

A Lutheran's Guide to the Orchestra

by Garrison Keillor

To each person, God gives some talent such as comedy, just to name one, or the ability to suffer, and to some persons God has given musical talent, though not to as many as think so. So for a young Lutheran considering an orchestral career, the first question to ask yourself is, "Do I have a genuine God-given talent, or do I only seem talented compared to other young Lutherans?" Because most Lutherans aren't musicians, they're choir members. Mostly altos and basses. And they can be sure that their gift is God-given, because who else but God would be interested? Nobody goes into choir music for the wrong reasons. But orchestra... do you know what you're getting into? You're getting into opera for one thing. Don Juan and Mephistopheles, pagan goddesses screeching and being strangled and thrown off balconies. And even if you stick to concert music, where are the Christian composers? Modern ones are existentialists, the romantics were secular humanists, the 18th century was all rationalists, and the 17th were Italian except for Bach. And you can't make a living playing Bach. In the Bible, we read about people singing and playing musical instruments, including the harp, the last trump, the cymbal, the psaltery. But in the Bible, music was in praise of the Lord, not for amusement. We don't read that our Lord Himself ever played an instrument or enjoyed hearing other people play theirs. The apostles did not attend concerts. They weren't in the arts--maybe there's a reason for that. You play in an orchestra, you're going to be devoting your life to music that sort of swirls around in spiritual mystery. Searching for answers that people could find in the Epistle to the Romans if somebody just showed them where it is.

But if you're determined to play in an orchestra, then you ought to ask yourself, "Which instrument is the best one for a Lutheran to play?" Which instrument would our Lord have chosen, assuming He played an instrument? And assuming He was Lutheran.

Probably not a French horn: the French horn takes too much of a person's life. French horn players hardly have time to marry and have children. The French horn is practically a religious belief all by itself. In some orchestras, the horn players are required to be celibate--sometimes by their wives. Because they think about the horn all the time anyway.

Should a Lutheran play the bassoon? Not if you want to be taken seriously, I don't think so. The name kind of says it all: bassoon. It's an instrument that isn't playing with a full deck of marbles. Maybe it's something you'd do for a hobby ("Hey honey, let's go bassooning this weekend!"), but not as your life's work. Some bassoonists filling out applications for home loans just say "orthodontist."

Many Lutherans start out playing clarinets in marching band and think of it as a pretty good instrument and kind of sociable. You pick up a clarinet, and you feel like getting together with other people and forming an "M." But the symphonic clarinet is different: clever, sarcastic, kind of snooty. It's a nice small town instrument that went to college and after that you can't get a simple answer out of them. It is a French instrument, you know. Ever wonder why there are no French Lutherans? Probably the wine wasn't good enough for them. The oboe is the sensualist of the woodwind section, and if there is one wind Lutherans should

avoid, it's probably this one. In movie soundtracks, you tend to hear the oboe when the woman is taking her clothes off. Also a little later when she asks the man for a cigarette. You start playing the oboe, you're going to have babies, take my word for it.

The English horn [cor anglais] sounds Christian, maybe because we think of it as the Anglican horn, but it's so mournful, so plaintive. And so are English horn players. They all have deep complicated problems. They're all down in the dumps, especially at night, which is when most concerts are. Maybe because they want what oboists have, I don't know.

The flute is the show-off of the wind section, the big shot: Jean-Pierre Rampal, James Galway--both millionaires. (How many millionaire bassoonists can you name real fast?) Well, that's fine. Everybody knows it's the hardest, blowing across a tiny hole with your head tilted all your life: it's like soloing on a pop bottle. The problem with the flute is that it vibrates your brain, and you start wearing big white caftans and smocks and eat roots and berries. You become a pantheist and sit in meadows, and you believe that all is one and God is everything--God is a column of air vibrating--and you know that's not right.

The last member of the woodwind family is the flakiest and that's the piccolo. It's never in tune. Never has been, never will be. All you can play with it is the blues. Which, being a Lutheran, we don't have anyway.

We come now to the string section. Strings are mentioned in scripture and some young Christians are tempted to become string players. But you want to be careful. Bass, for example. A very deliberate instrument, the plow horse of the orchestra: and bass players do tend to be more methodical, not so spontaneous or witty or brilliant necessarily, but reliable. Which makes the instrument appealing to German Lutherans. And yet bass notes do have a certain texture and a tone, a darkness, a depth that--my gosh, when you see those guys pick up their bows back there, doesn't it make you think the same thing that I do? And if we do, just think what they're thinking about....

The cello section seems pleasant, and cellists seem like such nice people. The way they put their arms around their instruments, they look like parents at a day care center zipping up snowsuits. They seem like us: comfortable, mid-range, able to see both sides of things. And yet, there's something about the cello that's hard to put your fingers on. It just doesn't seem right. Maybe, it's the way they hold the instrument the way they do. Why can't they hold it across their laps? Or beside themselves? I'm only asking.

The viola section is no place for a Lutheran and here you have to take my word for it, because I know violists and they're okay until late at night, they like to build a fire in a vacant lot and drink red wine and roast a chicken on a clothes hanger and talk about going to Mexico with somebody named Rita. Violists have this dark, moody, gypsy streak, especially when they get older, and they realize that their instrument for some reason cannot be heard beyond the stage. You think you hear the violas, but it's really the second violins.

The first violin is a problem for a Christian because it's a solo virtuoso instrument and we Christians are humble and decent people. The first violins see the maestro look to them first,

and most of them believe that he secretly takes his cue from watching their bows go up and down. The maestro, who has a great nimbus of hair and is here on a temporary work permit, is hypnotized by listening to the violins and forgets which page he's on and looks to the violins to find out what's going on--this is what most violinists believe in their hearts. That if the maestro dropped dead, the orchestra would just follow the violins while his little body was carried off into the wings, and nobody in the audience would notice any difference except that now they would have an unobstructed view of the violin section. Is this a place for a Lutheran to be? Did our Lord say "Blessed are they who stand up in front and take deep bows for they shall receive bigger fees?" No, He did not.

The second violin section is attractive to Lutherans because these people are steady, supportive and helpful, but look who it is they help--they help out the first violins. You want to play second fiddle to that crowd? (No, I hope not.) One thing you may not know about second violins is that the parts are so easy they never practice and they wind up staying out late in singles bars on the freeway near the airport and dancing with software salesmen. But I guess that's their way.

Let's be clear about one thing about the brass section. The rest of the orchestra wishes the brass were playing in another room. So does the conductor. His back is toward you so that you can't see what he's saying to them but what he's saying is, "Would you mind taking that thing outside?" The brass section is made up of men who were at one time in the construction trades. They went into music because the hours are better and there's less dust. They're heavy dudes and that's why composers wrote so few notes for them. Because after they play, you can't hear for a while. The tuba player is normally a stocky, bearded guy whose hobby is plumbing. The only member of the orchestra who bowls over 250 and gets his deer every year and changes his own oil. In his locker downstairs, he keeps a pair of lederhosen for freelance jobs. Anyway, there's only one tuba in the bunch and he's it.

The trombonist is a humorist, sort of the brother-in-law of the orchestra. He carries a water spray gun to keep his slide moist and often uses it against his neighbors. That's why they duck down back there. He's nobody you'd ever want to see become artistic director; you just hope he doesn't sit right behind you.

The trumpet is the brass instrument you imagine as Christian, thinking of Gideon and Gabriel, and then you meet one in real life, and you realize how driven these people are. They don't want to wear black tie; they want to wear capes and swords and tassels; they want to play as loud as they can and see mallards drop from the ceiling. Of the people who've keeled over dead at orchestra concerts, most of them were killed by a long trumpet passage. And most of them were glad to go.

There are two places in the orchestra for a Lutheran and one is the percussion section. It's the most Christian instrument there is. Percussionists are endlessly patient because they hardly ever get to play. Pages and pages of music go by when the violins are sawing away and the winds are tooting and the brass are blasting, and the percussionist sits there and counts the bars like a hunter in the blind waiting for a grouse to appear. A percussionist may have to wait for twenty minutes just to play a few beats, but those beats have to be exact, and they

have to be passionate, climactic. All that the Epistles of Paul say a Christian should be--faithful, waiting, trusting, filled with fervor--are the qualities of the good percussionist.

The other Lutheran instrument, of course, is the harp. It's a good instrument for any Christian because it keeps you humble and keeps you at home. You can't run around with a harp. Having one is like living with an elderly parent in very poor health: it's hard to get them in and out of cars, and it's hard to keep them happy. It takes fourteen hours to tune a harp, which remains in tune for about twenty minutes, or until somebody opens the door. It's an instrument for a saint. If a harpist could find a good percussionist, they wouldn't need anybody else. They could settle down and make perfectly good music, just the two of them.