

Some Observations on Teaching Orchestration

By Warren Benson

For many years the teaching of orchestration in college and university schools of music has followed essentially the same guidelines found in traditional textbooks on this subject. These texts are usually planned so that their content might be easily covered in a one- or two-semester course. In addition, their layout, examples and general format allow them to serve as reference books for the practicing musician who needs a ready reminder of range, technical impossibilities and, in some cases, unusual usage of the instrument in question. For these purposes, the average standard text is most suitable.

Most of these texts have been written by people with practical experience as composers and arrangers with an awareness of the problem of the performer and a solid knowledge of the traditions of the art. In many cases these people have also had considerable experience as teachers, so that their books contain comprehensive exercise material and directions. Most of these texts will reflect the passing on of a traditional method for teaching the subject of orchestration.

Perhaps it is time to review the traditional teaching approach to see if it is, in fact, the best and most effective possible method.

The standard orchestration text contains specific information on most of the instruments found in the large symphony orchestra and, in some books, specialized books, there will also be information on instruments restricted to the instrumentation of the American symphonic band, Renaissance ensembles and instruments from folk and non-Western music. This information deals with the construction of the instrument, the shape of its bore, its size, a description of its tone color in the various ranges, its practical range as well as its actual possible range, its problems of tone production and intonation. Most texts are profusely illustrated with examples drawn from the scores of master composers of all periods and styles, and may also include pictures of the instruments concerned. Some general considerations of the orchestra or band are included with special attention to the scoring problems inherent in writing for organizations of smaller or larger size than is standard.

The method followed is along the lines described herein: if the text begins with a study of the stringed instruments, the student learns about the violin and other members of this family. After the student has demonstrated sufficient knowledge of the construction, acoustical problems and performance techniques of this instrument, he is assigned a problem to which he must bring a solution. This problem might well be that of transcribing a solo piece, often with piano accompaniment, for an instrument other than the violin, so that the student's adaption of the work for violin solo will demonstrate his knowledge of both instruments. In many cases, the assignments deal only with multiples of one particular instrument or with families of instruments. In these cases the procedure is much the same. For the most part, the transcriptions are made from piano score into ensemble pieces for strings or whatever instruments are being studied at the time.

The teacher must ascertain the success or failure of these assignments in order to have some basis for arriving at a grade, which most of these courses require. The teacher's approach to grading often follows the line of comparison with the traditional practice of the period represented by the work assigned for transcription. If our concern in orchestration is that of specific stylistic imitation, then this method would seem valid and effective. Yet the variety of solutions brought to what are seemingly simple problems by the great composers of the past, present the teacher-critic with an astounding challenge. The teacher must have a vast knowledge of the various individual styles embraced by any general musical period. He must go beyond the confines of a few textbooks in order to verify what might be called a common practice of orchestration in any general musical period. And, he must be able to recognize in the work of a student the merely simplistic and direct copy-imitation, allowing room, at the same time, for artistic expressions of the general stylistic period as might be realized by another student. Most sincere, capable teachers of orchestration manage this problem very well.

One important observation must be made at this time. Usually, as each assignment is completed, a new work is selected for transcription in the succeeding assignment. In order that a variety of styles might be encountered, this practice seems reasonable. However, there is one important point that might be overlooked when proceeding in this manner. The problem of aural discrimination of tone color, while it is acknowledged and

approached through recordings and live performance by many teachers, is usually, in terms of the art of orchestration, only partially understood.

For many composers of our time, and written evidence from the great composers of the past would support this statement, the process of orchestrating a piece of music is a creative process of great importance. Many composers view orchestration as a creative and artistic process not entirely separate but functionally separated from the actual sketching out of a musical work. In other words, the main body of their music is composed in a somewhat reduced score, often in an expanded piano version, which allows for a separate approach, in time at least, specifically concerned with the problem of orchestrating the composition. Although, to be sure, this is not always the approach of any given composer, it is frequent enough to merit some consideration.

If the composer, as a creative artist, considers the problem of orchestration to be an artistic concern that requires this focusing of all his creative powers, what questions does this raise for us? Is the composer, as a one-time student of music, to fall back on his knowledge of stylistic imitation? Who is he going to imitate? Is he to follow the dictates of his eye as he observes examples in a score or book? Is he going to depend on the memory of his ear, his “outer” aural imagination, for the sounds and their component parts that he wishes to realize in his score? Or is he going to listen to the suggestions of his inner aural imagination, his imagined colors and their imagined component parts, in order to bring his most creative personal identity into his music? We must recognize, at once, that the composer will be unable to follow any of these approaches without significant knowledge of the practice and practicalities of his predecessors and contemporaries. Even so, no artist will settle for that alone. To say that the composer is not influenced in his decisions as well as in his imagination by the experiences of his world of sound as he has learned it from the musical works of others is to be unaware of the most common practice of all composers, namely, the study and analysis of a broad range of musical works from their heritage, past and present.

Let us assume, then, that our composer is aware of his debts to his musical tradition and is, at the same time, concerned with the reservation of his own identity as represented in his musical sensibilities. Let us suppose further that he has, at a particular

point in a particular composition, a sound in his inner ear that is new to his experience of known musical color. How does he deal with such a situation?

One can write down what one imagines and deduces will produce the sound one needs. Then, one can always take what comes. One may take this happenstance because it is beautiful, beyond anticipation, even though it is not quite what was originally imagined as the sound resulting from that deduced but unprecedented placement of registers and pitches within the particular colors chosen. As pleasing as this sound may be, there is a problem: one may never learn how to achieve the sound that was originally imagined if one settles for this beautiful result.

One has another choice: to reject what “happened” and make an effort to analyze that sonority in order to find the error in judgment that brought it about, presuming it is not what was intended. We may describe the “error” in terms of a sound that is more nasal, soft-edged, etc. Working from this, one may add or subtract colors, substitute colors, adjust dynamics and registers and try again, and again, until we find the imagined sound. Through all these attempts and trial and error, which may bring us to a realization of our true objective, though it may take a great many tries, we gain one important thing: know-how. By knowing how to do what we wanted to do, we have added a great dimension to our technique -- confidence. This confidence resides in our ability to duplicate the sonorities of our inner ear’s dictation. Confidence is, to a great degree, the major ingredient of technique. Information must be used, exercised, risked in new situations so that it is tested and proved valid in practice. When this is done we have technique. The successful end to our search for a particular sound adds a dimension of confidence, technique, which allows us to do the same things twice. To take what comes, to guess and accept the outcome of that guess does not allow for this confidence. If one has to wait on the muse to favor one’s effort, then technique must be a passive thing. But technique is active. It is confident. It is aggressive. It is self-contained and ready to make capital of any beneficence that comes its way. And it generates its own growth. The guess, the lucky visitation from the muse, allows one to do things once perhaps, but not twice. Twice is technique, with confidence.

While the search for a particular color may involve several attempts before the desired end is achieved, the sounds rejected are not rejected forever as unusable. Rather,

they may be thought of as by-products that can be saved, in one's aural memory, for future use in another context, or in the original instance, if one of these by-products becomes the preferred choice over that which was originally sought.

Presumably, the composer is as concerned with specifically colored sound at every moment in his work as he is with specific pitch, rhythm and dynamic organization. If this is true, then how can we approach this matter of color, specific color, when dealing with students? How do we pursue "the sound?"

If we follow the usual procedure of choosing a new piece for each new assignment in orchestration, certain problems might arise. The first problem involves the complex understanding of sound. Is it possible for us to ascertain, with confidence, whether or not the difference between two sounds can be determined on only one basis? For instance, is the greater difference between a C Major chord in root position and an "e" minor chord in the first inversion attributable to the fact that they are in different inversions or involve different pitches? If we compound this example by having the two chords appear in different voicings, with different soprano notes, or in opposing open and closed position, the problem of differential discrimination increases. And what happens if we go one step further and add a different instrumentation to each of our two sonorities?

Changing the work to be transcribed for each succeeding exercise in new color problems will certainly involve many or all of the above complexities. Why, then, add this extra burden? Would it not be better to keep the same piece for each new instrumental combination so that one might better evaluate the difference in sound as due to color change than to have to decide whether it is key, mode or some other element that causes the greater change? Why not simplify the problem by removing as many variables as possible? It might be more practical for teaching students the nature of the adjustments necessary when the same piece is to be scored for brass instruments as opposed to woodwind or strings or even percussion. The color differences and the practical performance issues are then more apparent. In addition, such adjustments might be better considered through familiarity with the material to be transcribed. In addition, it might be interesting at the end of the term of study to repeat the first instrumental assignment in order to observe the growth of the student's thinking and perception with regard to transcription in general, and to the now familiar piece used in particular.

While it is understood that the practice of using only one, or a very limited number of works for transcription purposes during a course in orchestration will necessarily limit the number of composer or period styles that might be encountered, the fact that it emphasizes the issue of color above all others may justify this procedure. At the same time, since orchestration is a creative act, this practice might allow for more personal freedom of orchestral style on the student's part. This has been the case particularly when the students are encouraged to choose a short, modern piano work. The choice of such a work will also involve the student with fresh harmonic balance problems. Basically, this work might prove more challenging and, therefore, more sustaining for a long period of time than a well-known, more conventional piece. Working with a modern piece will also point the student more directly toward modern music and involve him in a learning experience that will give him sufficient confidence that he might transfer to other modern works as a teacher, performer, conductor or orchestrator. The choice of a single piece for a semester's work does not, however, obviate the use of standard texts. Suggested assignments can still be used but with one piece instead of many for the actual writing exercises.

Most texts and courses tend to teach students as if they were going to have a symphony orchestra or concert band at their disposal. Since we cannot predict how far our students may go, perhaps this is necessary. Yet, how many of these students will find such opportunity waiting for them? While large ensembles should be understood and attempts made to handle them, it is certainly to the advantage of many students to practice orchestrating for the small, mixed ensemble. This writer's first teaching experience found him working with an ensemble of five violins and piano as the only instruments available. His second teaching assignment involved a 32-piece band with woefully incomplete instrumentation and an "orchestra" consisting of three violins, piano, tenor saxophone, bass clarinet, French horn, trumpet and flute.

In order to prepare for such unexpected but not unusual situations it is necessary that the student be involved with writing for whatever instruments are at hand. Why not write only for those instruments that are played by class members? The variety of orchestrations that any one class might bring to such a situation testifies to the almost

unlimited color possibilities that might be found within any given small ensemble. Writing for what is at hand can be the most practical experience one can have.

In addition to such situations, it is interesting to reverse the usual procedure. For instance, transcribing an original orchestra, band, or small ensemble piece for piano: two hand, four hand, or two pianos. Why not do a two-piano transcription of a piano solo? Such practice might be very helpful to future choral conductors who might wish to strengthen the piano accompaniment for a large chorus.

Since the true realization of a color combination can only be described by its own sound, it is mandatory that everything orchestrated by the students be performed as each assignment is finished, which also serves as another reason for writing only for those instruments in the class. When this is done, it is possible to hear “errors” and try various adjustments until a suitable result is found. This procedure is far more satisfactory than a “dry run” orchestration course, which is only paper work and talk.

It is advisable that someone else conduct the reading of a student’s orchestration so that the student can really hear his or her work. This will allow each orchestrator to concentrate on the sound of the piece without distraction.

In any creative study, the teacher is in a difficult situation. How does one know when the student has really found what he or she is after? How does the teacher grade this? In rewarding stylistic imitation, how does the teacher reward imaginative excellence? How does the teacher account for the unorthodox solution that might be -- or is exactly -- what the student was searching for? (It is not difficult to observe clumsy and ignorant efforts nor is it impossible to grade such observations if one omits the possibility that what one has observed is exactly what the student had in mind!) Perhaps, the teacher of a creative course such as orchestration must go out on the academic limb of subjective evaluation; that is, the evaluation of the student’s potential, his effort and his achievement.

In conclusion, the study of orchestration must be a study of sounding color based on the experience of traditional acoustical principles and the creative evidence of composers, orchestrators and arrangers. It must develop the technique of aural color analysis, and take for granted the facts of range, playability, acoustical peculiarities of specific instruments, etc. It must be a creative pursuit. It must explore and develop the

understanding of color as an expressive factor. It must identify and understand the expressive quality of such psychological phenomena as tension and relaxation as they relate to, among other things, range, register, sustaining power, amplitude and unusual uses of instruments.

In this way, it may better equip the composer and arranger to realize his or her specific expressive objectives, give greater understanding and creative opportunity to the performer, and lead the conductor to a better understood, organized and expressive interpretation of his or her score.

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