

Orchestration, An Anthology of Writings

By [Peter Lawrence Alexander](#) / August 10, 2008

Because of my work in writing orchestration books, the folks at Rutledge publishing sent me a great book by Paul Mathews, Chair of the Department of Music Theory at Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore. [*Orchestration, An Anthology of Writings*](#), is a refreshing joy to read as it's filled with many treats working professionals will appreciate thanks to its inclusion of comments from Gustav Mahler to a young composer, Stravinsky, Gevaert, Steve Reich, Percy Grainger (on writing for Concert Band), Charles Koechlin, and others. Some of these articles have not previously been available in English until now.

Paul has organized his Anthology in six sections:

- I. The Early Nineteenth Century: Beethoven's Orchestration
- II. The Late Nineteenth Century: French and German Orchestration
- III. Interlude: Orchestral Possibilities on the Eve of the New Music
- IV. The Turn of the Twentieth Century: French and German Orchestration II
- V. The Early Twentieth Century: Klangfarbenmelodie and Texture
- VI. Later Twentieth Century Innovations

Too often in our pursuit of, "bigger is bigger" in film scoring, we forget that orchestration has had a progression of writing development influenced by technology innovation and better manufacturing standards. The strings were the first section to be organized and complete as we know them while the woodwinds, brass with valves and percussion evolved over time to become the instruments we know and use today. As standardization of instrument design became accepted, writing techniques followed. Consequently, without a little study, we forget that the dramatic coloristic writing we've grown so accustomed to in film music progressed from the Russian composers through the French with Debussy, Ravel, Satie, and others.

This brings us to a very subtle point of Paul's book – how do you *really* teach orchestration? And then, how do you really teach orchestration when using electronic and physical modeling libraries that attempt to replicate the real thing? Within these questions is the hidden, "But *who* should I study first?"

In his *First Lesson: Preliminary Instruction*, Belgium teacher F.A. Gevaert makes a practical observation.

The orchestra of the early symphony does not admit of chiaroscuro or mixed colors; the various groups of instruments are juxtaposed without marked transitions. Since intense passages are almost excessively filled by bright timbres (violins, oboe, trumpets), the sonority is all brightness, sometimes even a little crude. Wind instruments seldom appear in the foreground and are mostly restricted to harmonic filling. Thus, by studying the symphonies of Haydn the student will not initiate himself with refined, unforeseen

combinations. But the student will learn there, better than anywhere, how to assemble the various parts of the ensemble and how to obtain a vigorous and honest sonority with thin resources: qualities which it is wise to acquire before being tested with more ambitious enterprises.

For the composer wanting to score for film, he will have to study Haydn on his own. Having read through the syllabi of many schools with orchestration classes, one does exercises for grades, not symphonic analysis to build scoring skills. To even find a Haydn/Mozartian library to work with, one must buy what some manufacturers insist on calling a “chamber strings” library when in point of fact the recorded instrumentation isn’t too far from the string section size used by Mozart.

Berlioz, in his *Treatise on Instrumentation*, has a slightly different take. His advice to the young is to look at contemporary scores first to know what’s happening, then go back and look at Haydn.

Having examined my own learning path in this area, I think on reflection that Geveart is really on to something, especially when most sample string libraries start you out with the full-sized Hollywood orchestra. It takes concert attendance to find out just how big a sound with effective linear writing can be created with 12 violins, 4 violas, 4 cellos and 2 basses plus winds and brass.

Mahler’s letter to young Max Marschalk is a thought provoking, wise piece of writing.

What struck me most is the feature that you also emphasize in your letter: at present you are still going in very much for ‘tone and colour!’ This is a mistake made by all gifted beginners now composing. I could show you a similar phase in my own development – Mood-music is dangerous ground.

Believe me: we must for the time keep being good to the old principles. Themes – these must be clear and plastic, so that they can be clearly recognized at any stage of modification or development – and then varied presentation, holding the attention above all through the logical development of the inner idea, but also by the genuine opposition of contrasting motives.

That is all still blurred in your work. Next, you must shake off the pianist. None of this is a movement for an orchestra – it is conceived for the piano – and then rearranged for orchestra without getting free of the trammels of that instrument.

I suffered from that ailment once myself. – All of us nowadays start out from the piano, whereas the old masters’ origins lay in the violin and the voice.

How true today as well are Mahler’s comments!

Mathews then provides us with a wonderful excerpt from Charles Koechlin’s four volume *Treatise on Orchestration*, published by Max Eschig in Paris, in classical French on 9 x 12 pages in 9 point type and smaller. I was delighted to see this excerpt. Several on the A-list studied with Koechlin before his death, including Lalo Schifrin (*Mission: Impossible* theme and many others). I’ve had parts of this book translated for me. And at one time at Alexander Publishing, we tried to negotiate with Eschig to work out the translation rights. Eschig is difficult to work with, as Paul Mathews told me he also discovered.

A class mate of Maurice Ravel’s and an individual who also orchestrated Khamma for Debussy, Koechlin had his own thoughts about where a student should begin.

The first question to treat after studying the resources of each individual instrument [editor's note: instrumentation] is that of the balance of instruments with one another and instrumental groups with one another. Beginners sometimes write sonorities that are stronger or heavier than they would prefer, – or sonorities that combine but leave gaps in the orchestra; one notices unintentional oppositions, inconsistencies, inequalities; an instrument predominates when another was intended, etc.

Koechlin's observations are still true today, again, especially when starting off with sample libraries. Even when an experienced orchestrator tries to work with samples, getting the right balance is a time consuming frustrating chore. Then when going from sampled orchestra to live orchestra, the young composer is often in shock as to how "small" the live orchestra actually sounds in comparison to the samples.

Paul Mathews *Orchestration, An Anthology of Writings*, is a timely book for those of us engaged in the practice of writing for deadlines. It should also be a bugle call to academic institutions to seriously review the holes in academic instruction of orchestration, the art we live and die by in L.A.

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