

THE INNER SECRETS
OF
ORCHESTRAL PIANO-PLAYING

A tutorial in ten lessons

by

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Welcome to ***THE INNER SECRETS OF ORCHESTRAL PIANO-PLAYING!***

My name is Rod Shaw and I've been playing orchestral piano for over 30 years with some of the world's finest orchestras. Now I'm going to share all the insider information you need to know to be a winner in this highly competitive field.

What took me years to learn, you can have literally *at your fingertips* from this tutorial. Learn how to play with an orchestra, find out which pieces you really need to have "on demand" and know which ones to avoid if possible, and you'll be **first call**, the person they'll always ask first and keep on calling.

When you graduated from music college with your solo diploma, you were ready to make your mark as a "Rising Star". Maybe you won a couple of competitions, got a solo recital here and there. But the big career was elusive...so you started teaching, anything from kids to bored housewives. Not exactly the glamorous life on the podium you'd imagined.

But wait a minute – you're still a great player, with an urge to be up there on the concert platform somehow. So why not do what ninety percent of your fellow musicians do and **PLAY IN AN ORCHESTRA?**

Find all the tips and tricks of the trade you need to know in ***THE INNER SECRETS OF ORCHESTRAL PIANO-PLAYING.***

Now let's get started...

LESSON ONE

Be prepared...

Like a good scout, you have to be prepared. Improvisation is great, but when the downbeat falls you've got to play the notes the composer wrote because that's what the conductor (and audience!) wants to hear.

Tip: If the conductor hears you starting in the right place at the right time, chances are she'll be happy and leave you alone for most of the rest of the rehearsal.

How do I know when to start? If that seems like a dumb question, try counting 187 measures of rest in changing meter and then ask again. Your part may have cues from other instruments written in, but there's no guarantee that they'll all be played at the first rehearsal or that you'll be able to hear them all later.

Practice counting empty measures in changing meter. You can do this at home following your part along with a recording you've found on YouTube..

Get familiar with the whole piece beforehand if you can. Listen to (or even better, watch) a recording, practice counting those empty measures. Unless it's a world premiere or something so obscure that it's never been recorded before (in which case, nobody's going to know better) you'll benefit from the familiarity this brings. Just remember that tempi may well vary between your favorite recording and the Nether Gulch Symphony performance you're in.

If the metronome marking is 126, get it up to 138 in your practicing. Conductors are often a bit nervous in the first rehearsal or get excited during the performance and push the tempo a little, so be prepared for that. By the way, some composers write very ambitious metronome marks (e.g. the 6/8 finale scale passages in *Saint-Saens' 3rd Symphony*) which are almost never heeded in performance.

Many pieces are scored for piano and an auxiliary keyboard instrument such as the **celesta**, and you're often expected to play both. This can involve some athletic jumping around from one instrument to the other (*Bernstein - Symphonic Dances from West Side*

Story) or even playing them simultaneously (*Magnus Lindberg – FERIA*). If this is the case, get to the first rehearsal early and check that the instruments are set up the way you need.

Tip: It's always a good idea to arrive early for a rehearsal, and a TERRIBLE idea to arrive late. This causes you, the orchestral manager and the conductor unwanted stress, especially on the night. Get into the habit of leaving yourself a safety margin and always being there ahead of time. It does wonders for your reputation for RELIABILITY and saves a lot of wear and tear on your nerves.

LESSON TWO

Where's the piano?

The answer to that one is: usually squeezed into a corner against the back wall behind the first violins and, if you're unlucky, downwind of the horn section (see *Tip* on earplugs). In some cases, you'll be placed in the center of the orchestra between the strings and winds, which is great for the solo repertoire (e.g. *Stravinsky - Petruschka, Symphony of Psalms*).

Wherever you sit, you'll have to confront the distance problem, visually and acoustically. Can I see (or even hear) the conductor? How do I place those left hand chords together with the double-bass pizzicati that are coming from the opposite side of the podium? Or get that tricky right hand figuration in unison with the flutes? How about getting those soft chords to sound together with the harp?

These are some of the everyday challenges you face as an orchestral pianist unused, as a rule, to being part of a large ensemble. The secret is to set your antennae, ears and eyes, onto maximum receiving power. You're not on your own any more!

Looking is just as important then listening.

You can actually SEE a pizzicato, a drum tap, the beginning of a violin or a harp tone by looking at the point of contact between player and instrument. You can SEE a wind section preparing for a chordal entry (they breathe together). Believe me, this information is critical. The conductor will ask you to play "on the beat". Doing so does not guarantee that you'll be together with the rest of the orchestra. You could be like the only soldier on parade who's marching in step...

Tip: earplugs in the orchestra? Look around, carefully, before you dismiss the idea. A week sitting to the right of a horn section, in front of the trumpets, or next to a piccolo and you'll be wishing you invested in a pair too. The pros use custom-made plugs which filter out certain frequencies but still allow you to hear yourself and enough of the orchestra to play together.

LESSON THREE

Do you also play celesta?

You bet! It's just a keyboard with bells attached. Literally. All you need to do is work out how to make a good sound on it. Basically, strike the keys as if you were striking a bell, with a quick stroke followed by an immediate half-release. For legato passages, rely on the pedal, but continue with a non-legato touch.

Which octave do I play at? Not such a stupid question, since the instrument sounds an octave higher than written, and some composers and conductors seem unsure of which octave they require. Be guided by common sense and the overall range of the piece. In some cases (*Mahler - 6th Symphony*) you may even need to adapt the part if it goes off the range of the instrument (usually 5 octaves).

Tip: Celesta makers have problems constructing a music stand. It's usually far too small to support the music, which often consists of one flimsy sheet that ends up on the floor. Ask for (or bring your own) wooden or stiff cardboard backing.

Although the size of the instrument is unimpressive, its clear bell-like tones carry well so it is used both for doubling other instruments to give additional coloring (*Strauss - Der Rosenkavalier*) as well as providing ethereal solos, a favorite device in *Shostakovich* (e.g. *Symphonies 5 and 15*).

Virtuoso celesta parts are quite rare, but certain modern composers have written some ferocious parts (*Berio*). Thankfully, they are often quite inaudible.

The one instance in which the instrument appears in the title, *Bartók's Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*, has a much harder part for the piano. You also have to join the pianist and play four-handed piano in the 4th movement.

In general, celesta playing is an easy gig, so sit back and relax whilst everyone around you is working their hardest! Or take the time to learn about...

LESSON FOUR

Do you play additional keyboards?

Organ, harmonium, synthesizer and harpsichord are also employed in the orchestra and, depending on your versatility and the difficulty of the part, can prove a useful addition to your skills.

Unless you have received some training on the **organ** however, beware of accepting a gig on this one. You may not be able to find the on/off switch. Or work out the registration (which stops to draw). Ever tried playing the pedals? OK, you get the picture. For trained organists, no problem (see lesson nine). For a novice, a bit like trying to fly a plane on a car driving license.

The **harmonium** is much easier, and good for the leg muscles, although the sitting position is usually a torture for more than 45 minutes at a stretch. The instrument does require one unique element of coordination, i.e. to pedal the bellows independently of the rhythm you play! A bit like accordionists, the art is to disguise the change of direction in order to provide a regular air supply and thus a steady tone. Try it and you'll see what I mean. Realizing a controlled diminuendo is tricky and requires anticipating when the sound should end, so it's worth trying out the instrument you'll be using beforehand.

The hand stops tend to be divided between the treble and bass so you need to pull out both left and right hand stops. Their names usually pay more tribute to the maker's imagination than to any instrumental sound they suggest. Oftentimes there are knee levers which are pressed outwards to increase the volume by progressively adding stops..

Composers employing the harmonium tend to be late Romantic / early Modern such as *Gustav Mahler (8th symphony)* or his son-in-law *Zemlinsky (Lyric Symphony)* searching for an extra element of decadence in their orchestral sound, or hard-core modernists desperate for any special effects.

Of course, the ultimate keyboard for sound effects nowadays is the **synthesizer**. Enlightened contemporary composers may specify the make of instrument and even provide software together with the orchestral material containing the sounds they have

created (*John Adams - Violin Concerto*). The key word here is compatibility, since software conflicts can arise during the loading sequence. You have to ensure that the specified instrument has been ordered (call the orchestral manager well in advance!) and have an instruction booklet delivered as well.

Any non-acoustic instrument, i.e. one requiring electric amplification, has a built-in panic factor, so it's a good idea to check out beforehand that there will be a technician on hand so that if there's a glitch, you're not in the immediate firing line.

The **harpsichord** has enjoyed a renaissance in the 20th century and is used orchestrally either for baroque parody (R. Strauss *Capriccio*, Stravinsky *The Rake's Progress*) or as a modern sound in its own right (*Schnittke Cello Concerto*). The instrument required depends on the piece – some require more than the 5-octave range, or demand a 16 foot register (i.e. sounding one octave lower) in addition to the more usual 8 and 4 foot registers. For any piece requiring instant register changes, ask for a two-manual instrument with pedal couplers.

As symphony orchestras are again programming baroque repertoire after being scared off for a while by the historically-informed performance movement, you may also be asked to play *continuo*. A written-out part, called a realization, is usually provided. Stick to it unless you're trained in reading figured bass or can play from a full score (which is more fun, except for turning so many pages!). See further Lesson Ten.

There are a few 20th century pieces which give the harpsichord a prominent role; one of my favorites is the *Petite Symphonie Concertante* by Frank Martin. The Russian school of contemporary composers such as *Gubaidulina* and *Schnittke* also favor its exotic sound in the orchestra.

LESSON FIVE

Is it in your repertoire?

Champion sportsmen and women have a repertoire of moves under their belt enabling them to deal with any opportunity that comes their way. So you, the regular orchestral pianist, can also build up your repertoire so that you can jump in at short notice when the orchestra manager calls with the question: “Can you play such and such a piece tomorrow?”

Tip: Every time you play a piece for the first time, make and keep a copy of the orchestral part and so build up your own personal library at home.

Remember the motto in Lesson One – Be Prepared.

If you’ve never played a piece before, ask the librarian to send you the piano part well in advance. Particularly if it’s not standard repertoire. Try to get a copy of the full score too so that you can see whether the part is exposed. This will help avoid any nasty surprises at the first rehearsal. Look for a recording online, preferably a video, and follow the performance with your individual part.

Because the piano sound is not typical within the orchestra, it does tend to stand out even if you’re playing along with other instruments (e.g. *R. Strauss – Der Bürger als Edelmann*). However, in certain passages that are thickly orchestrated the piano blends into the tutti sound and becomes a color rather than an individual voice (*Martini - Symphonies*). You’ll soon get the feel of ensemble playing if you keep your eyes and ears open.

Contemporary music can be a bit of a gamble, since you often can’t get hold of a score beforehand and some of the parts can be really ferocious, requiring many hours of preparation. It’s a real downer when it turns out that a particularly nasty passage you’ve been sweating over for weeks is totally inaudible because there’s a whole battery of percussion noise going on at the same time. As a guide, try to look at some other pieces by the same composer and get a feel for the scoring.

First performances are a double-edged sword: on the one hand there's no recording to

listen to for familiarization, but on the other, nobody else has ever heard the piece before either!

You can choose to become a specialist in the contemporary repertoire if that's your thing, but as most modern music is put on by small, dedicated ensembles run on a shoestring budget, don't look to earn an easy living with it.

LESSON SIX

Sight-reading

I never practiced much as a kid because my sight-reading was too good; I often managed to fool my teacher at the next lesson by simply reading the new piece I was supposed to have been working on all week.

How did my sight-reading get so good so early? Because I was a voracious reader and loved playing through volumes of popular classics at home, quickly learning to keep the tempo going and simplifying the difficult bits as I went.

Others are not so lucky and have to work hard at this aspect of their piano-playing later in life. Believe me, it's an investment worth making sooner rather than later. A bit like spending time sharpening your ax before venturing out into the forest to cut down a swathe of trees.

Isn't it better to put time into honing a skill that will serve you now and save you hundreds of hours later in your chosen profession?

Apply the same principle to orchestral playing. Get good at reading; learn how to "thin out" a tricky passage at first sight, for the all-important thing is to keep going! You can't stop the orchestra and repeat a few bars just for your own benefit. Then use the time in between rehearsals to focus your attention on getting those details into place.

Tip: The rhythm is more important than the notes.

This may seem an outrageous thing to say, but from the conductor's point of view a nonrhythmic pianist is much more of a liability in the early stages of rehearsal than one who can't yet play all the notes perfectly but can at least stay in tempo.

Always practice sight-reading rhythmically. Set yourself a slow enough tempo at first and you'll soon get into the habit of keeping going.

There's a temptation when preparing an orchestral piano part to concentrate exclusively

on the technically difficult passages and to ignore the bits that look easy. Take a few moments to check these out too, because they may hide some rhythmic complications that will leave you with a red face at the first rehearsal.

LESSON SEVEN

Accompanying auditions

If you get to be a regular pianist with a particular orchestra, it won't be long before they'll be calling you to accompany their auditions...

This is particularly challenging work, since you have to keep alert during the twelfth candidate's rendition of the exposition of a Mozart concerto ("A major or D major?"), then sweat through the big romantic concertos in the second round, trying to remember each player's interpretation from the 10-minute preparation session you may have had many hours previously.

Our motto from Lesson One - Be Prepared – is the secret here too.

If you are going to do this work regularly, have your own copies of piano reductions for the standard concerto repertoire, with all the usual cuts marked in. (The first time you do this job, check these out with one of the candidates beforehand). The advantages of having your own copies also include avoiding nasty surprises with strange editions (in my experience, candidates from distant countries can produce versions of the Mozart concertos with truly bizarre piano reductions).

The classical concertos (*Mozart, Haydn, Stamitz, Hoffmeister*) present few problems for the accompanist.

The romantic concertos are often quite challenging however, so even if you know them, it's well worth running your fingers over them again before accompanying an audition. After all, somebody's future career is at stake, and you have a duty to provide the best support you can during what is a perhaps one of the most stressful occasion in their lives. The big violin concertos (*Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Sibelius*), the *Walton* viola concerto, *Schumann* and *Dvorak* cello concertos should all be part of your repertoire.

Wind players often produce exotic concertos, so it's good policy to try and find out in advance what is coming up (*R. Strauss, Ibert, Poulenc* are all tricky numbers).

Any candidate who expects the accompanist to sight-read a completely obscure concerto is ill-advised and likely to learn an unforgettable lesson!

LESSON EIGHT

Prepared pianos

Remember Lesson One – Be Prepared? It can also apply to the instrument as well as the player...

In their search for ever-increasing originality of sound, in a desire to extend the normal use of instruments, or just for the heck of it, some contemporary composers resort to asking players to abuse their instruments in all sorts of weird and not-so-wonderful ways.

For the pianist, this includes being asked to strike the strings from above with a variety of objects including wooden mallets, drum sticks, triangle beaters (a six-inch nail will also suffice) or even glass bottles. Another common request is for “pizzicato” which can be done with the finger, fingernail or a plectrum. A “glissando” effect can be produced by rubbing the length of the string with the thumb or (for better effect and in the interest of self-preservation) with an eraser, which is what a lot of harpists use for orchestral glissandi. Keep an old plastic credit card handy for loud glissandi.

Tip: Get friendly with the harpists. They can be helpful in many ways and often have a wealth of orchestral experience to share.

The notion of a “prepared piano” can be extended to placing pieces of felt, cardboard or even metal onto the strings to produce particularly nasty jangling noises and, in the most extreme case I know, of inserting drawing pins into certain hammers. As you can imagine, these practices are highly unpopular with the piano technicians responsible for the maintenance of the instruments. If the score calls for any of these extreme alterations, it’s a good idea to warn them beforehand so that they don’t wheel out their best concert grand, unaware of the treatment you are about to inflict on it.

You may be required to play harmonics, which are done by lightly touching the string in question at a particular place and then striking the key quickly but softly. If in doubt, ask the harpist to demonstrate.

Many of these effects require the flexibility of a contortionist, since you have to bend over

the keyboard to reach inside the instrument with one hand, strike the keys with the other, all the while craning your neck to see the conductor and your music at the same time. Try placing the music desk on the frame inside the piano so that you can reach the strings more easily.

Tip: Use colored paper adhesive labels to put onto the dampers so that you can identify the string(s) you need without first having to depress the relevant key.

The above trick will save you a lot of grief, especially if you manage to color-code your music to match as well!

A piece by the German composer *Hans Zender* calls for four grand pianos all tuned at very slightly different (but carefully stipulated) pitches. This drives the tuner mad, but luckily puts no special demands on the players other than keeping a straight face.

LESSON NINE

From the organ loft

Organists, remember you're supposed to be playing with the orchestra, not against it, so watch the conductor (it may well be via a mirror or TV monitor) and be prepared to anticipate, i.e. play ahead of the beat, because the usual complaint is that "the organ is behind". This applies particularly to pedal notes.

Working out registration beforehand is important, but always have a couple of alternatives (louder and softer) on offer because what sounds right on your own in the hall before the orchestra arrive will inevitably need some adjusting. Unless there's a detachable console placed within the orchestra, in which case you can judge for yourself, chances are that you'll be fairly far away and thus at the mercy of helpful (or other) comments on balance from the conductor or an assistant in the hall.

There are some fun pieces in the repertoire, such as the *Alpine Symphony* or *Thus spake Zarathustra* by *Richard Strauss*. There's a substantial part in *Mahler's 8th Symphony* and a crowning moment in his *2nd (Resurrection)*, although you have to wait approximately 78 minutes for it to arrive. Bring a book on this gig.

There's a spectacular organ solo in *Janacek's Glagolitic Mass* for which you should definitely practice hard (and get your name in the program). The two French organist composers *Fauré* and *Durufié* wrote detailed organ parts in their settings of the *Requiem*; you may have to adapt their precise registration (conceived for French instruments) to suit the all-purpose concert hall organ.

The title *Organ Symphony* by *Saint-Saens* is actually misleading, because the orchestral piano part (four-hands) has just as much to do and is considerably more demanding technically, but the organist gets a solo fee ☺. Ditto for *Liszt's Faust Symphony*. Nice work if you can get it.

Often composers write organ parts on two staves only, so it's left up to the player when to employ the pedals (*Respighi Pini di Roma, Fontane di Roma, Feste romane*). Others specify the instrument but neglect to write a part for it (*Beethoven Mass in C, Missa*

Solemnis, early scores of *Brahms Requiem*), a tradition harking back to basso continuo when the organist (assumed to be familiar with the choral parts, and reading from a figured bass), improvised his part according to circumstance. As a general rule, remember you're there to provide color, so play unobtrusively.

LESSON TEN

Do you also play continuo?

No, that isn't some weird instrument you never heard of, it's short for *basso continuo*, a term from the baroque which defines an art practiced by most keyboard players from about 1600 to 1800.

Basso continuo is a bass line which may or may not be figured. These figures denote the harmonies the player is expected to add to the written-out bass line (just like jazz). Another term for this practice is playing from a figured bass. Almost all baroque and pre-classical orchestral and choral repertoire requires continuo, and orchestras which care about historically-informed performance (the majority nowadays) will be looking for a continuo player in this field.

Unless you've actually learned how to play from figured bass, you'll be glad to hear that most modern editions include a written-out realization of the *basso continuo* which will suffice for the inexperienced player. As you gain experience, you can use this as a basis from which to improvise more elaborate realizations.

The choice of instrument (harpsichord/organ or a plucked instrument such as theorbo) was generally left undefined and will depend on the piece and the preference of the conductor. Purely instrumental repertoire usually suggests harpsichord, whereas choral and vocal repertoire often implies the use of an organ. This should be a small "positive" organ which, like a harpsichord, sits in the middle of the orchestra (preferably near the cello/bass section). Some big choral pieces from the classical and romantic periods still demand organ continuo (see Lesson 9) but imply the use of a larger instrument.

Tip: take a few lessons from a baroque specialist before accepting to play continuo! It's an investment which will pay off because many regular keyboard players shy away from this work. Remember our motto: Be Prepared!

CONCLUSION

Now you've learnt a lot about the ins and outs of playing piano in an orchestra, you're eager to get started! But how?

Go to as many concerts as you can where this repertoire is being performed, or even better, ask to attend rehearsals. Observe the orchestra pianist, listen to how the instrument sounds within the orchestra, talk with him/her afterwards.

Gain experience: offer to play in any student orchestras and ensembles for contemporary music (they are often glad to have volunteers). Once you start, talk to other players, show your interest in their world and before long you'll find yourself in demand!

Then take your courage in your hands and contact the nearby professional orchestras. Find out the name of the person in charge of booking extra players, send in your resumé. Check out their programmes for the season and ask if they need anyone for any of the concerts with piano or celesta.

Tip: if you don't ask, the answer's always no!

Remember, with the **Inner Secrets of Orchestral Piano-Playing**, you're all prepared!

Standard Repertoire (Selection)

Bartok	Dance Suite, Music for Strings, Percussion & Celeste, Miraculous Mandarin Suite, Wooden Prince Suite
Berg	Lulu Suite, Seven Early Songs
Bernstein	Symphonic Dances from West Side Story
Copland	Appalachian Spring, Billy the Kid, Rodeo, El Salón México
de Falla	El Amor brujo, El sombrero de tres picos, La vida breve
Ives	The Fourth of July, Three Places in New England, 4th Symphony
Lutoslawski	Concerto for Orchestra
Mahler	Symphonies 2, 6, 8, Das Lied von der Erde
Martin	Petite Symphonie Concertante
Martinu	Symphonies 1-5
Orff	Carmina Burana
Prokofiev	Lieutenant Kije, Romeo & Juliet Suites, Symphonies 2, 4, 5-7
Rachmaninoff	Symphonic Dances, The Bells
Ravel	Bolero, Daphnis & Chloe Suites 1, 2, Ma Mère l'Oye
Respighi	Feste Romane, Fontane di Roma, Pini di Roma, Trittico
Saint-Saens	Organ Symphony (Nr.3)
Schoenberg	Five pieces for orchestra, Gurrelieder
Shostakovich	Symphonies 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 11, 13, 14, 15, Cello concerto 1
Strauss, R.	Alpensinfonie, Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme, Rosenkavalier Suite
Stravinsky	Les Noces, Oedipus Rex, Firebird Suite, Petrouchka, Scherzo, Symphony in 3 Movements, Symphony of Psalms
Webern	Five Pieces op.10, Six Pieces op.6
Zemlinsky	Lyric Symphony, Six Songs op.13

20th century repertoire

Adams	The Chairman dances, Violin concerto, Harmonielehre, A Short Ride in a Fast Machine
Berio	Nones, Rendering, Sinfonia
Corigliano	Clarinet concerto, Elegy, Fantasia, Symphony 1
Gorecki	Symphony 1, 3
Gubaidulina	Violin Concerto
Henze	Symphonies 1-8, Violin Concerto 2
Ligeti	Atmosphères, Melodies, Requiem
Lindberg	Clarinet Concerto, FERIA, Arena
Penderecki	St. Luke Passion, Symphonies 1, 2
Reich	The four sections, Three movements, Variations
Rorem	Sinfonia, Symphonies 2, 3
Schnittke	Concerti grossi 1 - 4, Requiem, In Memoriam
Schuller	Concerto for Orchestra, Five Bagatelles, Five Etudes
Takemitsu	Dream window, Quotation of Dream, Tree line, Visions
Williams	Star Wars Suite