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Project 2: Cultural Literacy

## The Evolution and Impact of the Symphonic Orchestra

### **Introduction**

In its most basic terms, an orchestra is a gathering of people who play instruments for an audience. But what makes the symphonic orchestra so unique is that it includes every instrument category which enables it to produce an incredible variety of compositions ranging from Korsakov's classic "Russian Easter Overture" to John William's "Cowboys Overture" and many more modern pieces which appear in countless movies and T.V. shows.

### **Background and History of the Symphony Orchestra**

During the 1500s, a time known as the Renaissance, many orchestras would play music with whatever instruments they had whether it was a flute, a lute, or a harp. This is due to the fact that many composers would not specify which instruments would be used to play each part. However, around the year 1600 the Italian composer Claudio Monteverdi composed the piece L'Orfeo (1607)("A Short History"). This was one of the first popular pieces which specified which instruments should accompany various parts. Also known as the "Renaissance Orchestra" the instrument layout consisted of 15 viols of various sizes, two violins, four flutes, two oboes, two cornetts, four trumpets, five trombones, a harp, two harpsichords, and three small organs ("Medieval and Renaissance")

By the next century, around the time of J.S. Bach's, the orchestra evolved further. The violin family -- violin, viola, cello, and bass -- replaced the viols and thus the Baroque-era orchestra was born. This era was very heavy on piano and other keyboard instruments. It was also the time where orchestras would have directors would conduct in front. However, the directors did not conduct in the modern way. Rather, they would use a long pole and tap the floor to maintain the beat. This unfortunately led to the death of one director who hit his foot and developed gangrene("A Short History").

The 1800s were the time of composers like Haydn and Bach. During this period the keyboard instruments of the Baroque period had been surpassed in importance by the strings. The orchestras would be led by modern conductors using batons rather than staffs and the concertmaster or the first chair of the first violins would assist in leading and training the orchestra. Another thing which was noticeably different from the Baroque period was the sheer size of the orchestras. By the late 1800s orchestras had reached the size they are today and sometimes even larger. One particular piece called "Gurrelieder" was arranged for a 150 member orchestra. This was a result of composers such as Berlioz who would deliberately compose pieces for enormous orchestras. Another way in which orchestras evolved was the new instruments which would be used. The various orchestral experiments carried out by the conductors would often result in unusual instruments being used or completely new instruments being introduced. One example of a new instrument was the Wagner Tuba which was designed by Richard Wagner to have a special sound compared to the cross between a French horn and a trombone.("The Wagner Tuba")

## **Perspectives on Symphony Orchestras**

According to many parents and elders, attending a symphonic orchestra concert can be a relaxing finish to a long day. Almost all of them, parents in particular, also say that playing an instrument and participating in a large orchestra can be a highly benevolent experience. Not only are the students able to meet others and experience being part of a team, but they can also learn a skill which many people do not know. It has been proven through many research studies that playing any instrument has many subtle benefits such as: enhanced coordination, increased responsibility, better mathematical ability, and creating a sense of self achievement to name a few. Unfortunately though, many schools have reduced or removed the emphasis on fine arts in exchange for more standardized testing and technical studies("18 Benefits").

## **Symphony Orchestras in the Future**

Within the U.S., many symphony orchestras experienced a financial crisis during the latter half of the 20th century. The changing taste in music saw that auditoriums could no longer be filled and the decreased emphasis on fine arts within schools saw that there were not enough musicians to keep orchestras at maximum capacity. In just 2011, five popular professional orchestras filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy.

The main way in which orchestras have combated this is to change their music styles. Nowadays, it is not unheard of for contemporary composers to use contemporary or unusual instruments. Many symphony orchestras now use synthesizers to achieve desired effects. Others have taken to keeping their instruments but have changed their music style. A great

example of this is the London Symphony Orchestra. On top of mastering many classical masterpieces, they also play many modern video game and movie soundtracks.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout the course of history it can be clearly observed that symphony orchestras have evolved greatly from a simple rabble of instrumentalists into the great marvels they are today. Throughout their evolution they have provided and are still providing us with great music while greatly influencing our culture. Although they are receiving less funding than they usually do they are coming up with more modern music and new ways in which they can entertain us. Of course, the key to the future lies with the youth of the world. Hopefully playing instruments and emphasis on the fine arts will still be implemented and through these future musicians the tradition of the symphony orchestra will be upheld.

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