

Chapter Four: Knowing the Orchestra

There are many features, you will inevitably discover, which all orchestras have in common; other characteristics you may observe which may be peculiar to those orchestras of a particular nation, and yet further individual customs that might be idiosyncratic to just one orchestra.

Wherever you travel in the world, you will experience both the familiar and the unfamiliar, and all orchestras possess these in abundance. It is knowing how to deal with the unknown that is the real test for a conductor.

So to set the ground rules so to speak, let me acquaint you with some of the features that you will find common to every orchestra in the world.

The leader is the *second* most important person on the concert platform - and don't they know it! They are usually full-time contracted members of the orchestra, however there is a growing trend these days towards flitting about between orchestras at will. It's an interesting symbiotic arrangement since, for the leaders, it allows them to keep more than one iron in the fire at any given time; and for the orchestra (which these days may have two or three such leaders) it keeps their gene pool well stocked with new blood (or at least rotating the blood that is already in stock – to stretch the metaphor to its limit).

Here is an oft-asked question: Why does the leader have to be a violinist? Why not a bassoonist or flautist or percussionist (Okay, maybe not a percussionist)? And it is not just ignorant members of the public who ask this question. No, it's ignorant members of the orchestral profession also.

The answer is twofold.

(1) The leaders' position at the head of the orchestra, evolved from the Concertmaster's role as musical director of the ensemble during the early days when orchestras were somewhat smaller and,

consequently, more manageable.

He would sit or stand at the front of the assembly where all the others could see him (and I mean *him* as this was, in those days, not considered suitable or fitting employment for a lady) with his violin, while trying to keep the other players together by bobbing up and down, swaying about, waving his bow in the air, and generally making a bit of a spectacle of himself. I doubt there was much finesse involved.

Then as orchestras really took off and became larger, it became too arduous a task for just one player, so the Concertmaster was given a sort of honourable discharge and was made to sit down and play all the notes like the other violinists. To keep them happy though, a new job specification was created. He got a rank all of his own which, in respect of his former position, allowed him to outrank all the other players and tell them what to do a lot of the time. So he became the conductor's lieutenant, a position which enjoyed many privileges to the lasting annoyance of many other members of the orchestra who, not only in those far off days, but even now, considered themselves to be equally (if not more) qualified to hold sway over the others.

(2) Part of their role these days, since they are seated closer to the conductor than anyone else, is to act as go-between or ambassador, with one foot in the players' camp so to speak, and a kind of diplomatic immunity with the maestro. You will notice that the leader's dressing room (another privilege of rank) is nearly always located next door to the maestro's.

The job requires intelligence, diplomacy, tact, finesse, charm, musicianship, and those notable qualities one would ideally expect in any high-ranking commanding officer, namely: a loud voice, ruthlessness, an expensive watch (though not, one hopes, as expensive as the maestro's), massive ego, and no sense of humour. (Did I mention charm?)

String principals sit at the head of each string section and bark orders over their shoulders to their downtrodden underlings. The skill here is largely a case of judging what, when, and how to bark them. Of course, they must at all times answer to the leader (which they hate doing) so they generally work off their many frustrations upon their

section colleagues.

On their shoulders (together with their instrument, of course) lies the weight of responsibility, together with all the frustrations, that often goes hand-in-hand with leading any bunch of belligerent, ill-disciplined, anarchic, lawless, lazy good-for-nothings, and fashion them into a section of tight, highly motivated, yet terrified drones. Essential requirements for a string principal, therefore, are: 360-degree vision, lightning reflexes and, ideally, some form of martial arts capability. (Those that don't possess all these qualifications tend to be somewhat more disposed to depart the orchestra feet first. Life insurance companies mostly regard being a string principal as a high-risk profession).



Vladimir Hakittobitz

A principal second violinist I once knew called Vladimir Hakittobitz (1917-1951) was about to market a rather ingenious little rear-view mirror which, when attached to the scroll of his violin, enabled him to keep a stern and watchful eye on his section at all times. I'm certain it would have been a great commercial winner had it reached the production stage, but alas Vladimir tragically and accidentally died of poisoning in the middle of his brilliant career. There was some mystery surrounding his untimely demise. Apparently, he used to enjoy the occasional tittle between rehearsals. But on his final, fateful day, unbeknown to himself, he accidentally picked up a bottle believing it to be his usual brandy. Unfortunately, his hand fell upon a very similar bottle which contained nitroglycerin (a powerful liquid explosive). As was his custom, he downed several glasses in rapid succession at one gulp. Then, a few minutes later, swaying once or twice, he slid off his seat at the head of his section with his violin still in place under his chin and an unblinking look of puzzled disapproval in his eyes.

The cause of death, however, was only discovered *after* the funeral, which was certainly not an event any of the mourners is likely to forget. It had been the wish of the deceased that he be cremated. Thus it was that, shortly after the casket disappeared through the curtains, the crematorium was reduced to rubble by a huge explosion, and all that was left of Vladimir was a twenty-foot crater in the ground. A spectacular and tragic way to end one's career.

Rank and file strings are the bottom of the ladder, both contractually and socially (and in most other respects also). They, nevertheless, represent the single largest body within the orchestra, but have not the powers to make any decisions either artistically or administratively. The brass section affectionately refer to them as 'canon fodder' and use them for target practice: A 'fortissimo' note on a trumpet can send a shock-wave (and a fine mist of valve oil) over surprisingly great distances. Valve oil, which has a very distinctive smell, is hard to wash out of one's hair and garments, and the rank and file violas, who tend to be first in the line-of-fire (and, unbeknown to themselves, since they have become so accustomed to it) carry this aroma around with them most of the time. It has frequently puzzled

them why complete strangers often say: ‘You play viola don’t you’? They put it down to some sort of ‘violary’ charisma - which I suppose is fairly accurate really.

Rank and files have evolved their own little society which runs on parallel tracks to the rest of the orchestra. They are very social animals who huddle together in groups of anything from three or four players, up to twelve (occasionally more) and it is quite rare ever to see one of them on their own or mingling with wind or brass players.

Woodwind players are very complex personalities. Emotionally speaking, they are unable to dissociate their work from their personal lives. These days, since the slow introduction of women into the orchestra, an unforeseen spin off has been that these female woodwind players tend to pair up with the male of their own kind. Although there is undeniably a romantic element to this, since they have been known to produce offspring, I have long suspected that the real reason they get together is to practice scales and technical exercises as a duo at home. One’s heart must go out to the neighbours of these couples. Unlike the string players, who have to share their music (two to each part), they will each have a copy to themselves, which is both a blessing and a curse. For, on the one hand, it is nice not to become embroiled in the mind-numbingly tedious string habit of arguing how the collective group should play a passage, it nevertheless brings its own pressures to bear through the weight of responsibility as there is no one else to fall back upon for support. They are, in fact, soloists but with none of the glitter that is enjoyed by, for example, a concert pianist.

Woodwind players spend much of their time in their self-made universes ruled by a complex structure of laws focused around their instrument which governs their whole existence. An indictment of which may be witnessed should you ever find yourself within earshot of one. Did you notice they are always whistling or humming? Now, if you are very observant you will perceive they always hum the *accompanying wind parts* from the great symphonic works which, much of the time, might have no thematic substance whatsoever. It is quite rare to find other musicians doing this - only woodwind players. Thus it has become a kind of stigma for them, except it seems to take place at a

subconscious level, so I doubt if they are even aware it's happening. Here is a little game you can try: Contrive to be close to a woodwind player during a rehearsal break, then whistle or hum a theme from a symphonic work. What do you suppose will happen? I'll tell you. They will not instinctively take up the melody like a normal person, but will, instead, add the accompaniment. And if you play this game where (as often happens) there are several woodwind players nearby, then you will precipitate a little impromptu hummed performance. Very enjoyable, not least since they will be completely unaware they are doing it.

Woodwind players are social creatures who, as with the rank and file strings, prefer the company of their own kind, but in smaller, more intimate groups.

Brass players are very straight forward individuals – what you see is what you get. They are fun loving, warm hearted, loud, have a good sense of humour, and are often very boisterous. One special quality they possess is an uncannily accurate body clock - as well as the equally uncanny ability to hit a moving viola player at fifty yards.*

For instance, most human existence, from the cradle to the grave, is governed by the cycles of day and night, eating, sleeping, the changing seasons, and a host of more subtle influences. But brass players seem to have taken it a stage further. Their music copies are quite thin. So much so, that even with a work as vast as a Mahler symphony, there is a real danger of drafts (brought on by small changes in air pressure on the concert platform) snatching the music off their stands and wafting it across the auditorium, whereas, on the other hand, string parts often need a specially strengthened music stand to cope with the excessive weight. This means that they may not have much to play for much of the time, though I should add that when they do play, it is of vital importance to the music. Imagine trying to count those vast stretches of emptiness where the music does not require their services. Brass parts don't so much have beats or bars rests as whole hours rests.

*

There is an accessory which can be purchased from specialist brass shops which, when attached just behind the bell of a trumpet or trombone, serves as an aiming-sight similar in principal to that of a rifle. Some brass players, however, regard this as un-sporting.

Counting all those empty pages would drive many people insane. So nature, in her wisdom, has intervened to bestow upon brass players an extra body clock, which can time any entry to the millisecond without them even having to think about it. It is very rare to see a brass player get lost – I certainly haven't. They can be reading a book, or be in deep meditation, completely dormant, but when they are required to play, suddenly in an instant, there they are, alert and upright, with maximum concentration and the instrument on their lips as if it had been there since birth. I will never cease to be amazed how they do it. Indeed, I've tried, on occasions, watching them to see if I can observe the transition from dormancy to alertness, and believe me, it is too quick to perceive with the naked eye. You would need the sort of specialized scientific photographic equipment that can film a bullet slowly emerge from a gun to see how this wonder of nature is achieved.

Brass instruments were traditionally the most non engendered amongst the instruments of the orchestra, yet to their credit they have embraced the female revolution most readily of all.



Trumpet player at work.

French horns are possibly the most intriguing and enigmatic of all the instruments to be found on the concert platform. They are basically pack animals, and their symphonic role seems to reflect this. I do not know whether it is the composers who have fashioned them into this form, or whether it is they that have influenced the composers' symphonic output. Possibly a little of both. Be that as it may, I can never remember a time when things were any different. They take an aloof exception to sitting with the other brass instruments, and seem to prefer annexing themselves to the side or back of the woodwind section. Thus becoming a sort of hybrid instrument possessing features common to the brass; namely the materials from which they are constructed, and having three valves to shorten or lengthen the tube down which they blow raspberries yet, in their souls, they believe themselves to be made of wood. You may occasionally come across people who are similar, who indeed feel themselves to be the opposite gender to that with which they were brought into the world. I believe there may be a specific 'horn' gene in their DNA somewhere to be found.

They also have some interesting features peculiar to themselves alone, namely:

1. Their bells point backwards, which is most probably a requirement stipulated by some industrial aural health-and-safety regulations. You certainly do not want to be facing the wrong end of a horn when its player is feeling bloody-minded.
2. Unlike all the other brass players, they do all their fingering with their left hands.
3. They have become very specialized, so that the 1st and 3rd horns concentrate on 'high' music, while the 2nd and 4th concentrate on low notes.
4. There is, you will notice, always a comedian within the horn section - it is a universal law. Unfortunately, no orchestra would be complete without its resident horn joker, who will endeavour, as he warms to his task, and through his absurd

antics, to swiftly draw attention to himself (and away from you) during rehearsal sessions. I am afraid you will have little alternative but to endure it, and, if you can, smile bravely despite your strong suspicions (verging on paranoia) that the butt of most of his jokes is, in fact, the maestro. This is one thing you will never be able to prove, regardless of how many years you might have been in the profession.

With the possible exception of number 4 above, they are usually intellectual creatures but, as a rule, prefer not to get embroiled in the sort of animated flamboyant debating and banter which the trombonists thrive upon. They prefer to sit in deep thought and work things out in their own time and in their own way. They are the poets within the orchestra.

Timpani players deserve a section to themselves – namely because they don't really possess bona fide membership of any other established group within the symphonic social and professional group dynamic. I've always felt slightly sorry for them for that reason, rather as if they were wallflowers. Of course, they are members of the percussion family, but consider themselves to be a more advanced level of evolution to the percussionists with their humdrum collection of toys (as they see it). The percussion, indeed, are only members of the same family in the sense that your pet hamster may belong to one's own family. It should be mentioned here, that the percussionist's perspective is: 'It is not what you've got, but what you do with it that counts'.^{*} Timpani are large, shiny, very impressive, possess a huge dynamic range, are very expensive, and stand elevated, at the rear of the assembled orchestra like a war-lord behind his army. Timpani players tend to be large, brooding, muscular, inscrutable individuals who say very little, and then only in monosyllables. But they are tremendous thinkers. One gets the impression that, in conversation, they are

*

Important point: I have noticed that when any musician uses the word 'Count' in conversation, I get a rather uncomfortable rush of adrenaline – my therapist states, unequivocally, that this is perfectly normal.

meticulously leaving out the words they think their listeners might not understand.

Harps usually appear either singly or in pairs, although there is the odd Wagner opera (and I *mean* odd) which require lots of the cumbersome objects. I believe if Wagner had known then what he knew now (as it were), then he would, most likely, have reconsidered the wisdom of having all those knitting needles clattering away noisily during those tacet arias where the harps are not otherwise required. Or perhaps succumbed under pressure, and composed a full-scale Knitting-Needle Chorus. In the hands of such a genius, an ensemble of knitting-needles would, I am convinced, sound magnificent. One can but wistfully speculate what path the history of opera and, ultimately, symphonic music, would have taken should this have come to pass.

Harpists are extremely sociable creatures, but frequently are forced to lead a rather solitary existence within the orchestra. They tend also to be of no fixed abode; finding themselves located wherever there is a convenient space to accommodate their rather bulky instrument plus its designer stool.

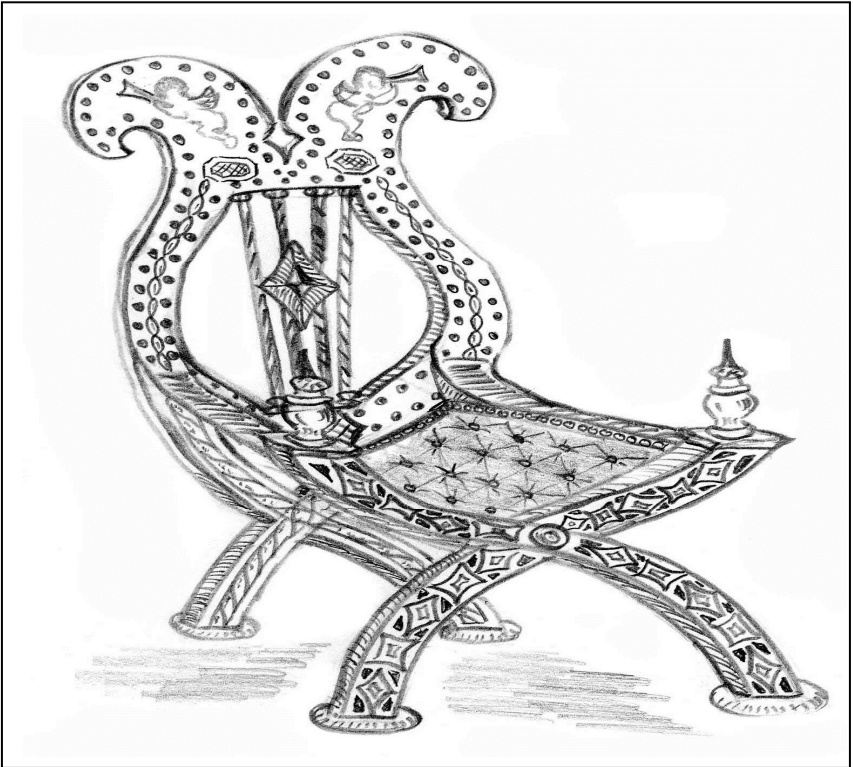
The harpists' seating equipment is a subject of great personal significance to their owners representing, as it does, their status or position on the harpists' league table. No two will ever be alike. They are custom built by master joiners, who will be instructed to spare no expense in time, effort, or materials. For, at the end of the day, a harp is simply a harp. But the stool, which (although to you or I represents merely a four-legged piece of functional furniture) really takes pride of place in the hearts and minds of all harpists. They would, in a heartbeat, willingly squander a king's ransom on a fitting rest for their bottoms.

There is a famous story of a Harpist known as Frau Rüschtwang (1834-?) who commissioned the foremost cabinetmaker of his day to create the 'most lavish stool ever'. It was clearly intended to be his Magnum Opus.

He set to work there and then. It took him three years to build and, when it was finally completed, was indeed everything and more Frau Rüschtwang had dreamed it would be. It took your breath away with its inlaid precious stones, rare woods and veneers, gilding, ornate carvings of classical figurines, sumptuous gold embossed leather, and

silk brocade upholstery. There is, however, a sinister end to this story.

So besotted was our harpist with her magnificent accessory, that she would never let it out of her sight for one moment. Indeed, so possessive and jealous did she become, that she could no longer entertain the thought of any rival harpist owning a finer one than hers. Hence, it was with this thought in her fevered mind, that she employed the services of two ruthless assassins whose instructions were to murder the only man alive capable of producing a finer stool than that which she now possessed. And that person was, of course, that very same renowned cabinet maker. He died the victim of his own genius.



Frau Rüschtwang's stool.

The two assassins were hunted down, questioned, then executed for their crime. But Frau Rüschwang was never caught. Some historians say she took her own life. Others claim she went into hiding and gradually lost her mind consumed by the overpowering guilt of her wicked deeds, then finally died and was ignominiously buried in an unmarked grave. We will never know for sure.

The stool survived, but no one wanted to own it – not even an American. So it spent some time displayed as an exhibit in an instrument museum where many people believed they could hear the sounds of a ghostly harp plucking during the darkest hours of the night. It was later destroyed by fire when the museum was accidentally burnt down by an inebriated music critic who was endeavouring to light his cigar with the score of *Götterdämmerung* while, at the top of his voice, singing the passionate aria: *‘Ich hab’ ein schönes Bündel Kokusnüsse’*. An aria which, curiously, later became quite a hit song in the music halls of London.

The percussion section are ideally located as far away from the conductor as possible. Indeed, in some instances, they have been positioned completely out of sight in the wings. Yet no matter how far away they might be stationed, one thing is certain and that is they will never ever be out of earshot. They are also the most rapidly expanding section of the modern orchestra. Certainly, the strings are larger than they used to be, likewise the wind. Yet a larger string section will simply mean more of the same instruments that were previously present. But what, I hear you ask, is all that stuff we see piled up on the platform when a contemporary work is being performed? It resembles an exhibition of modern kinetic sculpture. What it all does is a total mystery known only to percussionists. A wise conductor will steer the conversation well away from issues pertaining to percussion parts. Percussion makes us feel uncomfortable. Of course, composers just love to write for them – obviously, because if they didn’t, there wouldn’t be any to worry about. But they are foolishly playing with fire when they do. They will have to face a fusillade of rapid-fire questions about the use of the aforesaid which, let’s face it, they will probably have even less chance of answering correctly than the conductor. The only positive

aspect of having a composer on board when you rehearse his latest wretched opus is that you can stand behind him when the orchestra throws impossible questions at you, and enjoy seeing him take the flack.

Percussionists are like no other musician. They seem to communicate with each other on a subliminal level that requires neither speech nor gesture. It is beyond our understanding, and is both fascinating and rather frightening to witness – a little like watching those programs about deadly poisonous snakes – it’s okay when its on the television, but it must be altogether another matter actually being in amongst them. I ponder occasionally whether the unfortunate snake expert’s dying words would be, whilst the venom from an enraged reptile courses through his veins: “Would that I had become a conductor.”

Percussionists glide around each other whilst they play, as if they are enacting a slow dance with complex footwork and intricate rhythmic patterns. They can dart forwards or back, or abruptly change step, and all the while they are beating, shaking, stroking, waving, striking, walloping, clouting, bashing, thumping, squeezing and tickling these strange sculptures with the bizarre objects one can observe suspended from them. It can become quite hypnotic. It is not an easy matter for a conductor to admit he is out of his depth and, if I believed it was just myself that didn’t comprehend the strange parallel universe inhabited by percussionists, I would probably try to bluff my way out of trouble. But I am now old enough, wise enough, and cautious enough to know there will always be things forever beyond our knowledge and understanding. There are those gifted members of the scientific community who have made it their life’s mission to decipher the strange songs of the whale. Maybe some day in the future science will discover a way of knowing how and what it is that percussionists communicate to each other. Until then treat them and their instruments with respect and caution.



So your brief guided tour of the sections making up the modern orchestra is complete. Thus far we have expressed in general terms what you can expect to observe in any orchestra, anywhere on the planet. It

has been a safe riverboat ride through meadows and woodland.

Now your journey sweeps you out into the open ocean to explore the wild, untamed vastness of the modern orchestra.

Here is where the exploration of the unknown begins...

String bowing is the single largest drain on precious rehearsal time, but is the reality of life to every orchestral string player, and yet an utter nightmare for the conductor. Be warned, never was a truer word said than: 'A little knowledge can be a dangerous thing'.

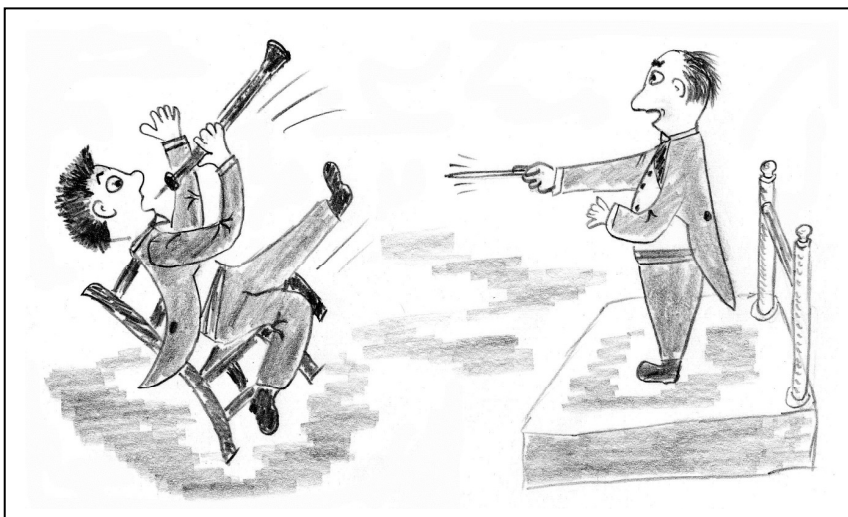
A foolish young student at the Royal College of Conducting said to me once:

'So what's the big deal, the bow either goes up, or it goes down. If it ain't one then it's gotta be the other.'

How do you begin to address the mountain of ignorance this foolish young man has to conquer? The truth is that it can't be done - not in one book or indeed many. Only a lifetime devoted to playing a stringed instrument will equip you with the wisdom necessary to address this vast topic. To all you doubters who may be reading this textbook let me say that string bowing represents fifty percent of a string player's technique. His instrument is just a hollow box without it; it is what draws the sound forth, it is the air in the lungs of the singer, the paint on the artist's brush, the wind in the sails of your tall ship. Here is one of those occasions where you are going to have to put absolute trust in your second-in-command. Should you hesitate to do so, it will be construed as indecision on your part (see list of faults in Chapter Five). Fortunately the leader will be ready and willing to get you out of trouble every time. There is a good reason for this, and being a good pal, helping out an old friend, a general spirit of altruistic brotherly love, has nothing to do with it whatsoever - indeed, it was never even an issue.

The real reason the leader is so eager to step into the breach, is that he needs to affirm that he can do something which you can't. Bitter as this pill may be to swallow, it is (to all conductors' eternal frustration) unfortunately the truth - which incidentally is the reason why you must not hesitate to fall back upon his expertise here, since any sign of hesitation on your part will be interpreted not only as a lack of trust, but therefore by reciprocity, a lack of mutual respect; furthermore

as an indication that you might be suggesting you know better than he how to do it, which will precipitate a strong negative reaction from the body of string players as a whole. Because, despite the probability that they frequently loathe the leader almost as much as they hate their conductor, they will nonetheless fiercely defend his right to intervene in what they would otherwise consider to be an unacceptable trespass on the part of the maestro. By readily employing the expertise of the leader, you will, indeed, be judged as wisely delegating the lesser responsibilities to your number two, while you focus your superior intellect, in the meantime, on the loftier goal of artistic interpretation.



‘You played a wrong mote’.

Much the same rule applies to the other bodies of instruments within the orchestra (though to a slightly lesser degree since, tactically speaking, with the exception of the strings, you are dealing with individuals on a ‘one-against-one’ basis). It is therefore well worth learning a good selection of the following technical terms specific to each type of instrument. Certainly you need to know the common words, but casually throw in the occasional selection of rare and esoteric technical terminology as well – it will really pull the rug from under

their feet if you can display such pertinent, specific knowledge in this offhand fashion. They never, for one moment, imagined you would be privy to such knowledge, and it will make them wonder what else you might be concealing from them; shaking, to the foundations, their false sense of security.

For instance, did you notice the oboe faking that impossibly hard chromatic passage in Tchaikovsky’s ‘Fifth’ for example? Not that you actually need to hear anything wrong necessarily. It is enough to know that here is a passage that *all* oboists have to fake simply because it is so unsympathetically written by the composer. The reality, of course, is there is usually such an infernal noise going on that it is bound to make you look all the more impressive if you can pick out one single instrument from the melee. They will marvel at your phenomenal hearing.

Make a point of looking at them knowingly; a slight nod of your head, raise the eyebrows ever so slightly, catch their eye, then look very closely at the score as if you cannot reconcile what you have just heard to what you see in the manuscript. There is such power in these small gestures that players have been known to faint during rehearsals. Indeed, they will actually look forward to the concert performance with all its associated terrors in the knowledge that at least you are less likely to be catching them out while they are thus engaged in performing.

This gives the orchestra the sort of motivation that keeps them alert and on their toes.

Try studying some of the following string terminology, and then put it to profitable employment...

String Terms

Common	Uncommon	Rare	Meaning
Arco			Play it with the bow.
Pizzicato			Plucked with the finger.
		Shoe shine	String players, it has been noticed, rarely, or never, clean their shoes.

Common	Uncommon	Rare	Meaning
Ponticello			Horrid scratchy noise. (the first technique a string student learns to do with the bow)
Slur			Joining notes together
Ricochet			Like a slur, but sounding very nervous
	Intensivo		Howling noise.
		Jetté	Nervous bowing.
		Battuté	Messy bowing.
Con Sordino			Play with mute.
	Spiccato		Type of pasta.
	Flautando		Sway about a lot
		Sul Tasto	Play without making any sound
Down bow			Bow goes down
Up bow			Bow goes up.
		Sul C	Viola term for woolly sounding noise.
3 rd position			Used in ballet music.
Senza Sord			Sord Off – see chapter three on use of bad language.
	Glissando		A swoop.
		Portamento	An accidental swoop.
		Portato	Sound like a tuba.
		Pontifliccato	Not a real word at all – Why not invent a few of your own? They'll never admit they don't know what it means.
	Col legno		Pronounced 'koll-lane-yo'. Means play it with the wood of the bow – and sounds truly terrible. (see 'Mars' in Holst's Planets)
Double Stop			Playing on two strings at once which sounds <i>twice</i> as bad as one.
	Triple Stop		Playing on three strings at once which sounds <i>ten</i> times as bad as one.
		Quadruple stop	Forget it.

Common	Uncommon	Rare	Meaning
Divisi			A cop-out when they should be double-stopping.
		Enharmonic	When the violin is tuned to 'F' flat, 'B' double-flat, 'C' double-sharp, and 'F' double-sharp.
	Non divisi		The same as 'Sul Tasto'.
Vibrato			Wobbly left hands.
Tremolando			Wobbly right hands.
	Snap (or Bartok) pizzicato		The prize-winning sound in the 'Who can make the worst noise' competition which all string sections indulge in.
	<i>f</i> hole		String instruments traditionally possess these. They were probably first put in as a joke by a 17 th century Cremonese instrument maker.

It is also worth while picking up a few more terms from the Woodwind, Brass, Horn, Harp and Timp vocabulary (though obviously not as essential as the string terms).

Woodwind Terms

Common	Uncommon	Rare	Meaning
Tonguing			With a 'T' sound.
Soft tonguing			With a 'fzlwby' sort of sound.
	Flutter tongue		Play and spit at the same time – see if you can shower the violins.
Transposition			Rewrite it in your head into another key.
		Circular Breathing	Changing facial colour, through: Pink – Red – Purple – Black.
	Open Hole		Wind players are obsessed with dentistry – this is a term they have picked up from their frequent visits.

Common	Uncommon	Rare	Meaning
Embouchure			The wind-players word meaning <i>mouth</i> to be used in musical conversation. For example: 'A sensual smile spread across her beautiful embouchure'.

Brass Terms

Common	Uncommon	Rare	Meaning
Rest			Rest.
Pause			Pause.
Break			Break.
Tacit			Go to the pub.
Bar line			Queue for a drink
Slow movement			Take an early break.
Key			Buttons which operate the valves.
Key			Device for letting the water out of your tubing. (Don't call it spit though; it is one of the few things to which even they take exception.)
Key			Used for locking the instrument case to prevent theft of valuable bottles.
	Key		A coded selection of sharps or flats that lets you know which valve keys to press.
	Pedal note		Tuba term meaning counterfeit bank note.
	Double tongue		Trombone term meaning to 'talk twice as fast a normal'.
Circular Breathing			Being able to talk indefinitely without needing to take a breath (trombone term).
	<i>P</i>		Play quietly.
		<i>PP</i>	Play very quietly.

Common	Uncommon	Rare	Meaning
<i>fff</i>			Aim for the nearest viola player.
	Accidental		A sharp or flat played on purpose.
		Accident	A sharp or flat played by mistake.

Horn Terms

Common	Uncommon	Rare	Meaning
Transpose			Horn players do this naturally – nearly everyone else finds it very hard.
Open notes			This is what a horn should sound like.
	Stopped notes		Funny buzzy sound – like a mosquito in a tin can.
		Bouché	Ditto – in French.
		Gestopft	Ditto – in German.
		Chiuso	Ditto – in Italian.
Crook			Horn players start pulling bits off their horns when they get bored – these are called crooks.
	Cuivré		Loud buzzy sound – like an angry dragonfly in a tin can.
Mute			A device to ram up the bell when you need your right hand for other things.

Harp Terms

Common	Uncommon	Rare	Meaning
Pedal			There are seven of these which are used to pre-select the notes. The clattering they make can attract the undesired attention of the percussion section.
	Harmonics		Sounds like those old clocks chiming – quite nice really.

Common	Uncommon	Rare	Meaning
Glissando			Very effective big Hollywood sound. You know you're in for an epic if you hear one in the movie.
Plain and Pearl			Used a lot in knitting.
		Plectrum	Used for special effects – bit of a waste of time really.

Timpani Terms

Common	Uncommon	Rare	Meaning
Pedal			One per drum – used for pumping it up.
Sticks			These come in varieties ranging from 'soft' to 'hard'
	Skin		Either synthetic or animal – N.B. It is quite rare to find a vegetarian timpanist.
		Solo	These don't happen that often – but when they do occur they are very impressive.
Roll			Timp players enjoy these – I've noticed they always seem happiest when they are rolling.
		Keys	Timp players regard these as trivial and not worth bothering about.
		Melody	Ditto.

Percussion Terms

The safest advice is to avoid getting involved with the mind-boggling language spoken on 'Planet Percussion' sometimes referred to in the trade as 'Bang-gangese'

The image displays a musical score for percussion, organized into four horizontal staves. Each staff begins with a double bar line and a 16-measure time signature. The notation includes various rhythmic values such as eighth, sixteenth, and thirty-second notes, as well as rests. The score is characterized by a variety of sound effects and onomatopoeic words written above or below the notes. The first staff includes 'splat', 'rattle', 'ping poingy ting ting ding', 'thud slap boing', 'poing shake', 'zing', 'sf', 'plink', 'stump', 'shake', 'crunch', 'wham', 'sf', 'bang', 'blorp', 'sf', and 'zott'. The second staff includes 'crunch', 'twang', 'thump', 'doing', 'splurt ping rattle', 'mf', 'twang', 'mf', and 'mf'. The third staff includes 'thud', 'f', 'shak-ety shake', 'mf', 'ping', 'f', and 'rat - tatty tat'. The fourth staff includes 'f' and 'mf'. The score is written in a standard musical notation style with a key signature of one flat (Bb) and a common time signature (C).

A typical section of percussion score including some of their technical terminology.