

How the Orchestra Grew

The grouping together of instruments of various kinds to form an orchestra first came about in the early 1600's. The first orchestras were haphazard collections of bowed and plucked strings and various types of wind instrument together with a keyboard instrument such as the harpsichord. Often, a composer would include whatever musicians were available to him at the time, and so the number of players and types of instruments would vary considerably from one composition to another.

Late 17th to mid 18th century

Strings mainly used, but flute, recorders, oboes, bassoon, perhaps horns and occasionally trumpets and kettledrums were used to accompany the strings. A constant feature used in this time was the harpsichord continuo – the player 'continuing' throughout the music to fill out the harmonies and to hold the ensemble together.

Mid 19th century

Towards the end of the 18th century, the woodwind section was invented. This included the flute, oboe, bassoon and the recently invented clarinet. While the harpsichord continuo fell out of use, a pair of kettle drums or a pair of trumpets was now often included. For some time, this formation of orchestra was accepted as standard, and is often called the 'Classical orchestra'.

Mid 19th century

During this time the size and range of the orchestra increased. Trombones were now regularly used and the number of horns used was increased to four and the brass section was now complete with the addition of a tuba. This section now took on far greater importance as its range and flexibility was increased by the invention of the valve system. More woodwind instruments, such as the piccolo, cor anglais, bass clarinet and double bassoon, - were now available and the choice of percussion instruments became more varied. The number of string players was necessarily increased in order to keep a balance of sound.

Late 19th century to the present day

The orchestra was vastly expanded at the beginning of the 19th century and now included extra brass and triple or even quadruple woodwind. Some composers began to write for much smaller orchestras in 1910; a small body of strings, one or two each of various kinds of woodwind and brass, and maybe one or two controlling a varied selection of percussion. In the 20th century composers have experimented with newly invented instruments discovering entirely new sounds and new techniques. Modern technology is also used.