

Instruments of the Orchestra

String Family

Violin, Viola, Cello, String Bass



These instruments have curved wooden bodies and strings. They are played with fingers and a bow. The bow is a long wooden piece with taut horse hair that runs the length of the wood. The bow runs across the strings of the instrument in order to create sound. The pitch is changed by the instrumentalist pressing his or her fingers on the strings, much like a guitarist would do. The sounds of the string family are unique and extraordinary and often sound like the human voice.

Woodwind Family

Flute, Piccolo, Oboe,
Clarinet, Bassoon



The instruments of this family are made out of wood and are played with fingers and breath. Unlike the string instruments that are played with a bow, these instruments rely on the performer's ability to push (blow) air into the instrument in order to make sound. While some of the modern woodwind instruments, like the flute, have metal bodies, they were once made out of wood and are still called woodwind instruments. The sounds of the woodwind family range from bright and lively to low and lush; they are used to boost the color of the orchestra's sound.

Brass Family

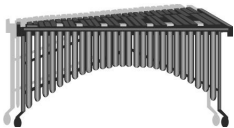
Trumpet, Horn,
Trombone, Tuba



The brass family is just that; they are made out of metal! These instruments rely on breath, buzzing, valves and slides to make music. The performers "buzz" their lips together and press them to the horn to create the sound. Then, they use either valves or slides to change the sound's pitch, allowing them to create music. The sounds of the brass family range from very low to very high and are often characterized as being fluid and rich. They, too, enhance the color of the orchestra's sound.

Percussion

Snare Drum, Bass Drum,
Cymbals, Timpani,
Xylophone, Tambourine, Triangle



This is perhaps the largest and oldest family in the orchestra. Percussion instruments range from drums to pretty much anything that can make sound—even chains and garbage can lids! Typically this family creates sound by striking the instrument. This family has the largest range of sounds; some cacophonous (sounding loud, jarring and potentially unpleasant) and some soothing and melodic. Percussion is often used to influence the mood of a piece of music.

Other

Harpsichord, Piano,
Harp, Voice



Instruments that are often guests in the orchestra include the piano, harpsichord, harp and voice. The piano, harpsichord and harp are similar in that they use strings to make sounds. The piano has keys that strike the strings while the harp and harpsichord pluck the strings to make sound. The voice adds another unique element to the orchestra—words and song. All of these instruments enhance orchestral color and the listening experience.