently called La Reine.

Most concert music continued to take place in the princely salons. Haydn administered eighteen or so orchestral players retained by the Hungarian prince Nikolaus Esterházy for his pleasure, seeing to it that the musicians conducted themselves "soberly, modestly, quietly and honestly," appearing "neatly, in white stockings, white linen, powdered, with either pigtail or hair-bag." They provided music at mealtimes, sacred music, theater music, and orchestra concerts—the 1772 premiere, for instance, of Haydn's "Farewell" Symphony No. 45 in F♯ Minor, with its closing *coup de théâtre* reminding Prince Nikolaus that the players needed to go home to their wives and children. From the court orchestra established in Mannheim in 1720, usually described as "the best in Europe," Mozart and others absorbed much of a modern style that included clarinets and crescendos. "Its forte is thunder, its crescendo a cataract, its diminuendo a crystal-clear stream babbling away into the distance, its piano a breath of spring." It numbered just under fifty players.

Haydn's concerts in London in 1791–92 and 1794–95, for which his last dozen symphonies were composed and first performed, attest to the increasingly successful marriage of commerce and art. These were presented by Johann Peter

Salomon, a businessman, impresario, and front-desk violinist. "I am Salomon from London, and I have come to take you there," he told Haydn in Vienna: "tomorrow we shall conclude an agreement." Salomon sought to accommodate the rage for music sweeping English society. Haydn's personal presence in London incited "such a degree of enthusiasm in the audience as almost amounts to frenzy!"; a wag journalist noted how "Folks of Fashion eager seek / Sixteen Concerts in a Week." Seasons were fully sold, and the mechanisms for institutionalizing them began to fall into place.

Similar success was found by Mozart and then Beethoven in their one-composer "academy" concerts in Vienna. Many of these were presented at the Imperial Court Theater, the Burgtheater, erected alongside the imperial palace by Empress Maria Theresa in 1741. Here, after his move to Vienna, Mozart presented his work annually: in 1784 a program of three symphonies, a piano concerto, a piano fantasy, and an aria with orchestra. Here, too, Haydn was borne by sedan-chair into the first public performance of *The Creation*, March 19, 1799. Beethoven's Akademie of December 22, 1808, in the Theater an der Wien offered a program over four hours, where the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies were premiered, the Fourth Piano Concerto, and for a finale, the Choral Fantasy with Beethoven himself at the piano.

First philharmonics

Arguably the first to offer continuous seasons of multiple concerts was the Philharmonic Society of London, established in January 1813—by the same J. P. Salomon who had brought Haydn to England, along with the pianist Muzio Clementi and like-minded associates. At one hundred years of age, in 1912, it became the Royal Philharmonic Society. The first concert included symphonies of Haydn and Beethoven, and soon the promoters were routinely inviting foreigners to conduct a resident orchestra in their 800-seat venue in the Hanover Square Rooms. The annual