



Music Literacy Articles: Why Orchestras Have the Instruments They Have

Directions: Read the Quora.org article titled “Why Are There So Many Violins in a Symphony Orchestra?” Then produce short responses to each of the argument-based questions below.

1. Supply the Missing Reasoning

All academic arguments contain an argumentative claim, evidence, and reasoning. Reasoning is the writer or speaker’s own analysis as to how the evidence proves the claim is true. Supply your own reasoning as to how the evidence below proves this claim is true, according to some voices in the article: The primary reason that orchestras contain a high number of violins is for an overall tonal balance.

Evidence: According to Tobin Sparfeld (in Quora.org (2015), there are two violin sections, and they often play a melodic line in orchestral pieces. James MacCloud states that violins have a softer pitch than other orchestral instruments, too.

Reasoning:

2. Supply the Argumentative Claim

Another argument made by the Quora.org article pertains to violins and their particular playing features. For this argument, supply the missing argumentative claim

Argumentative claim:

Evidence: Tobin Sparfeld states, “Because it is bowed and not played with air, violins can play long melodic phrases. And because the pitch is determined by one's fingers on the string, it is easier to produce varying vibrato which mimics the human voice than with other instruments. Violins can also play two notes at a time. Called ‘double stops,’ they allow more complex harmonies to creatively evolve from the melody.”

Reasoning: Sparfeld here enumerates several key playing features of the violin that have made it the focal instrument of symphony orchestras. Playing for a longer uninterrupted stretch than wind instruments, sounding the like the human voice, and overlaying complex harmonies – these are all ways that the violin plays its way to importance.

3. Supply the Evidence

Still another argument made in the Quora.org article pertains to changing norms in the number of violins and their balance with other instruments in the orchestra. For this argument, supply a quote or summary from the article to supply its missing evidence.

Argumentative claim: While always important, norms for the number of violins in an orchestra have changed and evolved over the musical periods in history.

Evidence:

Reasoning: These varying numbers of violins in a normative or average orchestra of different musical periods suggests that even though violins have always been important, the expectations of composers and audiences for their total and relative volume have not been static or unchanging.

4. Counter-Argument and Response

Krysta Storer seems to contradict the view of several of the other contributors when she writes, “Violins play in the treble clef, which means they are the highest, and loudest.” She seems to suggest that, far from needing to have more violins to balance the other instruments, violins are actually the easiest instrument to hear in an orchestra. How do you think the other writers would respond to and refute Storer’s counter-argument.