How 68 musicians of Vancouver orchestra will join in one symphonic voice

Each instrument, player united in smooth teamwork

When the Vancouver Symphony orchestra plays its three concerts in Prince Rupert's Navy drill hall Friday some 68 musicians, playing a variety of 23 instruments will merge their talents under the baton of director and conductor Irwin Hoffman.

"What are some of these instruments? What is that strange-looking instrument and how is it played? What kind of a sound does it make?"

These are many questions a great many people will be asking themselves Friday night when they first see the Vancouver Symphony orchestra assembled on the stage in the HMCS Chatham drill hall.

On this page we hope you will find, in short form the answers to some of these questions.

Basically, the symphony orchestra is a group of four kinds of instruments—strings (the backbone of the orchestra) woodwinds (adding color of enormous range), brasses (color again, but with greatly increased possible volume) and percussion (means by which rhythm and climax are often achieved).

The strings, having a somewhat less penetrating tone than many of their partners which are blown or struck, are found in greater number in the orchestra and almost always toward "stage front". The double basses are an exception to this and because of their size are always placed well in the background so that other players will not have to peer round them to see the conductor.

Often a piano and harp are included in the orchestra. These instruments do not fit into any of the four broad classifications but are often called for by composers.

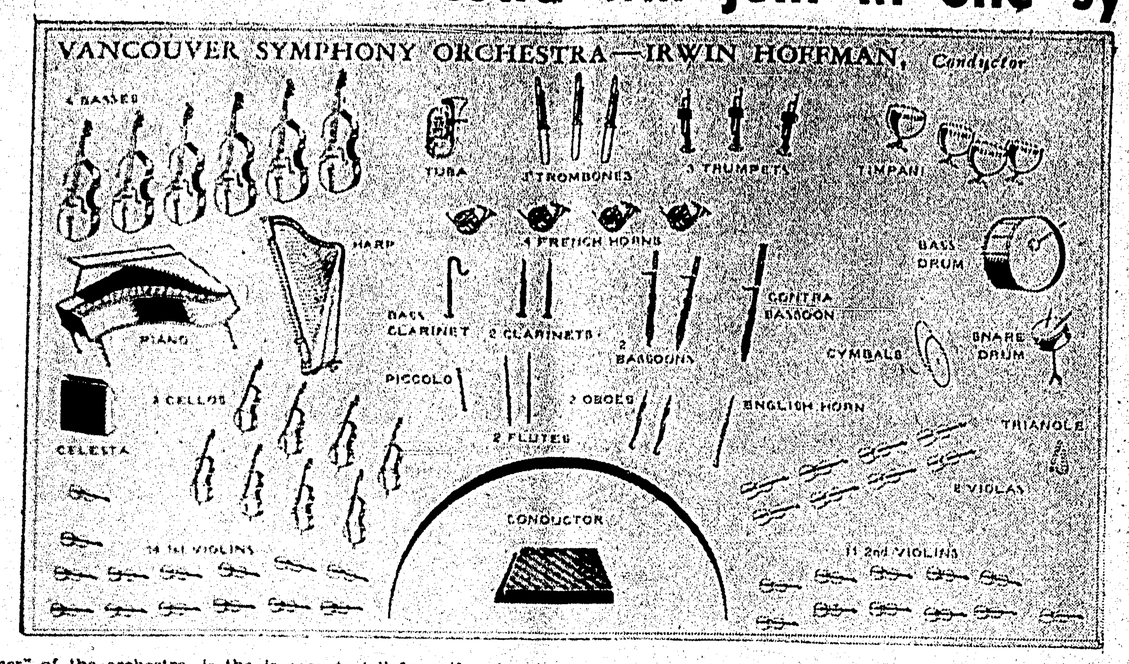
Like a member of any team, every orchestral player is important and a great deal is owed to the player who seldom handles anything but a supporting part. Listeners are not aware of him as they are for the instrument thundering forth the main theme or tune, but they would realize, if he were absent, that something was missing. The more perfect the orchestra, the more conscientious and co-operative the players.

The conductor, or the captain of the team has inumerable duties. He must procure the best instrumentlaists available, choose programs, rehearse the orchestra, choose the tempos, cue the orchestra or sections of it in such matters as attack and release.

His main duty, of course, is interpretation, for it rests with the conductor to draw from his players the beauty as he sees it in whatever music is being played.

This then, is capsule form is our modern symphony orchestra, the most complex and the most marvelous musical instrument the world has ever known.

A description of each of the instruments that will be played here by the Vancouver Symphony orchestra follows:



DAVID ROBBINS
. . . First trombone

LEA FOLI
. . . Principal second violin

Violin

A violin is the highest-sounding member of the string family. For orchestral purposes the players are divided into first and second violin groups. It is often given to "Violin 1" to play the principal melody in a work with the "seconds" providing the accompanying part, but both divisions can be used for either role. The expressive range is unlimited.

The concertmaster, the "first officer" of the orchestra, is the leader of the first violin section.

Viola

The viola is a somewhat larger and as a result somewhat lower member of the string family. Its tone is not as bright as that of the violin but it is often used in romantic and sombre solo passages. It is chiefly used as an accompanying instrument and as such is enormously helpful.

Cello

This is a descendant of the viol da gamba or knee fiddle. In a string quartette it is the lowest or bass instrument, but in a symphony orchestra it is usually assigned the "tenor" part. It is often given a principal role and a group of 10 or 12 of these instruments playing in unison can accomplish a singing, penetrating sound of great effectiveness.

Double bass

The double bass is in many ways the true foundation orchestral instrument. It has a rich, deep sound and while it is not often asked to provide the melodic line, can portray elephantine humor admirably. The contrabass, as it is also called, often doubles the cello part, in effect it plays the same notes an octave lower.

Harp

The harp is a descendant of one of the oldest known instruments is heard most often in the orchestra in sweeping arpeggios (broken chords) and glissando passages.

Tympani

The tympani or kettle drums is the only member of the drum family which can be accurately tuned. One can often see this being done while the orchestra is playing. The tone is resonant and the volume range very wide. There are usually three "tymps" in a symphony orchestra and these are tuned to the first, fourth and fifth notes of the key in which the orchestra happens to be playing. Tuning is accomplished by tightening or loosening the drum head.

Bass drum

The bass drum has a tone not unlike that of a tympani but is indefinite in pitch. Like the kettle drum, also, it is played with soft-headed sticks and although perhaps most commonly associated with the strong beats of military music it is frequently used in climaxes and for thunder effects.

Snare drum

The snare drum is also military in association but with a very different sound. The crisp, sometime snarling tone is the result of snares stretched across the lower drum head which vibrate against the parchment when the instrument is played. Hard-headed sticks are used and the playing of "rolls" in either increasing or diminishing volume is one of the most effective uses of the instrument.

Triangle

This is a steel rod in the shape of an incomplete three-sided figure. Held by a cord, it is played with a short steel bar. Rapid striking of two sides produces a tremolo and the tone is clear and sharp. It is used sparingly but can add a great deal of interest to soft passages.

Oboe

The oboe is the instrument to which all others tune. It is the soprano of the double-reed class, so called because the player uses a mouthpiece made of two bound slips of cane. It is a difficult and sensitive instrument to play and has a unique nasal tonal color. Its use in pastoral and reflective passages is very common and successful.

English horn

This is probably not originally English and certainly not a horn. A double-reeded instrument, it is easy to tell from the oboe in that it is longer and wider, has slightly bent reeds and a small bulb near the lower end. The tone is rich and sonorous and when used in solo roles is rather sad in character.

Flute

The flute is the coloratura soprano of the woodwind group. Unlike the ancient flutes which were held vertically, the modern instrument is known as a transverse flute and is played by blowing across a hole toward one end. The pitch is controlled by altering the length of the vibrating column of air. Admirable for rapid, ornamental pasages the tone is clear, hollow, mellow or brilliant depending on the register (aproximate pitch) being used.

Piccolo

The piccolo is not as long as the flute and sounds an octave higher. Because of its shrill tone it can pierce the sound of a full orchestra and is used to brighten the woodwind part and in music which is violent and terrifying in character.

Bassoon

A double-reede instrument the pipe of which is doubled back on itself for ease of carrying and playing. The instrument is held in a slanting position and has rather a solemn tone. In contrast it can be immensely humorous.

Contra bassoon

Is much the same instrument as the bassoon but considerably larger and its pitch is an octave lower. Like the double bass it sounds an octave lower than the score would indicate and the tone in its lowest range is gruff.

Bass clarinet

This is not to be confused with the saxaphone which it resembles in appearance. It has a wide range and although capable of playing loudly, perhaps its chief charm lies in its resonant reedy quality in soft passages.

Trumpet

The trumpet is the clear-toned soprano of the brass family. As are all instruments of this type, the basic notes are obtained by what is known as the embouchure (lip and wind pressure variations). In all brasses, aside from hte trombone, further pitch variation is controlled by valves which alter the length of the vibrating column of air. The trumpet in Bh, a transposing instrument, is the one most commonly heard and is used to advantage in providing substantial accompaniment background as well as for brilliant melodic statements and peak volume effects. The cornet, often confused with the trumpet, is slightly more conical in shape and tonally is not as brilliant.

Clarinet

The clarinet is a tremendously useful, versatile instrument using one reed which is clamped to the mouthpiece. Due to fingering difficulties it is what is known as a transposing instrument and "clarinets in B" and "A" are those commonly used. An excellent ensemble instrument, it can step into the melodic spotlight at a moment's notice.

French horn

A descendant of the old hunting horn, the French horn has an even, mellow tone which blends equally well with the woodwinds as with other brass instruments. The player's hand inserted into the "bell" of the French horn can influence the pitch in fine degree and can also accomplish the change of tone. The latter is the result of "over-blowing" and results in a blatant rather sinister sound.

Trombone

In the trombone, in place of valve operation, the pitch changes are achieved by lengthening or shortening the air column by means of moving a slide. Of utmost importance, obviously, is an excellent ear, for deviation from true pitch will result with the slightest inaccuracy from the slide adjustment. The tone has much grandeur when volume is stressed and in quiet, passages it can be awe-inspiring. Smooth playing is the instrument's forte and for obvious reasons it is able to cope with glissando passages easily. A somewhat large instrument, the bass trombone is sometimes used in the bass choir as well. Its range is a fifth lower.

Tuba

The tuba is too often associated in our minds with its "oompah" role. This bass instrument can be used in many ways to complete an orchestral sound. The tone is rich and the instrument is capable of surprising agility considering its size.

Cymbals

These are two circular mettalic plates held by means of leather loops. By striking them together in an up and down motion a "clash" is obtained, without which many orchestral climaxes would sound very tame. The player can stop the sound by bringing the edges of the cymbals against his body and some extraordinary effects can be obtained by striking them with soft and head-headed drumsticks.

Celesta

The celesta is a keyboard instrument, the light charming tone of which results from hammers striking small steel plates suspended over tuned wooden resonators. A pedal is used to sustain sound when this effect is desired.

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