

## **What is an Orchestra?**

### **I. Announcements**

- A. NJ Symphony Concert: Recommend concert of March 15, 2026 at State Theatre, New Brunswick (Bartok and Chopin)—Update today

### **II. Orchestra: The Term, Its Meanings and Development**

- A. Ancient Greece: “orchestra” referred to the area in front of the stage employed by the chorus for singing and dancing
- B. Middle Ages: “orchestra” now refers to the stage itself
- C. 18<sup>th</sup> Century: Now the word “orchestra” refers to the performing body itself on the stage
- D. Additionally, the term “orchestra” also refers to the area in a performing space at ground level in front of the stage
- E. Baroque Period: Orchestras consisted of primarily string instruments, although with the development of opera some composers added winds and percussion (i. e., Monteverdi’s *Orfeo*). Court orchestras in France, Germany and England were primarily string ensembles. By 1700, these ensembles often contained woodwinds (e. g., oboes), some percussion and continuo instruments (harpsichord, theorbo). By the time Bach and Handel died in mid-century, a large Baroque orchestra would have these sections:

Strings	Woodwinds	Brass	Percussion
Violins	Oboes	Trumpets	Timpani
Violas	Recorders/Transverse Flutes	Horns	
Cellos	Bassoons		
Basses			

- F. Classical Period: It is in the period from 1750-1830 that the “modern” orchestra develops and many compositions are written for it with parts delineated for each section, along with multiple parts within sections (i. e., 1<sup>st</sup> and second violins).
  1. Composers such as Haydn and Mozart write works with prominent parts for expanded wind sections, adding the clarinet, trombone (at times), harp and dispensing with continuo by the end of the century.
  2. Beethoven and Carl Maria von Weber expand the number of players in the brass section, while also adding piccolo to the ensemble.

G. Romantic Period: It is with Berlioz and Wagner that we see the development of the large ensembles that many people associate with the term “orchestra”. Hector Berlioz added the ophicleide (forerunner of the bass tuba) to the orchestra for his *Symphonie Fantastique*, while later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Richard Wagner added “Wagner tubas” to his operatic scores, an instrument he conceived and developed for his *Ring cycle* operas. Berlioz’ noted that **83** instruments comprised the Berlin Opera Orchestra in 1843:

Woodwinds: Four flutes, Four oboes, Four clarinets, Four bassoons (16)

Brass: Four trumpets, four trombones (8)

Percussion: Timpani, bass drum, cymbals (3)

## Two harps (2)

Strings: Fourteen first violins, fourteen second violines

eight violas, ten cellos, eight double basses (54)

H. Creation of Municipal Orchestras: The late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries saw the development of orchestras in urban areas: Leipzig Gewandhaus (1781), Paris Conservatoire (1800), Philharmonic Society of London (1813), Philharmonic Society of New York (1842). This coincided with the development of professional conductors, originally composer/conductors such as Mendelssohn, Berlioz, Meyerbeer and Wagner, later leading to individuals specializing in conducting alone (Toscanini, Mengelberg, Artur Nikisch, etc.).

(Source: “Orchestra” in Don Michael Randel, editor, Harvard Dictionary of Music. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003, pp. 595-597.

### III. Musical Selections

- A. George Friedrich Handel, Concerto Grosso in C Major (No. 3)
- B. Jan Kritel Neruda (18=707-1780), Trumpet Concerto
- C. Franz Josef Haydn, Symphony NO. 45 (Farewell)
- D. Beethoven, Symphony No. 2 (3<sup>rd</sup> movement) (Film)
- E. Berlioz: Symphonie Fantastique (final movement)
- F. Gustav Mahler; Symphony No. 3, First Movement (Film)
- G. Bela Bartok, Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta
- H. George Gershwin, Rhapsody in Blue (Film)

#### IV. Today's Recordings

1. George Friedrich Handel, 6 Concerti Grossi, Op. 3. Sony 88875030622-17
2. Baroque Bohemia and Beyond, Volume V Alto ALC 1101
3. Joseph Haydn, Symphonies 43-45 Brilliant Classics 9925/12

4. Rafael Kubelik: A Portrait	DG 00440 073 4225 DVD
5. Charles Munch, Complete Recordings on Warner Classics	Warner 0190295611989
6. Gustav Mahler, Symphonies 3 and 4	C Major 719108 DVD
7. Rafael Kubelik, The Collection of East Classics	Profil PH19019
8. Gershwin, Ives, Bernstein	DG 00440 073 4513 DVD

## V. Sources

- A. “Orchestra” in Don Michael Randel, editor, Harvard Dictionary of Music. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003, pp. 595-597.
- B. Joan Peyser, editor, The Orchestra: A Collection of 23 Essays on the Origins and Transformations. Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Corporation, 2006.

## VI. YouTube Films

1. Tafelmusik, Handel Concerto for Oboe.  
<https://youtu.be/Hu8yuleLlmw?si=rg02N9qIYNpqNsX7>
2. Il Giardino Armonico, Haydn Symphony 45, “Farewell”  
<https://youtu.be/GMaM6ivx8X8?si=orUOJAnOgub-2BQS>
3. Concertgebouw Orchestra, Beethoven Symphony Four  
<https://youtu.be/-pmpyUOcTgQ?si=6rYe430xA-4WPP5G>
4. Orchestre Philharmonique du Radio France  
Berlioz, Symphonie Fantastique  
<https://youtu.be/5HgqPpjIH5c?si=-uf85EGHBQknOdF9>
5. Vienna Philharmonic, Bartok Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta  
<https://youtu.be/JI0OLlasAas?si=M2gWcqn1fsAG2MXs>
6. Lucerne Festival Orchestra, Soloist and Choirs, Mahler Symphony 3  
<https://youtu.be/Xplx64LVENg?si=2ZYmnyt1541uOS7z>

Time: February 23, 2026 10:30-noon

**Bill Fernekes email:** [bill41@comcast.net](mailto:bill41@comcast.net)

Program Website: <https://williamrfernekes.com>