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The Musical Palette Expresses
Color, Harmony and Mood

by Dorothy Evans

"MUSIC begins where speech leaves off," a great English poet once said. Isn't it essential that each of us have a speaking acquaintance with this art which adds so much richness to life?

Of the many students who either attend orchestral concerts or listen over the radio, few understand what they are hearing. Their senses have not been attuned to this musical painting.

As the novice stands before a painting beautifully done in a variety of colors, he cannot appreciate the delicate shading. Why? Because he lacks a knowledge of the fundamentals of color on which to base his understanding. But let him study the artist's palette and understand that all colors are developed from three primary colors, red, yellow and blue, and he will study with an appreciative eye the work before him.

So with the orchestral palette as with the artist's, the three fundamental choirs, string, wind and percussion, must be understood before the combination of them may be appreciated.

The string choir or "family" is usually spoken of as a quartet. The most important member is the violin. Its clear, penetrating tone makes it the richest voice in the orchestra. A mass of violins playing in the upper or middle register makes the most brilliant color in the instrumental painting. By barely touching the string, overtones are produced which give mystic, aural effects, as in "Lothengrin," and by deadening the vibration of the string with a mute, a weird, mournful sound is produced.

The alto of the string choir is the viola, which has a beautiful quality of tone, somber and gloomy in the lower register, but in the upper range, mellow and tender.

The cello, the baritone of the group, is expressive and melodic. The bass viol is the fundamental piece of the entire orchestra.

This group as a whole is capable of producing a great variety of tone-color because of the large range of the instruments and variations in tonal quality. However, the "wind" choir, consisting of woodwind and brass, usually makes periodical entries, generally for the purpose of color, or at the climaxes.

The woodwind choir, consisting of flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons, is capable of playing by itself in full harmony, or of subdividing into small groups each of which can produce harmony and melody. The flute has a clear, pure tone, rather unemotional in quality. It is often linked in melodious work with the plaintive "bitter-sweet" oboe.

The clarinet, the "female voice" of the orchestra, is capable of much expression in the various registers. The lowest pitched instrument of the group, the bassoon, has been called the "buffoon of the orchestra" because of the grotesque sounds which it is capable of producing. Its unusual tone may take on a mysterious quality in another setting.

Unlimited tonal variations are secured by combining these instruments differently—two flutes and two oboes, two flutes and two clarinets, two clarinets and two bassoons, etc. Again the whole of the woodwind can be employed in combination with all the strings or all the brass or with parts of either. In passages written for the entire orchestra all the woodwind instruments are used, though their individuality of tone is lost in the general mass of sound.

The brass choir consists of cornets, French horns, trombones and tubas. The cornets are the soprano of the choir and have a brilliant, militant tone. The horn is the most valuable instrument because it is so expressive and has numerous color variations. It can give a good imitation of a thundering trombone or unite excellently in soft chords with strings, or clarinets and bassoons. When not in use in solo work, to which the round, "romantic" tone of the horn lends itself admirably, it is sustaining long chords, which seem to weld the wind instruments and strings into a harmonious whole.

The trombones likewise sustain harmonies but are capable of fine effect in broad, melodic passages. The tuba is the bass of the orchestra, and, though it adds much to the volume of sound in loud passages, it is pleasing when played softly.

The instruments of the percussion section are used to accentuate rhythms, with the exception of the tympani or kettle drum, which can be tuned to certain tones. A great many striking effects are obtained by skilful use of this latter instrument.

There are sometimes "visitors" among the band "families," such as the harp or a number of woodwind instruments, the piccolo which is high and piercing, the English horn which has a low, hollow tone, or the saxophone which is vibrant and pleasing in quality. Enough instruments have been indicated to help the onlooker to a nodding acquaintance with the orchestral instruments so that he can understand how the tone colors and moods are developed.

Music is an art which expresses moods. Dark, gloomy feelings call for low, suppressed tones, while high, shrieking sounds are suitable to the expression of stormy emotions. It is intensely fascinating to follow these changes in a symphony. However, many people make the mistake of trying to discern the causes of moods and music cannot tell us that. It conveys feelings of finished expression. The charm of music lies in the contrasting of these various states of mind.

Although there are some conventional types of expression, for example, trumpets and drums suggest war, generally speaking music does not paint an objective picture but rather a subjective one.

Often on an orchestral program you will find an outline of the story telling of a particular composition. The composer cannot actually tell the story as the singer does; he can only portray his feelings. This summary of the story is to give the listener a cause for the emotions and to enable him to study the emotional treatment of the different characters, or scenes with a more perceiving eye.

"Color is to music what language is to thought. It is the medium that makes the message intelligible." The orchestra secures it by contrasting the expression that is, varying the level of tonality and the moods of the composition. Thus the mood of the composition depends on color, and color depends on mood, and both, if properly treated and varied, combine to give a rich, colorful harmony.