



M·U·S·I·C  
for

young  
PEOPLE

musicforagreatspace.org

**Catchfire Collective and Marc Mellits' Platter of Discontent**

Discussing Orchestration and Instrumentation

# Orchestration 101

Grades 3-6

What is Orchestration?

Orchestration (OR-KEH-STRAY-SHUN) is the overall sound that makes up a musical composition. It involves choosing which instruments will have the melody - or the main musical part, and the harmony - the “backup” or chords that go along with the melody. Composers often use contrasting instruments to make a certain part in the music come out. Music for a Great Space’s 2025 Resident Ensemble, Catchfire Collective, includes variety of instruments, including piano, strings, woodwinds, and percussion. They played Marc Mellits’ piece *Platter of Discontent* which uses a wide variety of instruments that play different sounds to draw the audience’s ear in. You can hear a movement of their performance of *Platter of Discontent* here:



Each instrument has a contrasting sound. The flute tends to have an airy and lighter sound. The range of the instrument tends to be fairly high, which can be heard [here](#).



The violin and cello are two of the stringed instruments in the ensemble. The violin tends to play higher notes while the cello usually plays lower sounding pitches. You can hear the violin [here](#) and the cello [here](#).

Below is the violin.



Below is the cello.



The piano has the widest range of these three instruments, and can play 88 different notes! Hear what the piano sounds like [here](#).



The clarinet is a woodwind instrument and tends to play mid-range to higher notes. It can be heard [here](#).



Catchfire Collective's ensemble also includes percussion instruments. Percussion refers to a lot of different types of instruments, but the majority of them are hit to produce their sound. One of the main percussion instruments used in Catchfire's performances is the marimba. Listen to what a marimba sounds like [here](#).



If a composer wants to highlight a specific instrument, they may have that instrument play louder while the others play softer, so as to not drown out the melody.

When a composer wants to make the audience feel a certain type of emotion, they may choose to use a different instrument. If a composer wants a big, exciting, triumphant sound, they may use brass instruments, like the ending of [Pines of Rome by Respighi](#). A composer might want a more romantic and heartfelt sound, like [Tchaikovsky's Overture to Romeo and Juliet](#).

You can see more in depth information by Marc Jovani about all of the instrument families and their sounds [here](#). This video also includes really interesting information about using digital mixing to create music!

## Activity

Use this free tool by Google Chrome to create your own musical composition <https://musiclab.chromeexperiments.com/Song-Maker/>. Please note, this activity is much easier on a computer or tablet versus a cell phone.

Here are some of the basics:

- Each square makes up an 8th note, so if you want a note on the beat only, click on the box that is right after the thick line.
- The lower the box is on the screen, the lower the pitch. You can also have multiple pitches play at one time.
- If you want to undo a pitch selection, simply click the box again.
- Play around with the different instrument sounds! When you're done, you can save your creation.

Remember, just play around and have fun experimenting!

You can hear my sample tune at this link: <https://musiclab.chromeexperiments.com/Song-Maker/song/6521479486898176>