

## MUSICAL CHAIRS

I'm often asked why orchestras sit the way they sit, so here's my standard explanation for all those inquisitive minds out there tonight.

Let's view our orchestra as half a pie with the conductor's rostrum at the centre. In our orchestra, the first row of players just in front of the conductor is really a double string quartet. From left to right, there is a desk (2 players sharing on part) of 1<sup>st</sup> violins (with the Leader on the outer edge), then 2<sup>nd</sup> violins, then cellos and finishing on the right with a desk of violas. On the far right and behind the violas/cellos, stand (but usually sitting on a stool) is the double bass section, . Each of these desks have their principal players sitting on left with the Principal Double Bass on the outer edge. You can always tell them apart because they are a little more active, gesticulating with their heads, shoulders etc., than the rest of the section. Accordingly, their relating sections are behind/alongside them, sitting at their desks in pairs, watching every move from the conductor, the Leader, their principals and hopefully enough of an eye remaining to glance at the music. Those sticks in their right hands (known as bows) are suppose to all go in the same direction as their principals. This is called "bowing" and put simply, gives the conductor the sound he/she wants. It's quite a strategy and takes a long time to explain so I'll leave there.

Moving further back, you have the woodwind section. The first row is composed of 2 flutes and a piccolo left of centre and 2 oboes plus a cor anglais right of centre. Their principal players sit in the middle, i.e. the Principal Flute and Principal Oboe are sitting next to one another. Very cosy. The next row back contains 2 clarinets and a bass clarinet left of centre and 2 bassoons (sometimes 3 or with a contra bassoon). Their principal players sit in the middle too. I think they sit like this because of projection priority. They would most probably argue this with me.

Behind the woodwind sit the brass sections. Here, the horn section sits directly behind the woodwind section, so that a kind of woodwind quintet box of five principal players (flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon and horn) is formed. This is suppose to allow them better lines of communication and relay that information to the rest of their sections. The horn section is, as we all know, the finest of all sections, mainly because I make up one fourth of it. "One fourth" I hear you say...but there are five! Yes, I know...that fifth player is known as a "bumper" and is employed expressively to give the principal player (second from centre left) a break during the loud bits so lips stay fresh for more important exposed solo work. So, 5 horns playing 4 parts. To the right of centre, you get the bell fronted brass section composed of 3 trumpets playing 3 parts, 3 trombones playing 3 parts and a tuba. Principal players sit in the middle...except for the tuba...there's generally only one of them...so they get to be the Principal and sit at the end by themselves.

Behind them, sits/stands/leaps the percussion section. Generally (but by no means always) the timpani player is the Principal, because they look so elegant and spectacular when playing. I won't go into where everyone is suppose to be in this section because there is no order back there. Chaotic as it may seem, there is great strategy going on. Getting from one instrument to another just in time is not easy. You've got to keep alert, be precise, fit of mind and body and very disciplined. Percussionist make excellent soldiers. If I ever go to war, I want one next to me.

Oh, the harps. They usually sit looking quite beautiful on the left, behind the violins. Why is it that these big, extremely heavy instruments (really pianos on their sides) are generally played by the most delicate of female flowers? Heaven only knows! And here's the good news...we all get one when we go there!

Well, there you have it. I know you probably think it really doesn't matter where we sit and its all for show but it isn't you know. Since the beginning of mankind, orchestras have strived to sit just in the right place to get just the right sound. They sit this way and that way, all at the whim of the conductor at the time so we still haven't come to a fixed plan nor, I guess, will we ever.

So take a seat and enjoy the concert. At least you know where to sit.

Steve Migden, Chairman