

Chapter Seven: Repertoire and Soloists

The work specification of the modern symphony orchestra is vast, and has to encompass:

1. Symphonic repertoire
 2. Concerto
 3. Opera
 4. Oratorio
 5. Ballet
 6. Light Music
 7. Contemporary
 8. Baroque
 9. Musicals
 10. Film soundtracks
 11. Commercials
- ...and probably more besides.

How is it possible to embrace a repertoire which is so varied and huge that, should it be gathered together, the scores alone would probably have trouble fitting into an aircraft hanger?

The average professional orchestra has to be able to work with up to three different conductors in each and every two-week working period, no two conductors will have the same style of beating or rehearsing. Also, they must share the platform with a continual stream of neurotic soloists, both instrumental and vocal. How do they cope?

It is quite probable that if they stopped to think about it they would be so overwhelmed by the burden that they would most likely suffer a nervous breakdown or drop dead with fright. Fortunately, it is very rare to find an orchestral animal whose mental faculties evolved beyond the time of the Neanderthals. So they tend not to be troubled by thoughts more complex than:

'When is the next break?'

and:

'Whose turn is it to buy the next round of drinks?'

and:

'It looks like some women feel the cold more than others'.



Homo Symphonicus.

Hence, the ideal symphonic player (we shall name him **Homo Symphonicus**) should possess the following qualities:

1. An effortless technical mastery of their chosen instrument.
2. The ability to read and make sense of a badly written, disintegrating part which is dog-eared, foxed, stained

and over-edited with cuts, repeats, alterations, crossings-out in thick dark note-obscuring crayon, not to mention generations of graffiti (the legacy of past players making their mark for posterity).

3. The ability to execute the previous two qualities after consuming three bottles of wine.
4. The ability to sleep and play at the same time.*

The Symphony:

The most important item on the 'job description' list (at least from the conductor's viewpoint) is, without doubt, the Symphony.

Historically, it was the Symphony that gave birth to our profession, since it became too demanding a task for any of the players to keep time whilst encumbered by their instruments, so, from the ensuing chaos rose the conductor with nothing more sophisticated than a short stick to pull all the tangled threads together and fashion them into a transcendental work of art.

The symphony is verily the maestro's chariot of fire. Hence, it is almost always featured as the principal work in the concert program. There will be occasions when this is not going to be possible, usually due to administrative circumstances beyond the control of the Maestro (such as the Requiem mentioned in the previous chapter). When this occurs, it may be possible to delegate the concert to a junior conductor. It is regarded as a form of apprenticeship for the younger members of the conducting profession (or those with less than three homes), and will provide them with the stepping stones to propel them further up the creek of our profession.

The choice of symphony is vast for, as well as being the pivotal

* There is a form of dormancy which evolution has bestowed upon the orchestral musician. They are able to perform superbly, yet if you look one of them in the face it is alarming to notice they are often, in fact, in a sort of somnambulistic trance. Their mental shop door has the 'closed' sign displayed. It is most commonly seen amongst rank and file strings, but also percussion and occasionally brass players. The fingers move, the eyes follow the notes, but the brain is sunning itself by the pool side with a long cocktail complete with paper umbrella, slice of lemon, sprig of mint and plenty of crushed ice.

work in the symphonic concert program, it represents the ultimate goal in the creative output for most of the great composers. They traditionally have had to start earning their bread and butter through smaller-scale commissioned works to satisfy the requirements of their patrons, but they have nurtured the dream in their hearts of some day having a great symphony of theirs performed. So, in their free time they would extract the manuscript of their secret symphony from under the mattress (the traditional hiding place for objects of great personal worth) and add a little more to it over the months. The widely adopted habit of keeping unfinished symphonies under the mattress probably accounts for the rather tatty and, dare I say, unhygienic condition of many of the works that end up in the great music collections around the globe. It is for that reason one is usually required to wear gloves to handle them, rather than for any concerns regarding the welfare of the manuscript itself.

The task of researching original manuscripts should ideally be left to the musicologist - they seem to have acquired a more robust immune system. Also, try not to shake hands with one if you can possibly avoid it. Keep in mind, when in their company, the disgusting diseases some composers seemed to pick up which seems to go cheek-by-jowl with their chosen career. Many of them died young as a result, but their work (and maybe their germs) liveth on.

There are many composers whose first attempt at a symphony is a spectacular disaster. They try to take on a large-scale work without the maturity to cope with its technical complexities and artistic disciplines. It is of little use being a creative genius if you do not speak the language of the instruments for which you write. I am sure that, in retrospect, they would be inwardly cringing at the thought of these juvenile works ever being performed, but from the historical point of view they can be quite interesting. Mozart, for example, was writing music before he was out of nappies. Should one wish to perform, or record, a compilation of nursery tunes by an infant prodigy they are doubtless of some worth, but the orchestra would rather stick to his magnificent mature output which has rarely been equalled and never surpassed.

It is always useful to have a speedy way of assessing the suitability of a composer's symphonic output for inclusion into your

concert program without the time-consuming inconvenience of wading through massive reference tomes on music.

I have reproduced the following catalogue from the scholarly writings of the much-published Hugo De Surleygit (1927-). It provides a somewhat personal but convenient quick-reference guide to the classical, romantic, and modern composers and their output, who managed to get ‘the symphony’ (or similar) *more or less right* first time:

Bartók	No actual symphonies, but a jolly good concerto for orchestra. Keeps the orchestra on their toes.
Beethoven	This angry young man showed early promise (his publisher would cheat by designating opus numbers non-chronologically).
Berg	Definitely not everyone’s cup of tea. But he wrote some major (atonal actually – Ed) works for orchestra.
Berlioz	Ripping good fun to play – weird chap, though. I’d hate to be stuck in an elevator with him and Beethoven.
Brahms	There are none finer - this is about as good as it gets.
Britten	Twentieth century English – but not bad for all that.
Bruckner	This is the most fun a conductor can (decently) have on the concert platform. Guaranteed to whip the crowds into a frenzy every time. String players hate him though.
Debussy	No symphonies as such to his credit, but he turned out some pretty atmospheric music. Pity he was French.
Elgar	Two epic symphonies. Quite a craftsman. Not so twentieth century sounding as Britten.
Franck	Gets in by the skin of his teeth. He only wrote the one symphony, which shows some promise. He should have had another go. I think he would have been good at it if he’d persevered.
Górecki	Hypnotic sounds. One has to shut ones eyes to listen. But it’s hard to stay awake.
Haydn	He was the father of the modern orchestral format and therefore holds a special place in the hearts of all conductors. His last symphonies are great. He also gave Mozart a kick-start which is always a good thing to mention on any c.v.
Hindemith	Serious German music. A bit of a ‘composer’s composer’. Well scored though. He was also a closet viola player!
Holst	The Planets was his big blockbuster hit despite its embarrassing ending. He should have kept Mars and Jupiter and scrapped the rest. He wrote other pieces too, but they are not such fun.
Janáček	Elemental music that sets your pulse racing.
Kodály	Big symphonic folk music – very effective.
Lutoslawski	Music for the discerning listener. Deep and thoughtful.

Mahler	One of the Gods of the symphony. Very expensive to stage – but well worth it.
Mendelssohn	Bright kid. He should have stuck to his early style instead of getting grandiose later in life.
Mozart	One of music's greatest geniuses. Never wrote a bad note in his short life.
Nielsen	Dark, brooding, vast landscapes of sound.
Prokofiev	Boy wonder from the Russian stable. His first symphony is the best. The others lack the same spontaneous exuberance.
Rakhmaninov	Romantic sounds you could happily drown in.
Ravel	An unsurpassed master of the art of subtle orchestration.
Respighi	Great music, fabulous climaxes.
Rimski-korsakov	Very likable music – not cutting edge though.
Saint-Saëns	Has no distinctive style that he can call his own, but wrote some great melodies.
Schoenberg	Brainy chap. Father of the 'weird school' of music.
Shostakovich	A one-man oppressed mass. Terrific loud bits but gets a little dull in between.
Sibelius	Very distinctive style – has an irritating foible of writing <i>meno forte</i> when he wants it to be <i>ppp</i> . Usually goes down well with the crowds though.
Smetana	Long-winded and loud. But the public seem to enjoy it.
Strauss R.	Elgar's German counterpart and symphonic master craftsman. Everyone knows the film '2001 A Space Odyssey', but not everyone has heard of (or can pronounce) 'Also Sprach Zarathustra'. His style has been much copied by film-score writers.
Stravinsky	Controversial genius. His ballet music is even better without the dancers jumping about and distracting everyone.
Tchaikovsky	Seven great unashamedly romantic masterpieces.
Tippett	Brainy English school of writing.
Vaughan Williams	Nostalgic English school of writing.

And now for some of Hugo De Surleygit's *also ran's* of the symphonic world who didn't always get things right first time – but often came out on top later on in life.

Bizet	Definitely a late developer. He turned out some good material after a few false starts.
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Delius	Nice romantic, dreamy English style, but he should have written a major symphonic work and given Elgar a run for his money.
Dukas	Another one-hit-wonder with 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice'. Walt Disney has made it <i>his</i> piece though. (See 'Fantasia')
Dvorák	His first attempts are long-winded and feeble. But the 'New World Symphony' really makes up for it – he should have cut the final coda though.
Grieg	Apart from 'Peer Gynt' and a piano concerto, not very many 'crowd pullers' to his name.
Ives	American.
Liszt	The victim of his own success as a pianist. No one takes him very seriously as a symphonic writer.
Puccini	He didn't write any major works for symphony orchestra – Why? Conductors will never forgive him for that. But what superb operas.
Rossini	Another 'big on opera' chap. His overtures always go down well, though.
Rubbra	Not a huge crowd puller. Elgar is lots better.
Schubert	Nice melodies, fascinating harmonization, but alas, the threads holding his works together are a little flimsy.
Schumann	Should have stuck to piano music. He was very good at that, but an indifferent symphonic writer. He could certainly turn out a catchy tune though.
Wagner	Not a nice man. Writer of larger-than-life massive operas. Worshipped by opera fans. He wrote some orchestral things too, but they are dwarfed by his operas.
Walton	There is the sort of 'loud' that gets one excited, and there is the sort which gives you earache. Which one is Walton?
Weber	Wrote music that was nice to listen to – for a while.

The concerto is, after the symphony (indeed quite a long way after the symphony), generally the next most important work to include in the planning of a concert program. There is no escaping the reality that you are going to have to share the stage with a soloist on a fairly regular basis throughout your career. It is one of the many trials a conductor has to endure and, unfortunately, it won't get any easier with the passing of the years. It is therefore essential to understand the mind of the concert soloist; how they think, what is their motivation, what drives them, what they like to eat, how they like to rehearse, their taste

in shoes and watches^{*}, what they are likely to say about you to the press, and so on.

Therefore it is helpful to divide soloists into three broad categories namely:

1. **Pianists**
2. **Other instrumental**
3. **Singers**

Pianists in general are arguably the most fanatical of all three (and that is saying something). They live and breathe piano.

In order to succeed they have to start learning before they can either walk or talk (usually whether they want to or not). Hence, they often tend to be the victims of their parents unfulfilled ambitions.

As you can imagine, their childhood years are governed day and night by the piano. So deeply rooted is this psychological imprinting that, hypothetically speaking, should they ever find themselves in a *piano-free* environment, it would undermine their whole being. This has only happened once, to the best of my knowledge, to a celebrated nineteenth century pianist from London called Benjamin Marcato (1827-1903).

He was travelling on a steamer across the Pacific Ocean on a much publicized world tour, when the ship foundered in a fierce storm, hundreds of miles from the nearest mainland. He was the only survivor. He spent three days adrift, clinging onto an upturned lifeboat, while keeping his spirits up by carving the piano cadenza from the Emperor Concerto into the wooden hull of the boat with a tuning fork. In fact, he had come in sight of a small uninhabited tropical island after only one day adrift, yet he couldn't bring himself to leave the lifeboat until he had finished the cadenza.

So having drifted round the island nine times, and having checked his carving for wrong notes, and having added all the correct expression markings, he felt it was time to disembark. He struggled ashore, sat on

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Always make sure the orchestra can see that your wristwatch is obviously more expensive than the soloists.

the beach and tried to get to grips with his situation. He could see straight away that it was not going to be easy surviving without a piano. So he set about building one using whatever materials came to hand.



Benjamin Marcato.

News of the shipwreck reached the port authorities who, straight away, dispatched a schooner to comb the suspected area for survivors. Then, after only seven weeks as a castaway, Benjamin was discovered. However, he resisted all attempts at rescue, saying that he had not finished his piano yet. Needless to say, the crew of the schooner were puzzled by this, but attributed it to his isolation causing some sort of delirium. Yet, try as they might, they could not budge him. In the end they were forced to return to base empty handed, having left what supplies they could spare on the island.

The story ends when, after consultation with another pianist who happened to know him, they set out again equipped with a concert piano

on board.

This time they were immediately successful in luring Benjamin off the island. He continued his world tour without further mishap, and lived to a ripe old age, never again parted from his piano.

Here is a question:

What is it that some pianists are saying when they play? This is another of the great mysteries that has troubled musicologists through the ages. They are certainly not singing, that much is clear - the conductor stands close enough to pick up even the faintest sounds. Yet their lips move as if they are forming words. Are they speaking in tongues? It would be interesting to employ the services of a lip reader to sit close enough to read, but I rather suspect it is no language known to man. For what it is worth, this is my theory:

The piano has been categorized in the orchestral score (for want of a better term) as a ‘percussion instrument’, maybe because it uses mechanical hammers to sound the notes. There is equally no reason why it shouldn’t just as soon be a string instrument, just as an organ could justifiably be regarded as a wind instrument rather than a keyboard instrument. Be that as it may, percussionists (as mentioned in a previous chapter) do not communicate on any level which other musicians are capable of understanding, and yet it is clear that they do possess some form of language. So could what we are seeing, in fact be a form of ‘Bang-Gangese’? (See Percussionists – Chapter Four.) It would be a fascinating line of research should any scientist feel disposed to rise to the challenge.

The piano concerto repertoire is very large indeed, yet continues to grow with the sort of relentless un-stoppability comparable to that of tectonic plate movement. In time it will swamp the music libraries of the world. But such is the nature of the addiction, that pianists will always be hungry for more.

One real problem pianists have to face is they cannot travel with their instrument, so are at the mercy of the instrument installed at the concert venue. This may not always be to their taste, but they are forced to make the best job of it they can. Because of this, they have become,

understandably, so paranoid and neurotic about the resident concert hall piano, that they frequently arrive at a venue the day before the rehearsal just to try it out to see if it is okay.*

Enter the **Piano Tuner**.

Piano tuner is too small a word (two words actually– Ed) for the vital service they perform to humanity. Certainly they have to tune the piano, but they have to get it checked by the soloist and win his approval – *before* the rehearsal, *during* the rehearsal, *after* the rehearsal, and *before* the concert, and will be given no peace until the soloist is completely satisfied, and yet no two soloists will ever have the same requirements. I confess to you now, that in my youth when I was an inexperienced conducting scholar, I once inquired of a concert pianist why he didn't tune the piano himself like all other instrumental soloists. I was wise not to wait for the answer to this question, and am truly grateful to have escaped without injury. Pianists can be surprisingly strong when they want to be. You would be impressed with the distance he was able to throw his piano stool. I still don't know the answer to my question, but have long since learned to curb my idle curiosity.

As well as tuning the piano, they have to check all its mechanical functions, perform small maintenance tasks, and effect minor repairs if needed. But most of all they have to be experienced therapists. They must develop the instinct for sensing the soloist's mood, strike up a rapport with him, bond with him, and must know exactly the right thing to say and do to calm him down. There are a number of gifted individuals who can tame an enraged wild stallion through the sheer strength of their personality, their humanity, empathy and compassion. And all this by murmuring a few comforting words and gently laying on of hands. Such is the gift of the concert hall piano tuner.

I personally would be happy to nominate any concert hall piano

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It may be too... old, new, stiff, loose, soft, hard, even, uneven, bright, woolly, clear, unclear, loud, over-toned, under-toned, resonant, dull, etc. If you want more, and if you have plenty of time on your hands, speak to a pianist.

tuner for a Nobel Prize, for their extraordinary accomplishments and advances in this specialized field of Psychotherapy.



Other Instrumental soloists come in all shapes and sizes. Every instrument that can be found on the concert platform has its own library of concerto repertoire together with a whole lot more besides. However, let us take an obvious good example: The violin.

The violin has a concerto repertoire that very nearly rivals that of the piano. Indeed, since it is a very much older instrument historically speaking, it is fair to say that its repertoire is that much broader and encompasses an even wider range of genre than any other instrument in use today. And like the piano it seems to attract its share of unwanted attention from contemporary composers who, it seems, cannot take the hint that maybe, just maybe, there are possibly more violin concertos than we need as it is. So, thank you very much but why not try writing a concerto for comb and paper, or some other un-emancipated instrument that is crying-out for your particular field of expertise.

However, such is the understandable appeal of the violin that most of the great symphonic composers have had a go at writing concertos for it, indeed, in many cases, having more than one opus to their credit. Yet it is not, and never will be, as versatile as the concert piano – for it tends to favour only those keys that are closely related to its four strings, and it has not the range of the piano. But it is, nevertheless, a most impressive instrument when it is played well. Sadly, however, there is a universal law which states that a great work played badly on a violin will mutate into something quite horrible with terrifying rapidity.

Violinists need careful watching. *They are consummate show-offs.* Okay, pianists are too - but there is a difference...

- Pianists show off their passion, their artistry, their refinement and musicianship. They are the Rolls Royce

motor car, the Monet painting, the Chippendale cabinet.

- Violinists show off their pyrotechnics, their acrobatics, their high diving. They are the red Italian sports car, the snakeskin cowboy boots (complete with spurs), the gold and diamond Rolex chronograph watch.



The concert violinist.

It is some small comfort that a pianist is at least sitting down on his seat getting on with the job in hand, aside from that there is not much else he can do to get in your way. But the violin soloist is standing right beside you, slashing away at his Stradivarius (which is probably worth, at the very least, ten times more than even the most expensive concert piano), jumping up and down, stamping his feet, swaying about and enjoying himself, while you, the conductor, is left with the impossible task of keeping the concerto from falling to pieces - and trying to look good into the bargain.

How do you reconcile having to be 'Robin' to his 'Batman'?

There may be a few good tricks up your tail coat sleeve...

Violin soloists like to make a drama out of everything they do, and that, of course, includes *tuning up*. They give an imperious gesture to the principal oboe to command an 'A'. He, of course, dutifully reciprocates as requested. This is followed by a lengthy and tiresome charade wherein the soloist strokes his open strings with his bow in as sensual a way as he knows how, accompanied by an extraordinary repertoire of facial expressions which, when translated from mime, form a little piece of one-man theatre with its own melodramatic dialogue running something like this:

Soloist: *Ah me. I hear that my incredibly expensive violin is somewhat out of sorts upon this eve. Whence will help swiftly to my aid appear? For I must hap upon this very night perform, ere I die, to this adoring public, with the assistance of yonder fat bald git grasping the stick aside of me.*

Violin: *Yea, verily forsooth 'tis true, O alas and alack.*

Soloist: *But wait! - Hark, do mine ears deceive me, or is not that the sound of the concert 'A' that squeaketh forth from yonder reeds?*

Violin: *Verily 'tis so, forsooth.*

Soloist: *Then help is at hand, by all that is noble and true.*

Violin: *Then we are saved! The Gods do in truth favour us. We must do them honour.*

Soloist: *Yea, rejoice and behold, my incredibly expensive violin*

doth with the voice of angels sing.

Violin: *Then all is aright as it will be in truth, now and ever more. The concert 'A' indeed liveth.*

Soloist: *Amen.*

While all this is taking place, the audience and performers alike sit spellbound in disbelief. And when it is finally over there is the same sort of stunned silence which can often follow in the wake of a loud explosion. This is just what the violinist is hoping for. This is the sort of focus he needs in order to begin his *real* performance.

Unfortunately for him, the vast majority of violin concertos start not with the violin but with the orchestra. Forsooth!

So once he has calmed down and gracefully deigned to allow the conductor and his orchestra to take up playing positions, the fun can begin.

It is not normally usual or desirable for the conductor to tap his baton on the stand for reasons already explained, but in *this* scenario it is a good way to focus the attention of both musicians and public alike onto the maestro. It also has the therapeutic advantage of completely breaking the soloist's hypnotic spell and restoring some semblance of sanity and equilibrium to the concert platform. So now you have everyone's attention at last, don't go spoiling it by starting the music. Enjoy it for a while. Take things slowly and calmly - don't be rushed.

Here is what you do:

1. Get into the starting stance – baton raised, head up, eye contact with the players.
2. Show that you are collecting your thoughts.
3. Hold this pensive posture for the count of ten.
4. Then stop. Something seems to have disturbed your

concentration. But what? (*The soloist is looking frustrated. This was not supposed to happen – this was not in his plan.*)

5. Compose yourself, a slight knowing smile, slightly raised eyebrows, and a paternal reassuring nod of encouragement towards the soloist. (*The soloist is confused – What happened? Has he missed something? Does everyone know something he doesn't?*)
6. You may now repeat steps 1 to 4 if you are feeling really bloody-minded, or you may want to actually begin the performance.

Either way, by this time the soloist will have truly had the wind taken out of his sails, and you and your orchestra can now enjoy his performance which will be guaranteed free of any of his artificial additives, flavourings or colourings.

Continuing Hugo De Surleygit's brief guide, which will assist the conductor through the minefield of concerto repertoire.

J.S.Bach	A Baroque genius with many terrific concerti to his credit. You might like to go 'retro' and direct these from the harpsichord.
Bartók	Himself a concert pianist (three piano concertos) but could write well for any instrument. Watch out for the moody viola concerto.
Beethoven	Pianist and genius, liked to shock his audiences. Five great piano concertos, a smash hit violin concerto and a triple concerto with easy piano part for beginners.
Berg	Product of the dodecaphonic (good word to show off with) school. Look out for his violin concerto, it is rising in popularity but begins as if he is <i>still tuning up!</i>
Brahms	The violin concerto has been in the top ten ever since its first performance. Terrific pair of piano concertos, and a double concerto for violin and cello too.
Britten	Concert pianist / composer. But he was such a good all-rounder that his concerto output doesn't get much of an airing these days.
Bruch	The unashamedly romantic G minor violin concerto is a must for all violin soloists.

Chopin	He was about as typical a pianist as it is possible to be (see pianists).
Dvorák	Great romantic Cello concerto, better than his violin.
Elgar	Great romantic Cello concerto, quirky violin concerto.
Gershwin	Pianist and composer. Tried to portray jazz on the concert platform. I'm not sure it really works.
Glazunov	Mushy violin concerto, Not as over-the-top romantic as the Bruch.
Grieg	Nice piano concerto. Not too hard to play. But you need a rest from it from time to time.
Liszt	Two piano concertos containing every trick of the trade. The orchestra does so little they might as well not be there (unless you happen to be the lucky triangle player).
Mendelssohn	Simply one of the greatest violin concertos of all time.
Mozart	He was equally at home writing for violin (his concertos are superb) as for piano (they are inspired) plus four great horn concertos, and a collection of other odds and ends, any one of which would be the pride of other composers.
Nielsen	Terrific Clarinet and violin concertos.
Paganini	Legendary violinist and master of the 'show-off' school. He had to write his own concertos, as nothing else was flashy enough for him - and they are <i>very</i> flashy.
Poulenc	Funny little organ concerto and a piano concerto.
Prokofiev	BEWARE! His second violin concerto starts with solo violin (see violinists).
Rakhmaninov	His superb piano concertos (made famous in the movies) are also monumental symphonic masterpieces.
Ravel	Jazzy style of writing which is more spontaneous than Gershwin's. Look out for the big contra bassoon solo in the left-hand piano concerto - it's a winner.
Saint-Saëns	Nice
Schumann	Obviously good with the piano stuff. But a very nice cello concerto too.
Shostakovich	Two dark violin concertos, an exhilarating cello concerto and a silly piano and trumpet concerto.
Sibelius	Another winner violin concerto with lashings of cadenzas.
Stravinsky	Pianist/composer or composer/pianist?
Tchaikovsky	A double whammy. Violin and Piano
Vivaldi	Dozens of violin concertos. The Four Seasons is the best by far. Plus an assortment of other works for instruments past their 'use by' date.
Walton	A surprisingly nice violin, viola and cello concerto to his credit.



Singers:

So, if pianists are the most fanatical of the three, and violinists are the biggest show-offs, then singers surely hold the distinction of being the most neurotic. They broadly come in four categories: High Female, Low Female, High Male, and Low Male. Many other subdivisions exist, but for the purposes of this book, which is intended to be on conducting orchestras, we will endeavour to avoid getting sucked into 'The Singer Black Hole' for now. The singer, unlike the instrumentalist, does not have to purchase his or her instrument. They are built in biologically, and thus have to be maintained diligently by their owners against the risk of infection, contamination and injury. This alone is a huge topic and goes some way to explaining why singers carry a mobile pharmacy around with them containing every possible medication for throat, lungs, tongue, teeth, nose, ears, and of course shoe care.



The concert singer.

If, whilst closely observing a singer during rehearsal, you notice a shimmering haze about them and wondered what it is. Then be reassured it is not your eyes playing tricks, and certainly no kind of supernatural aura. It will be, as any physicist will confirm, a phenomenon that occurs by the bending of rays of light through its pathway as it passes through the varying densities of air between yourself and the source - namely our singer. What you are witnessing is the side-effect of the various vaporizers and throat-sprays which, being of a more volatile nature immediately surrounding the singer's head and upper body than the ambient atmosphere, will cause this mirage which, to give it its scientific term of **chromatic aberration**, rather suggests to me not only a visual, but also an audio distortion – or, more likely, a feeble attempt at humour by some long forgotten scientist.

Practically speaking, it has only been a real problem for the publicity photographers who have tried (often in vain) to capture a sharp image of their subject. Thus singers portraits tend to be fuzzy, not by design but by circumstance, and are now regarded as a hallmark of the trade. Indeed, the more mature lady divas' much prefer their portraits to exhibit a generic softness of any, or all, distinguishing detail to the extent that I am convinced I have seen the same photo used for up to a dozen lady singers during any given concert season. It generally goes without saying that the hapless audience will frequently be seen scrutinizing their programs (not helped by the subtle low lighting in the auditorium) in confused disbelief when the diva makes her grand entrance.

Through the eyes of the public the singer is, of all musicians, the one they most readily relate to, simply because everyone sings – not, of course, in a professional capacity necessarily or indeed as a performer, but music is built into all of us, and the human voice is the first (or indeed only) instrument most people possess. Other instrumentalists and conductors, you will find, have to try just that bit harder to win the hearts of their audiences.

The vocal repertoire, which you and your orchestra will most likely encounter on the concert hall stage, will be approximately in this order:

1. Oratorio. With several soloists plus chorus.
2. Songs and song cycles. With one or two soloists and no chorus.
3. Gala nights with a variety of opera arias and musical numbers. Sometimes with amplified sound and chorus.
4. Concert hall opera performances; much better than actual opera as you don't have to be in a pit all night. The audience can enjoy seeing you at all times.

Singers when in company are very 'pally'. They are always kissing each other – except they don't really...

So paranoid are they about the risks of infection, that they have perfected the '**remote kiss**' which is more of a sound effect (something like: 'mmmmmwAh'!) accompanied by a mutual forward thrust of the head whilst keeping the feet as far removed from the other party as possible. It is taught at conducting college and there are rules:

- A lady singer *may* do it to a gentleman.
- A lady singer *may* do it to another lady.
- A gentleman singer *may* do it to a lady.
- A gentleman singer *may not* do it to another gentleman – except in certain circumstances, those being if you happen also to be a professional footballer, in which event be prepared to be affectionately gang-banged by your team mates if you are fortunate enough to score a goal.

One important feature peculiar to vocal music, which you will not encounter with the instrumental soloist during performances, is words.*

Words are a nuisance. They get in the way of the music, they are hard to understand (even when it's your own mother tongue), the consonants often produce ugly unmusical sounds, and singers, in their

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With the possible exception of pianists – see 'Pianists'

attempts to project and articulate clearly, will shower the front three rows (and often the conductor also) with spit. Furthermore, singers have to have knowledge of the correct pronunciation of several languages, the most common being: Italian, German, French, Spanish, English, Latin, Hebrew, Russian, plus three times as many less common ones. This is a lot of extra work for them so they have devised an alternative means of coping. The truth is that if the music is any good, then the notes alone will convey the meaning to the listener without the necessity for the intrusion of language. Indeed, it is more often than not the case that the music surpasses the words in its artistic sentiment, thus taking the spirit of the song onto a higher level of expression than could possibly be achieved by the unaccompanied text.

It is a fine balance for the songwriter and composer. The musical setting of the words should improve them, and the text should lend gravity to the music. If the composer gets it right it will be a masterpiece. If not, then a disaster.

Knowing all this, however, does not help our poor singers. Hence they have developed a style for making the words sound so far removed from their native timbre that it is quite possible for one to listen to an entire opera believing it to be in a foreign language only to find out retrospectively that it was in your native tongue the whole time. This is achieved by subtle over-use of vibrato and swoops, by carefully emphasizing the wrong syllables, and by breaking up a long word into its component parts. All quite legal and aboveboard.

The latest trend when screening songs on television is to accompany the song with simultaneous subtitles of the translated text, the object being, presumably, to enhance the understanding and appreciation of the viewer. Unfortunately, if the translation has not been well executed, then rather than improving the song it can severely intrude upon the beauty of the music.

Here is a good example of 'Lieder' where the music would have been greatly improved by the total removal of the words in their entirety.

This is what appeared on the viewers' screens:

*My love, my love, why do you smell thus so?
 How full up my nose is with the smell.
 Like a rose you are to my nose,
 And, like the rose, you can give me a sore prick.
 Such is love, such is love, such is love:
 A most very overpowering smell,
 And I, left with a painful prick.*



Here, once again, is the Hugo De Surleygit easy-reference-guide to those composers who you might be considering for inclusion into your concert program with singers:

J.S. Bach	Top notch oratorio and cantata man.
Beethoven	9 th symphony; very heroic piece with a bit of everything; three orchestral movements, then he throws in the soloists plus choir. Always goes down a bomb.
Berlioz	He wrote a pile of song cycles, oratorio and three operas. French - but nice.
Bizet	Songs from Carmen crop up a lot in gala nights. Singers like to show off with them.
Borodin	Not at all bad for an amateur. He really knew how to write a good melody.
Brahms	Founded a women's choir (yes really), Wagner gave him a hard time over his music (Wagner gave everyone a hard time). His German Requiem is powerful and brooding.
Britten	A real natural when it came to writing for voice. But you either like his style or you don't.
Bruckner	He was a nice man. Has written quite a lot for voice and orchestra still waiting to be discovered if you have the time.
Debussy	He wrote with his heart on his sleeve. Look out for Pelléas and Mélisande – great songs you can dip into.
Gershwin	With brother Ira wrote some amazing hit songs with great soupy harmonies.
Gounod	Hmmm? – Maybe not.

Handel	Master of the rousing chorus – the music is always more important than the lyrics – Hallelujah!
Haydn	Traditional sounding oratorio writing. Organized chaos at the opening of ‘The Creation’.
Janáček	Look out for the weird Glagolitic mass – it sets your teeth on edge, but in a good way.
Mahler	Amazing songs. They even spill over into his symphonies.
Mozart	Some of the most famous arias of all time – and you never get tired of them.
Offenbach	Silly composer – but popular.
Orff	Dirty Latin poems set for choir, soloists and orchestra. Much used as commercial music.
Puccini	He ‘The Man’ – Mr. Opera in person.
Ravel	Any text he sets to music is magically transformed into a work of art.
Rossini	What a guy.
Schoenberg	Don’t be put off, he could write some pretty esoteric songs when he was in the mood.
Schubert	King of the songwriters.
Strauss R.	If his sublime ‘Four last songs’ were his only opus, then <i>they alone</i> would make him a landmark composer.
Sullivan	Catchy tunes. The words are definitely wittier than the music. Not to be taken seriously.
Tavener	Minimalist sacred music much favoured by hippies.
Tchaikovsky	It doesn’t matter if you don’t understand the words. The music says it all.
Vaughan Williams	Pretty songs that work well with orchestra.
Verdi	His Requiem is very theatrical and is a great box office piece. Scary high soprano part which really sorts out the men from the boys.
Wagner	Over-the-top massive ego with operas to match. Singers take him very seriously. Attracts the most fanatical audiences.
Walton	Belshazar – Showy piece with all the trimmings. Not too long either.
Weber	Better than Sullivan.



The Remote Kiss.

