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Evolution of the Orchestra



EARLY everything good that we have comes from the Greeks, including the word "orchestra," which is the name they gave to that part of the Greek theatre between the semi-circular seats of the auditorium and the stage (called by the Greeks the "logion"—speaking-place), where the chorus sang or danced. "Orchestra" literally means "dancing place," and we shall see later that this meaning describes precisely what ought to happen in the modern orchestra of instrumentalists which began to develop during the Renaissance in Italy, whence it spread to France and England.

How many, if any, instrumentalists the Greeks had in their orchestra we do not know, although some writers assert that the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles were accompanied by a band of lyres and flutes, and one authority declares: "It is quite certain that not only were the choruses of the Agamemnon and the Antigone sung to the grandest music that could be produced at the time they were written, but also that every word of the dialogue was musically declaimed." The classical Greek drama was therefore a form of opera, but an opera which was probably nearer the ideal of the great operatic reformers like Monteverde and Gluck than any operas that have been written since; because the music to the Greek play was subordinate to truthful dramatic expression.

There has been a continuous development of the orchestra and the instruments of the orchestra since the fifteenth century. Nearly all the early bands were court musicians. Edward IV had "trumpets, lutes, rebec, trombone, viol, cornemuse, flute, virginals and drums." The French kings had a court establishment of musicians from which the first great French operatic composer, Lully, an Italian by birth, formed his small operatic orchestra.

Lully also wrote the music for Moliere's plays, and the musicians were not accommodated in the "orchestra," but behind a trellis; sometimes they were placed in appropriate costumes on the stage, sometimes behind the audience, sometimes at the back of the stage, in the wings, or before the footlights.

There is an inventory, made in 1547, which shows that Henry VIII had sixty-

With the advent of Broadcasting, attention has been focused upon all those bodies whose function it is to entertain. Not the least in this flood of limelight is the modern broadcasting orchestra, for it is they who give the body and the background to the studio entertainments. In view of the place it holds the accompanying article dealing with the beginning and leading up to the present symphony orchestra will be of considerable interest to those who listen to and appreciate music. It is from the pen of W. J. Turner, music critic of the "New Statesman," and appeared originally in the "Radio Times."

four stringed instruments and 215 wind instruments, apart from keyboard instruments.

Queen Elizabeth had an orchestra of about forty and the more important princes and dukes of Italy and Germany all had their private bands. It was at the courts of these Kings and Princes that operatic and orchestral music developed; although in our own country there is a history in this development due to the Puritan revolution. Contrary to a popular opinion, this puritanical change of temper in the English people, although it began under the Commonwealth, did not reach its full intensity until much later.

The reigns of Charles II and James II gave it a fresh impetus and excuse, and it

was when George I came to the throne, in 1714, that "Merrie England" in the sense of "Musical England" was finally overcome and the age of respectability, dullness, and cant set in. Purcell, who died in 1695, our greatest composer, was the last representative of the earlier musical age, and he wrote for an orchestra of strings, trumpets, oboes (including in "Dioclesian," a tenor oboe), and flutes. His "Dido and Aeneas" was written for a girls' school, but in "King Arthur" and other works he collaborated with Dryden music dramas for the stage.

But most of the instruments used in the seventeenth-and-eighteenth-century orchestras differed greatly from their modern equivalents in our contemporary orchestras. In Bach's time there were stringed instruments that have since fallen into disuse—the viol, the viola d'amore, viola pomposa, viola da gamba, for example. All the viol family have been practically obsolete for generations; their places have been filled by the violin, the viola, the violoncello, and the contra or double bass. The viola d'amore which has five or seven strings, is still used occasionally; for example, Richard Strauss used it in his "Sinfonia Domestica."

The greatest change, however, has taken place in the wood-wind and the brass instruments, owing to mechanical inventions during the nineteenth century. The most important of these inventions was that of the valve, which has revolutionised the use of trumpets and horns, enabling them to play the full chromatic scale whereas before this invention they could play only the notes of the harmonic chord, and the player was provided with a number of different crooks which he fitted into, change the key of his instrument and enable him to play different notes. Obviously, it was impossible to play a rapid sequence of notes in this way, because it would not give the player time to change his crooks.

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