



Toby Appel's *Guide to the Orchestra*

Also see:

[Culture Test](#)

[You might be a theory geek if . . .](#)

The members of the orchestra are divided into four sections. These are woodwinds, the strings, the brass, and the percussion. There's also someone standing in front of all these other folks playing no instrument at all. This would be the conductor. It is generally required that the conductor is required to make musical decisions and to hold all of the instruments together in a cohesive interpretation of any given work. Not so. Rather, the conductor is necessary because the four groups would rather eat Velveeta than have anything to do with someone from another section. And, as we know, musicians are quite serious about their food.

Why all the animosity? Before I begin my explanation, let me set the record straight in plain English about some of the characteristics which typify the four groups.

Woodwind players have IQs in the low- to mid- genius range. Nerds with coke-bottle glasses and big egos, blowers tend to be extremely quiet, cowering behind bizarre-looking contraptions -- their instruments -- so nobody will notice them. It is often difficult to discern whether a wind player is male or female.

String players are neurotic prima donnas who won't even shake your hand for fear of permanent injury. A string player will never look you directly in the eye and they never bathe carefully ... or often. Brass players are loud-mouthed drunkards who bully everyone with the possible and occasional exception of a stray percussionist. They like to slick their hair back. Nobody knows why.

Percussionists are insensitive oafs who constantly make tasteless jokes at the expense of the strings and woodwinds. They look very good in concert attire but have the worst table manners of all musicians. They are always male, or close enough.

Now, is it any wonder orchestra members have little to do with anyone outside of their own section? For the answer to this and other pertinent questions we will need to examine the

individual instrument and the respective -- if not respected -- players within each section.

The woodwinds:

Oboe players are seriously nuts. They usually develop brain tumors from the extreme air pressure built up over the years of playing this rather silly instrument. Oboists suffer from a serious Santa Claus complex, spending all their waking hours carving little wooden toys for imaginary children, although they will tell you they are putting the finishing touches on the world's greatest reed. Oboists can't drive and always wear clothes one size too small. They all wear berets and have special eating requirements which are endlessly annoying and which are intended to make them seem somewhat special.

English horn players are losers although they dress better than oboists. They cry at the drop of a beret.

Bassoon players are downright sinister. They are your worst enemy, but they come on so sweet that it's really hard to catch them at their game. Here's an instrument that's better seen than heard. Bassoon players like to give the impression that theirs is a very hard instrument to play, but the truth is that the bassoon only plays one or two notes per piece and is therefore only heard for a minute in any given evening. However, in order to keep their jobs -- their only real concern -- they act up a storm doing their very best to look busy.

It takes more brawn, and slightly less brain, to play contrabassoon. They are available at pawnshops in large numbers -- the instruments as well as the players -- and play the same three or four numbers as the tuba, although not quite as loud or beautiful.

Okay, now we come to the flute. Oversexed and undernourished is the ticket here. The flute player has no easier time of getting along with the rest of the orchestra than anyone else, but that won't stop them from sleeping with everyone. Man and woman alike, makes no difference. The bass flute is not even worth mentioning. Piccolos, on the other hand, belong mainly on the fifty yard line of a football field where the unfortunate audience can maintain a safe distance.

The clarinet is, without a doubt, the easiest of all orchestral instruments to play. Clarinets are cheap, and the reeds are literally a dime a dozen. Clarinetists have lots of time and money for the finest wines, oriental rugs, and exotic sports cars. They mostly have no education, interest, or talent in music, but fortunately for them they don't need much. Clarinets come in various sizes and keys -- nobody knows why. Don't ask a clarinetist for a loan, as they are stingy and mean. Some of the more talented clarinetists can learn to play the saxophone. Big deal.

Let's continue now with the real truth about ... the strings:

We begin with the string family's smallest member: the violin. The violin is a high-pitched, high-tension instrument. It's not an easy instrument to play. Lots of hard music is written for this instrument. Important things for a violinist to keep in mind are: Number one -- the door to your studio should be left slightly open so that everyone can hear your brilliant practice sessions.

Number two: you should make disparaging remarks about the other violinists whenever possible, which is most of the time. And number three: you should tell everyone how terribly valuable your instrument is until they drool.

The viola is a large and awkward instrument, which when played, sounds downright disgusting. Violists are the most insecure members of the string section. Nothing can be done about this. Violists don't like to be made fun of and therefore find ways of making people feel sorry for them. They wear shabby clothes so that they'll look as if they've just been dragged under a train. It works quite well.

People who play the cello are simply not good looking. They have generally chosen their instrument because, while in use, the cello hides 80% of its player's considerable bulk. Most cellists are in analysis which won't end until they can play a scale in tune or, in other words, never. Cellists wear sensible shoes and always bring their own lunch.

Double bass players are almost completely harmless. Most have worked their way up through the ranks of a large moving company and are happy to have a secure job in a symphony orchestra or anywhere. The fact that it takes at least ten basses to make an audible sound tends to make these simple-minded folks disappear into their woodwork, but why do they drive such small cars?

Harpists are gorgeous. And they always know it. They often look good into their late eighties. Although rare as hen's teeth, male harpists are equally beautiful. Harpists spend their time perfecting their eye-batting, little-lost-lamb look so they can snare unsuspecting wind players into carrying their heavy gilded furniture around. Debussy was right -- harpists spend half their life tuning and the other half playing out of tune.

Pianists in the symphony orchestra work the least and complain the most. They have unusually large egos and, because they can only play seated, also have the biggest butts. When they make mistakes, which is more often than not, their excuse is that they have never played on that particular piano before. Oh, the poor darlings.

The brass:

Trumpet players are the scum of the earth. I'll admit, though, they do look good when they're all cleaned up. They'll promise you the world, but they lie like a cheap rug. Sure, they can play soft and pretty during rehearsal, but watch out come concert time! They're worse than lawyers, feeding off the poor, defenseless, weaker members of the orchestra and loving every minute of it. Perhaps the conductor could intercede? Oh, I don't think so.

Trombone players are generally the nicest brass players. However, they do tend to drink quite heavily and perhaps don't shine the brightest headlights on the highway, but they wouldn't hurt you and are the folks to call with all your pharmaceutical questions. They don't count well, but stay pretty much out of the way anyway. Probably because they know just how stupid they look when they play. It's a little-known fact that trombone players are unusually good bowlers. This is true.

The French horn. I only have two words of advice: stay away. Horn players are piranhas. They'll steal your wallet, lunch, boyfriend, or wife or all the above given half a chance or no chance at all. They have nothing to live for and aren't afraid of ruining your life. The pressure is high for them. If they miss a note, they get fired. If they don't miss a note, they rub your nose in it and it doesn't smell so sweet.

The kind-hearted folks who play the tuba are good-looking and smart. They'd give you the shirt off their back. The tuba is one of the most interesting to take in the bath with you. It's a crying shame that there's only one per orchestra. Would that it could be different.

And finally -- the percussion:

These standoffish fools who get paid perfectly good money for blowing whistles and hitting things that don't deserve the considerable space they are allotted on the stage. Aside from the strange coincidence that all percussionists hail from the Deep South, another little known, but rather revealing fact, is there are no written percussion parts in the standard orchestral repertory. Percussion players do have music stands and they do use them -- to look at girlie magazines. Percussionists play whatever and whenever they damn well feel like it and it's always too loud! The ones with a spark of decency and intelligence play timpani, or kettle drums.

Most percussionists are deaf, but those who play kettle drums pretend to tune their instruments for the sake of the ignorant and easily duped conductor.

The guy with the short nose who plays the cymbals is no Einstein, but he's also one of the best guys to share a room with on tour. Cymbal players don't practice -- I guess they figure it's bad enough to have to listen to those things at the concert.

Percussionists pretend to have lots of kids whose toys can be seen quite often shaken, dropped, or manhandled to great effect. Whole percussion sections can be seen and now and then on various forms of public transportation, where they practice getting up and down as a group. This represents the only significant challenge to a percussionist.

And that just about does it. I trust that this little tour has enlightened you just a little bit to the mysterious inner world of the symphony orchestra. This world, one which is marked by the terrible strain of simple day-to-day survival, is indeed not an easy one. Perhaps now you will be a bit more understanding of the difficulties which face a modern-day concert artist. And so the next time you find yourself at the symphony, take a moment to look deeply into the faces of the performers on the stage and imagine how much more difficult their lives are than yours.

This is surely what's on their minds ... if anything.