



10 STEPS TO A CLEAR ORCHESTRAL SOUND

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1. Know The Orchestra

The best way to learn about writing for the orchestra is to listen to a live orchestra. It's obvious, but do we do it enough? How do the orchestral sections interact? How do they balance against each other? What is the purpose of each section? Knowing the answers to these will aid you in choosing the right instruments for the right moments in your music.

2. Know The Details

Dedicate some time to learn all about each instrument you'll be writing for. We should internalize the sound, timbre, dynamic/note ranges, and breath of articulations that each instrument features. For example, while a flute features an airy and light quality, a bassoon features a husky and somewhat mischievous timbre.

3. Ensemble Size

How large is the group you're writing for? Is it a smaller chamber group of 4-5 players, or a 60-piece symphony orchestra? Generally, the less players you have, the more detail that will be heard. Meanwhile, the more players you have, the more powerful the resulting sound, but the less overall detail.

4. Part Spacing

Parts that are further apart tend to be easier to discern from one another. This is especially important in the low end, where the bass builds up very easily. I tend to space the low instruments apart no less than a perfect 5th to maintain clarity and definition.

5. Part Movement

The more a part moves, the more it will tend to stick out and be noticeable. Parts that move less will fade into the background and lend more of a supporting role. For example, you may want to use less movement in the supporting instruments if your melodic line is intended to be more romantic and uses longer note values.

6. Respect The Range

Ensure that your instruments are playing within their comfortable respective ranges for clarity. Don't force the double basses to play a middle C when the cellos can handle that note more than easily.

7. Equalization

An EQ, or equalizer, is a volume control for different areas in the frequency spectrum. If your orchestral track sounds muddy or unclear, that is an indication that you will want to use an EQ to get rid of those offending frequencies. Using the 'Sweep & Destroy' method, take the time to isolate the offending frequencies and notch them out before starting your mix.

8. The Static Mix

Our instruments must be volume balanced. Starting in the most important section of your piece, lower your faders to the bottom, raise the most important instrument to around -6 dbFS, and balance all of your other instruments around that main instrument so you achieve a natural balance. This is fundamental.

9. Panning

Panning is the concept of placing our instruments in the stereo field (left/right/centre). In my music, I prefer to keep the solo instruments and fundamental bass instruments in the centre, while I'll generally pan the supporting instruments more to one side. I tend to avoid LCR panning (hard left/hard right) panning in orchestral music.

10. Volume Automation

Balancing our instruments is great, but what about all the tiny variations in volume in each instrument's performance? This will take some time, but before your mix is complete, go through each track and make any volume automation changes manually, ensuring the balance is as close to perfect as can be.

Enjoy The Process!

Orchestral music is simply amazing to listen to and to write. The authenticity of acoustic instruments adds and life and depth into any style of music.

Please have fun while you work! Not only are you more creative, but you also make better mixing decisions. If you would like to discuss any of these topics further, feel free to contact me at my website at www.christophersiu.com. Thank you!