

14. "Orchestra Seating"

The String Sections

karenlak.com

The difference between the violins and the violas in an orchestra is that the violins play higher notes, and the violas play lower notes. They are divided into three sections: first violins, second violins, and violas. The first violins usually play leading parts, identified by higher notes, and more prominent melodies. The second violins, also, may play with these techniques, but they also play music that serves as harmonies to what the first violins are playing. Both first violinists and second violinists must have total command over their techniques.

When you hear a melody, it truly is much more important with a harmony played at the same time, enriching the total effect. Accompaniments are sometimes much more difficult than the melodies. The coordination of the two makes a composition beautiful. The term, "second violin" does not mean "second place", like a contest. It only is a term that separates the sections, playing separate parts.

The viola section adds the harmonies and rhythms which complement the violins, and their contribution to the orchestra is very important. They connect what the violins are playing to the celli and basses. The violas, also, add the middle range of string sounds to the entire orchestra. The string sections play almost continually throughout symphonic compositions. Their contribution cannot be duplicated by any other section of the orchestra. In viewing an orchestra, one may see that the string sections include many more members than the other sections.

When a certain section has an important role in the composition, you will hear it. The sections sometimes alternate with this, and sometimes play all together for emphasis. Throughout the music the string sections must be aware of their contribution to the performance. In music talk we mention things like, "moving passages" and "momentum". These are very important for the musicians to recognize which you are playing.

"Moving passages" are those measures in the music where you may be playing faster notes, adding a rhythm like a "rhythm section". This gives "momentum" to the composition. "Momentum" is what connects and drives the music forward, giving an emotional feeling to the composition. Every composition must have a beginning, a middle section, where the ideas of the music are being developed, thus it is called a "development section", and a conclusion is what ends the piece. These sections give the music life, so that the audience and the musicians, playing the music may experience a story-line, by their own imagination, just like events in life.

The great composers knew just how to do this. They could write the music to be sad, happy, victorious, courageous, tragic, or romantic. We, as musicians need to honor the music we are playing by performing it as well as we are able.

How can we accomplish all of these techniques? In violin and viola playing the left hand does all of the gymnastics, and the right hand and arm finish it all off with a beautiful tone. Every composition you are playing will add to your techniques and make you a great musician! Not only will you improve your own playing, but when you attend a concert, you will hear all of these differences more clearly and enjoy the concert more!

Orchestra Seating:

The first violins sit to the left of the conductor, and the second violins sit beside them. The leaders of those sections sit at the first stand, which is nearest the conductor. They sit on the right side of the stand. The concertmaster is the first first-violinist, and he/she is in charge of the whole violin section. The first second-violinist is responsible for observing the bowing indications that the concertmaster will plan and, also, for the style of bowing that the concertmaster will display or talk about in each composition. Each member of the violin sections are required to observe the leaders of their sections and imitate what they are doing.

The viola section usually sits to the right of the conductor, but in some orchestras the celli will sit there. In that case the violas will sit next to the celli. These sections also have leaders. All leaders, including the second violin section, are called, “the principals”. They are required to follow the style of bowing the concertmaster displays as well. The principals of the celli and violas will sit at the left side of the music stand. These musicians are the “outside” players. The inside players, for the violins they will be the ones on the left, and for the violas and celli, they will be the ones on the right, and they are required to turn pages when needed.

Protocol is followed in this manner. All musicians in these sections follow their principals. If anyone has a question about the music in rehearsals, they must ask the principals of their section. Never do we interrupt the rehearsal and ask the conductor for anything regarding our music. This is very important. Furthermore, each musician in these sections is responsible for marking their music with the appropriate bowing marks. The concertmaster is the authority, the principal second violinist, the principal violist, and the principal cellist must all match those marks as closely as possible as well as the style of bowing that will be played.