INSTRUMENTS OF THE ORCHESTRA

There can be no hard and fast rule about the role of each instrument in the orchestra. However, it is true that you often find the instruments playing the parts as outlined here. Other instruments appear occasionally, often with a special role to play. Read this information carefully, then answer the questions.

Instrument Description

Piccolo Plays the tune. Shrill sound. Often doubles the flute an octave above; also used for decorative parts.

Flute Plays the tune, decorative parts and some harmony.

Oboe Plays slow legato tunes or spiky staccato tunes, sustained harmony, countermelodies.

Cor anglais Plays the tune, low and slow.

Clarinet Plays the tune, sustained harmony, countermelodies, arpeggio accompaniments. Played higher, it sounds humorous; played low, it sounds spooky.

Bassoon Plays the bass part, low tunes and some comic tunes when staccato.

Trumpet Plays heroic tunes, fanfares, loud harmony.

French horn Plays romantic tunes, hunting tunes and calls, sustained notes and harmonies.

Trombone Plays loud dramatic chords, loud tunes in octaves with the trumpet, or some of the bass part.

Tuba Plays the bass part, contributes to chords with the trombones.

Timpani Provides part of the bass part using only two notes. Also plays dramatic drum rolls.

Snare drum Plays exciting rhythms and drum rolls, adding tension and colour to the music.

Bass drum Used for loud, regular drum beats.

Cymbal Often clashed together at loud, exciting passages.

Violin Often plays the main tune. Also provides descants, harmony and pizzicato effect.

Viola Provides mostly harmony and pizzicato effect.

Cello Generally plays the bass part, doubled by the double bass, romantic tunes and pizzicato bass.

Double bass Doubles the bass part played by the cello, and plays pizzicato bass.

Harp Sweeping or spread chords, glissando, occasional tunes.

Harpsichord Used in the chords in Baroque music.

Celeste Rarely used, usually has short solo passages which are quite clear and colourful.

Glockenspiel Used mainly to add glittering colour to the music.

Xylophone Sometimes used for tunes in modern music. Adds a spiky sound to the music which can be quite comical in effect.

Questions For questions 1 to 6, circle true or false.

1 The most common part for the violin to play is the bass. True False

2 A trumpet is often used to play slow, quiet, romantic tunes. True False

3 The French horn is often used to play hunting calls. True False

4 The flute is lower than the piccolo. True False

5 The viola is the most likely member of the strings to play the tune. True False

6 A clarinet played low can create a spooky atmosphere. True False

Answer the following questions in the space provided below.

7 Which woodwind instrument can play slow, legato tunes and spiky, staccato tunes equally well? ...........................................................................................................................................................

8 Which instruments may play the bass part if the cello is playing the tune? ...........................................................................................................................................................

9 Which percussion instrument is sometimes used to provide some of the bass part, but only using two notes? ...........................................................................................................................................................

10 Which ‘hybrid’ instrument is missing from this orchestral list? Clue: It is made of brass but produces its sound in the same way as a clarinet. ...........................................................................................................................................................

Find out which of the following percussion instruments could play a tune, and tick the correct answer: Yes No

11 Snare drum

12 Tam-tam (gong)

13 Tambourine

14 Xylophone

15 Cymbals

16 Glockenspiel

17 Claves (sticks)

18 Maracas

19 Castanets

20 Marimba