

INSTRUMENTS IN THE ORCHESTRA:

(4) The Double Bass

THE fourth of a series of short articles on the instruments of the National Orchestra, written to help interested listeners towards a more informed appreciation of orchestral music and a better understanding of the resources at the command of the conductor

ONE of the impressive features of the symphony orchestra is the rank of double basses which extends round the back of the other players, sometimes on the conductor's left,

sometimes on his right. The sight and sound of these huge instruments being played together can be almost awe-inspiring. The voice of the double bass, as would be expected from an instrument standing six feet in height, is rough and powerful. The player requires no little strength to press down the heavy strings against the fingerboard and the fingers of his left hand must stretch wide apart to form some of the chords. The bow is shorter and heavier than that of the violin.

The double bass is constructed on the same principle as the other members of the violin family, although its shoulders are sloping, not rounded, representing one characteristic of the old viols which the others have not retained. At one time it had only three strings which were tuned in fifths but this necessitated such great stretches of the player's fingers that during the 19th Century the modified version with four strings tuned in fourths (which made it less exacting to play) gradually replaced it.

Though the double bass plays a vital part in the make-up of the orchestra it is not suited to solo use, but such players as Bottesini, Dragonetti and Koussevitzky (who is more widely known as the conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra) became famous as virtuosi on the instrument. The few soloists who perform on the double bass generally use a smaller model than that of the orchestral player. Haydn wrote a concerto for double bass and orchestra, but this has not

been preserved. An important solo passage for the instrument occurs in Act IV of Verdi's *Otello*.

In 1851 an "Octobasse" was displayed by its inventor, J. B. Vuillaume, at the London Exhibition, and he was awarded a medal for it. This monster, which was praised by Berlioz, was in the form of a double bass, but was ten feet high and the strings had to be stopped by means of levers and pedals which the player operated with his left hand and his feet, while he bowed with his right hand. An even larger one, the "Grand bass" which was 15 feet high, was invented by an American in 1889.

The National Orchestra has five double basses.



Spencer Digby photograph

W. BARSBY

Principal double bass of the National Orchestra

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Now at the height of her fame, she will also appear at public concerts in each of the other three main centres, and in studio recitals.

Bizet's opera *Carmen* will be produced in Dunedin for a season of seven nights in June, with the National Orchestra, conducted by Andersen Tyrer. Mr. Tyrer has been invited by the Otago Centennial Committee to conduct the choral concerts with the orchestra and also the operatic season. Negotiations are in train to bring soloists to take the main roles of *Carmen* (mezzo-soprano) and Don José (tenor) from England. It is expected that in each centre the operatic chorus will be composed of members of local choirs and musical societies.



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