

For SCL's SCORE

The Best Orchestral Writing: Revealing An Obvious Secret

By
Michael Isaacson

Whenever I teach orchestral writing one issue seems to initially crop up with new students suggesting that what I thought was an obvious, universal truth is not. Accordingly, allow me to spend this lone column reminding film composers, at whatever stage of mastery, that in an orchestra two thirds of that sound will be strings.

Isn't this obvious? In an orchestra of 100 musicians while a woodwind section in threes (12) and 5 horns equals 17%, a brass section equals 10%, and a percussion section equals a noisy 6% all totaling 33%, an appropriate string section would include 16 first violins, 14 second violins, 12 violas, 12 celli and 10 basses or more equaling a string section of 64 players or almost two thirds of the orchestra personnel. In a smaller recording orchestra the ratio should still hold true.

When a composer employs only strings it is still called a chamber orchestra or a string orchestra as opposed to an ensemble sound when woodwinds or brass are used. In other words, an orchestral sound is primarily created by the strings.

When Haydn was creating his early classical symphonic textures they were overwhelmingly strings with fewer woodwinds and ever less brass and the occasional tympani at infrequent punctuations. Even as late as in Tchaikovsky's romantic orchestration the main parameters are always highly developed in the strings.

So, why bring up this obvious truth at all?

For five reasons:

Firstly, there is a tyranny to the visual appearance of the score page. While the woodwinds, brass, and percussion take up the upper 80% of the page, the five string lines only seem to take up 20% or less and they are on the bottom of the score to boot! The unmindful composer might be seduced by this visual inequity into thinking that the audio ratio is similar when, in truth, it is quite reversed. Remember the best orchestral sounds lavishly utilize the strings.

Secondly, film composers, who are always a bit defensive about writing too much texture that might inevitably see its demise during a dubbing session, tend to write more coloristically for solo instruments too often leaving only a halo of strings in the background.

At this juncture, it should be pointed out that in the hands of a skillful composer worlds of meaning can be culled from only the strings themselves without the slightest intrusion on the dialog or fx tracks; Alex North's brilliant score to *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* immediately comes to mind. Remember string idioms like mutes, harmonics, or pizzicati can go a long way in a most subtle manner.

Thirdly, Phil Spector rock and roll arrangements began suggesting that while strings were “classy” they were no longer as important as they once were and were relegated to the lower levels of our consciousness. However in film, hearing a really sophisticated string arrangement on even a hip hop arrangement would give more life to its rhythmic textures. Remember live strings bring a desperately needed humanity to a visual that’s why they’re so often asked for in animation and science fiction projects.

Fourthly, with the advent of ersatz string writing and unperfected algorithms used in samplers, composers cannot as yet write an interval of two simultaneous tones on a string patch without suggesting a larger string section. By necessity, when these string sonorities are played by keyboard players the effect is much heavier than a true orchestral string sound. Consequently, to mask this algorithmic problem the strings are “hidden” behind the other sections.

Lastly, whether it is because of time pressures or lack of invention, less interesting composers, rather than carving out string figures that have rhythmic individuality, rely too frequently on whole note “footballs”. However, our best film composers, even when only providing harmonic support, give their strings consistently interesting musical figures to play. I’m always aware of the craftsmanship of Jerry Goldsmith, John Williams, and others master in their meticulous attention to this string issue.

Forgive me if in calling attention to orchestral writing I’ve stated an obvious secret that you’ve known all along, but if something here does tinkle a bell perhaps your next orchestral score won’t pull any strings in rising to the musical occasion.

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