

# History of the Orchestra

People have been putting instruments together in various combinations for millennia, but it wasn't until about 400 years ago that musicians started forming combinations that would eventually turn into the **modern orchestra**.

In the old days, when musicians got together to play, they used whatever instruments were around. Around the 1500s, in the time known as the **Renaissance**, the word "**consort**" was used to refer to a group of instrumentalists, and sometimes singers, making music together, or, "in concert". Composers would write parts that could be played on virtually any instrument.



Around 1600 in Italy, the **composer** Claudio Monteverdi changed that. He knew exactly which instruments and sounds he wanted to accompany his opera *Orfeo* (1607), and he specified this in his score.



Claudio Monteverdi (*above*) was a pioneer in his time, completely reforming the Renaissance idea of **consort** music (*left*).

The **violin family**, of which the violin (*below*) is a member, eventually replaced the **viol family**, a group of string instruments with frets and six strings (like a guitar).

Monteverdi's "Renaissance orchestra" was starting to look like what we think of as a modern day orchestra: instruments organized into sections; lots of bowed strings; and lots of variety. Over time, the **viol family** (an early string instrument family) was replaced by the **violin family** (violin, viola, cello, and bass) as social practices changed.



In the 1800s, the strings became more important than ever. Brass, woodwind and percussion instruments became more advanced, allowing composers to write more difficult parts, and keyboard instruments took a back seat. These composers began to write for even more specific instruments, which meant a detailed knowledge of individual instrument sounds and capabilities was vital.



The first violinist, or **concertmaster**, led the orchestra's performance from his chair, but as orchestras were getting bigger and bigger, all those musicians couldn't see and follow the concertmaster. This led to the **baton** that conductors use today. Early in the 1800s, conductor-composers such as Carl Maria von Weber and Felix Mendelssohn actually began to stand up on a **podium** and conduct from front and center.



Later in the 1800s, the orchestra reached the size and proportions we know today. Many composers, including Berlioz, Verdi, Wagner, Mahler, and Richard Strauss, also became conductors.

Their experiments with orchestration paved the way to the 20th century. In fact, Arnold Schoenberg wrote a piece for a 150-piece orchestra!

The first violinist, or **concertmaster**, sits closest to the conductor (*left*), while in the back of the orchestra, a percussionist plays the xylophone (*below*).

The 20th century has been a century of freedom and experimentation with the orchestra. It has also been a time of superstar conductors, as the conductor has more and more responsibility and visibility. The "basic" 19th-century orchestra is still around; you might see a large, expanded percussion section, or lots and lots of woodwinds and brass, but the orchestra still takes more or less the same form: a big string section, with smaller sections for brasses, woodwinds, percussion, harps and keyboard instruments.



**And after all these years, it still works!**

Some information adapted from  
"A Short History of the Symphony  
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