

## ORCHESTRAL DECOMPOSITION

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[Assignment: Write an essay in which you use classification or division to explain a subject about which you know more than the average reader. Remember your audience: use the familiar to help describe the unfamiliar.]

(1) We sit back comfortably in our chairs at the auditorium and patiently wait for the signal from the conductor. He pulls the trigger and the orchestra begins, slapping us in the face with the four opening notes of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. The orchestra continues playing, exhilarating us and soothing us with the changing moods of the flowing music. There are many people playing odd-looking instruments that sound very different. Magically, they find a common ground and blend with unbelievable energy. Yet, as those familiar with orchestral music will know, this odd assortment of instruments actually breaks down into four distinct sections: strings, woodwinds, brass, and percussion.

(2) The visual embodiment of an orchestra is the string section: violins, violas, cellos, and basses. The orchestral group is set apart from all other instrumental groups because of this section. Distinguished by size, the four instruments that make up the section are identical in shape and tone qualities. The violin is the smallest instrument and can play very high notes. Following successively, the violas, cellos, and basses increase in size and decrease in pitch. This is the largest section of the orchestra, with 20 to 30 violins, three or four violas, eight cellos, and four basses, but it is also the least powerful. Instead of power, these instruments provide beauty and choral-like interactions. Their melodic song-like harmonizing gives direction and character to the music. With the quartet set up, violins playing the soprano, violas playing the alto, cellos the tenor, and basses the bass voice, the section becomes even more distinctive and voice-like in sound. No other section interacts as much as the strings.

(3) The woodwind section consists of flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons. Unlike the string section which plays nearly all the time, the woodwinds get a lot of time to rest. This instrumentation is brought about to give the music a different flavor. The high flute melodies are birdlike in song, and bring about a happy feeling. The clarinets are mellow, pleasant to listen to and serve as a variation to the airy flute melodies. The oboe has a whiny voice that always gets its way; its harsh tones pierce through any wall of sound. This adds even more warmth to the smooth, soothing tones of the flutes and clarinets. The bassoon is a brother to the oboe, but instead of complaining about the idle time spent waiting for rests like the oboe, he is a jolly instrument that enjoys the music he can play. Each instrument in this section has its own singular quality that adds to the intricate whole.

(4) When composers are looking for power, they look straight to the brass section. This section consists of parts for three trumpets, four french horns, two trombones, one bass trombone, one tuba and is by far the most exciting section in the orchestra. Neither the woodwinds nor the

strings can send "shots" of sound with as much energy as the brass can. With their directional bells and an abundance of raw power, the trumpets and trombones can send shivers up anyone's spine. It is most brass players' dream to play in an orchestra because this is the only place where they are told to play "ugly." With only a few restrictions on loudness and brightness of tone, the players are given license to play as "brassy" as they want. All brass players understand their unique responsibility to the orchestra. The brass may rest more measures than they play, but the parts are very demanding when they come around.

( 5 ) Finally, we have the bold percussion section. The basic set-up for this section includes snare drum, bass drum, four timpani (each tuned to a different note), bells, xylophone, and often a gong. (There are many obscure percussive instruments that are used occasionally.) This section is unique because many of the players never have to read notes; they only read rhythms. Because they are not musical in nature, they also sit out during the melodic sections of the music. This group of instruments is used, along with the brass, to convey power, fear, and dominance.

( 6 ) As we have seen, the orchestra is made up of many diverse instruments. Because the instrumentation is so diverse, many different combinations of sound, musical expression, and feeling can be portrayed. It is the skillful art of the composer to blend each instrument in such a way that his or her interpretation is plainly seen through the music.