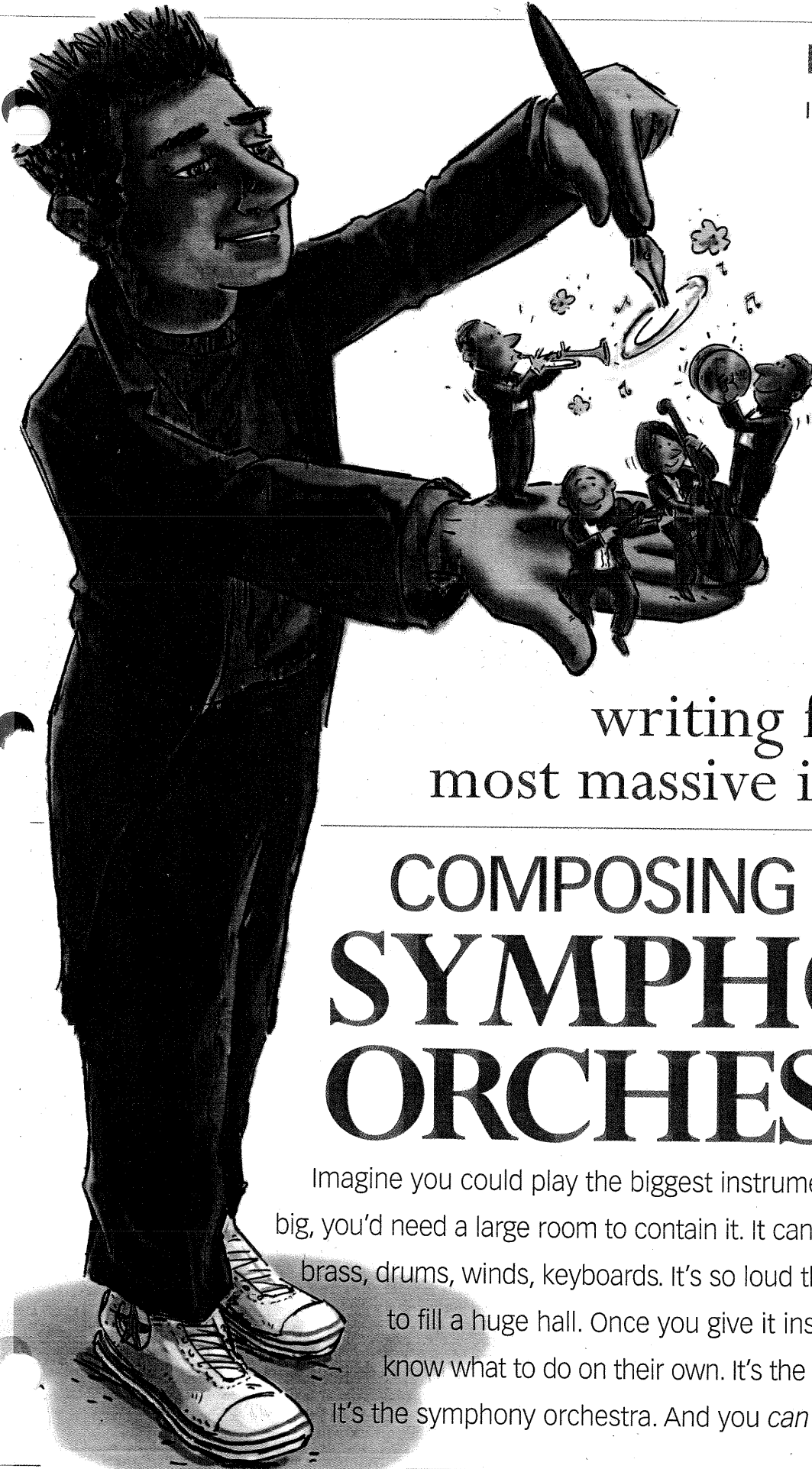


By Jon Chappell

Illustrations by Chris Murphy



every
musician
should try
writing for music's
most massive instrument

COMPOSING FOR THE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Imagine you could play the biggest instrument on the planet. It's so big, you'd need a large room to contain it. It can play everything: strings, brass, drums, winds, keyboards. It's so loud that it needs no amplifier to fill a huge hall. Once you give it instructions, all of its parts know what to do on their own. It's the ultimate music machine. It's the symphony orchestra. And you *can* make it sing your song.

Many of the world's great classical compositions use the symphony orchestra, but we also hear orchestral backgrounds for films and even pop songs. But how do composers know how to create the parts that make those symphonic sounds? How do you go from singing and playing the guitar or piano to a full orchestra? Where do you begin?

Know the score

To write any form of symphonic music, you need to produce a complete orchestral score. Until recently, the only way to do this was with a large sheet of paper, a pencil, and a really big eraser. Composers who are very skilled can write music down from their heads, the way you write a note to a friend. But most composers use the aid of an instrument like the piano or other keyboard.

Regardless of their chosen tool, though, all composers ultimately need to know how to get the notes they hear in their heads or their instruments onto paper, and in a way that a whole orchestra full of musicians can follow—at the same time, hopefully. A standard orchestral score has the woodwinds first (with the flute on the very top line), followed by the brass, then the percussion and keyboard, with the strings at the bottom. The music example on page 50 shows a passage from the finale of Rossini's *William Tell Overture*—also known as the “Theme from the Lone Ranger.”

Today, there are electronic tools that can make this process easier, allowing you to play parts into a computer and, using software, organize the parts, play back your notes with the appropriate sounds, and build your score. Programs like Finale, Sibelius, and NOTION let you see and hear your score, and actually include information about instruments and their uses. Digitally sampled sounds are commonly found on keyboards, and can approximate the sound of acoustic instruments. But they lack the expressiveness of the real thing and—just as important—playing samples can mislead you on the capabilities and limitations of actual instruments. So even if you're composing your symphony on a keyboard, a deeper understanding of music is important if you want to take your orchestral composing career past the experimental stage.

Start with the building blocks

Those of you who are already in band or orchestra may have a pretty good idea of how an orchestral piece is constructed, or you may have knowledge of your own instrument's role in the score. But to be effective, a composer also has to know how every instrument works, and how to assign them the duties they do best. That means understanding the sound qualities and ranges of a lot of different instruments, many different clefs,

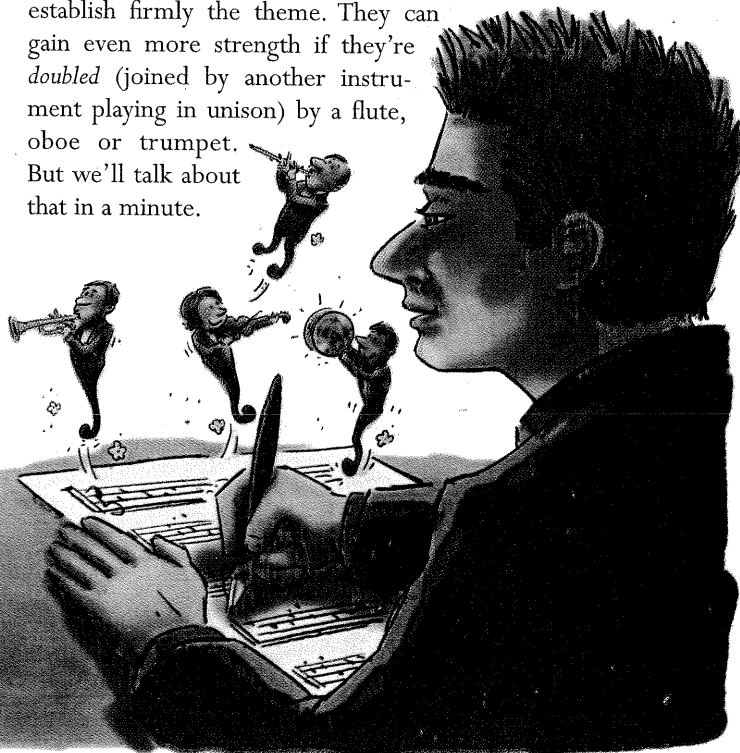
and even which instruments must be transposed—written in a different key than they sound when they actually play a note.

If you don't know what an instrument can do, check a book on orchestration, look at your bandmates' music, or ask a friend to show you his or her instrument and explain how it works. Serious composing students will often take lessons on every instrument in the orchestra! They may not get very good at any one of them, but they do gain an appreciation for how the instrument is played, and can then write music that is idiomatic (suitable to the specific qualities) to that instrument. And the players themselves will love you for it—very important for a successful recording session! It's important to know details, like the fact that the strings can be bowed in different ways or plucked.

Come up with a melody

Okay, so there's no rule that says you need to start with a melody. In fact, in some styles of composing, the theme is less important than the overall mood the orchestra is setting. But in most cases, an orchestral piece is really not that different from any song: It needs a strong melody. If you can hum a tune or play an instrument, you can create a melody. At this point in the process, you don't concern yourself with what will go with the melody, just about inventing a catchy tune.

As you work out your melody on whichever instrument you're most comfortable with, try imagining how the orchestra will play it. The violins usually get to play the main melody first, because they provide the biggest sound in the orchestra and can establish firmly the theme. They can gain even more strength if they're *doubled* (joined by another instrument playing in unison) by a flute, oboe or trumpet. But we'll talk about that in a minute.



Once you've crafted your melody, it's time to support it, expand upon it, and weave it together with other parts. If you listen to most any symphonic piece—especially classical symphonies by Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven—you'll notice that the main melodic theme appears in many different settings, played by different instruments at different times throughout the piece.

Assign some parts

Most books used in teaching orchestration start by breaking the instruments into their families—strings, woodwinds, brass, and percussion. But there's another way of grouping the instruments: by *range* (an instrument's playable pitches, limited by their highest and lowest note). So a melody occupying the middle of the treble clef (where most melodies fall) could be played equally well by the violins, flutes, oboes, clarinets, and trumpets. For a lower melody, consider the cello or trombone, which may be from different families, but have very similar ranges. And for a really low melody (think "Theme from *Jaws*"), you can consider the double bass, the tuba or bassoon.

We already mentioned that most composers will open a piece by giving the melody to the violins. When the melody is done playing the first time through and it's time for a new section of music, a composer will often have the woodwinds step in and play a passage in a different texture. He or she might write some *counterpoint* (opposing melodies) for a transition into the second statement of the main theme.

Woodwinds are very good at counterpoint because their voices are very individual sounding—much more so than strings. So where strings sound better in a block, playing a big melody, woodwinds can more effectively execute more subtle

textures. And though the woodwinds don't have the power of strings, they are very expressive melody-makers because they can sustain, swell, and slur melody notes just like strings, and more expressively than, say, a piano.

When the woodwinds have had their moment in the sun, a composer might return to another statement of the melody. But this time, to raise the stakes on the dramatic effect, he or she will introduce the powerful brass family. Brass can be very effective playing *block chords*—coming in and changing notes in rhythmic unison. If it's better to hold the brass in reserve, say, until the finale, a composer might consider a keyboard or harp to *arpeggiate* (playing the notes in rapid succession rather than simultaneously) the chords. This produces an effect that is gentler than having the brass entering all at once.

Mix and match

There are many parts to an orchestra, but if you've ever played in one, you know there can be some downtime for one instrument while another takes over. One of your jobs as composer is to decide when to bring an instrument or group of instruments in. A good composer might write as many rests as notes, as an instrument waits for its big entrance.

You can create a massive sound by throwing in everything from the piccolo to the timpani, but you don't want to use everybody up too soon. If the melody will reappear later on in the piece, consider leaving the first statement of it sparse, and employ doubling later on for a more dramatic effect. Composers sometimes introduce variations of the melody, as well. For example, you could write a slow theme, and then create a passage where the same phrase plays in double time. Or, you might try *modulation*, where a melody written in a major key is changed to a minor key.

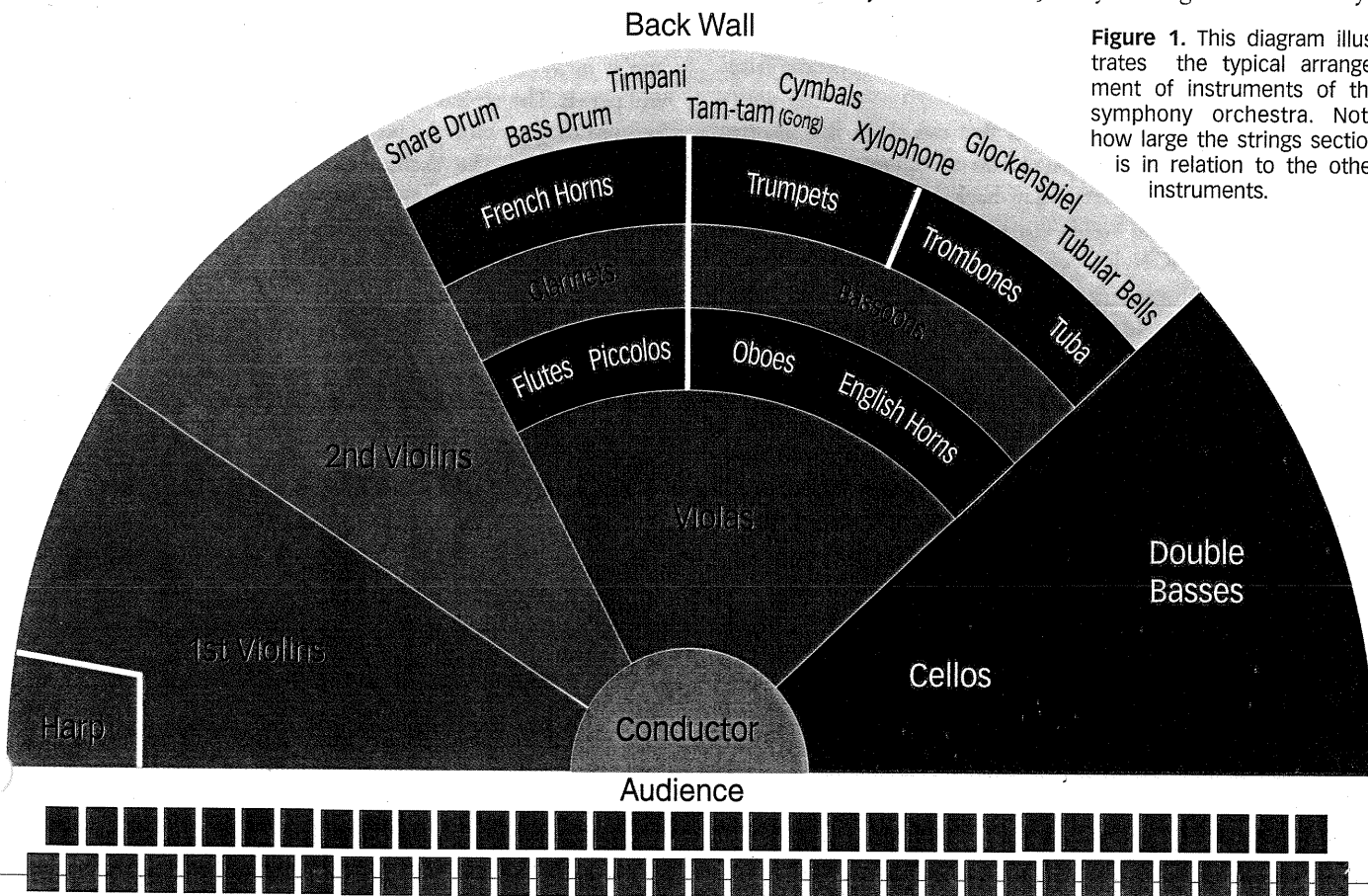


Figure 1. This diagram illustrates the typical arrangement of instruments of the symphony orchestra. Note how large the strings section is in relation to the other instruments.

Think about the balance

One of the hardest skills for an orchestral composer to master is balance. No matter how well you think you've scored a piece, nothing replaces experience at hearing how the instruments play. For example, it's almost impossible to get a flute to play middle C above a whisper and it's equally difficult to get a trumpet to play a high C at anything other than *fortissimo*. This goes back to knowing how each instrument behaves.

The best way to hear the results of all this experimentation is, of course, to have an orchestra at your disposal. But since that's not very practical—for even established composers—many people use a combination of samplers, synthesizers and multitrack recording to try to at least get an idea before going into a live rehearsal. Digitally sampled sounds are no substitute for the real thing, but they are quite authentic-sounding and can give you a good idea of what to expect.

Just the beginning

Looking at a blank page of an orchestral score and thinking "How am I going to fill this?" may seem like a pretty daunting task. And it's not easy to face a hundred different musicians from the conductor's podium, either! But if you study scores, experiment with instrument combinations, and use home recording technology, you can improve as a composer for the orchestra just like you would for any instrument—through diligent practice and lots and lots of listening. No, you can't write a symphony in five minutes. But with careful study and a willingness to explore, you can start on the road to writing for the symphony orchestra. Hey, even Beethoven had to start somewhere. ■

Jon Chappell has a master's degree in composition from DePaul University and has appeared with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

Learn more at
intunemonthly.com/inside

Essential Orchestral Listening

The best way to learn how to compose for a symphony orchestra is to listen to the masters and their masterpieces. Start by obtaining a copy of the score to a famous piece (by purchasing it or checking it out from the library) and listening along to the music. (Did you know you can also download symphonies from iTunes? It's true!) Below are some classic examples of using the orchestra well in specific musical settings:

String melody with accompaniment

Fifth Symphony (first movement) — Ludwig van Beethoven

Brass chords

Pictures at an Exhibition — Modest Mussorgsky

Woodwind counterpoint

Til Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks — Richard Strauss

Doubling and Strength in Numbers

Rhapsody in Blue — George Gershwin

William Tell Overture Gioacchino Rossini

The image displays a page of a musical score for the William Tell Overture by Gioacchino Rossini. The score is arranged in a standard orchestral format with multiple staves. The instruments listed on the left side of the score are: Piccolo, Flute, Oboe, Clarinet in A, Bassoon, Horn in F, Trumpet in C, Trombone, Tuba, Timpani, Triangle, Cymbals, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Cello, and Double Bass. The music is written in 2/4 time and features a key signature of two sharps (D major). The score shows a passage where many instruments are doubling the first violins, and the bassoon, trombone, and tuba double the cellos and double basses.

Figure 2. A passage from the finale of the *William Tell Overture* by Gioacchino Rossini. Note that while all the instruments are playing, there's a lot of doubling going on. For example, the piccolo, flute, and clarinet are all doubling the first violins, and the bassoon, trombone, and tuba double the cellos and double basses.