**Chapter 10**

**Orchestra and Voices**

The concert hall is a perfect setting for large-scale musical spectacles including choruses, soloists, and orchestras. The acoustics are such that it can handle a large number of musicians performing, or just a soloist. Beginning in the Baroque era, and continuing today, composers have written works that combine choirs and orchestras in very impressive, and usually lengthy, works. Many were written to honor a specific person or event, or some special occasion. And many are of a religious nature or use text from the Bible as their topic.

The earliest of these types of orchestral/vocal pieces is called the oratorio, which was developed in the Baroque era. An oratorio is much like an opera except it does not have sets or costumes. It has recitative and aria and is set in acts with different characters. These are called choruses and employ large numbers of mixed (meaning both male and female) voices. An oratorio’s subject is usually religious and often is a bible story set to music. An oratorio is different from just about all other religious music in that it is not intended to be performed at a church service. It is written for performance in the concert hall and became very popular in England as the public grew tired of historical opera. In fact, oratorios became popular because of the Church’s prohibition on plays and other spectacles during Lent and Advent. Composers were allowed to produce oratorios during this time despite their spectacle-like atmosphere because they were religious stories or texts.

Oratorios were long works consisting of alternating and contrasting music of orchestral only, big choruses, solo arias, and ensemble or duet pieces that are put together in a logical progression to tell the bible story. The music is generally grouped into three types; solo sections with orchestral accompaniments, small vocal ensembles with orchestral accompaniment, and sections involving all performers. The music is also delivered in mainly two ways; the aria and the recitative. The aria is a solo song. The recitative is harder to describe, but sounds like a rhythmic sort of speech with limited accompaniment usually lacking in steady rhythm and song-like melody.

One of the most famous works of Western music, Handel’s *Messiah* is an oratorio. Handel wrote this work in 1742 and we hear it today at both Christmas and Easter time. The “Hallelujah Chorus” has become one of the most recognized pieces of all Western music. It is a choral section of *Messiah* with full orchestra. This work is also one of the most important musical works written in English

George Friedrich Handel was one of the two most important composers of the Baroque era and was the best-known musician of his time. He was born in Germany in 1685 and had his greatest successes as a composer in England. He is best known today for his operas and oratorios, but he wrote for almost all genres. His oratorios, orchestral suites, and works for chamber instrumental groups or soloists are particularly famous. Much of Handel’s music has an invigorated and driving rhythmic pulse that was so important in music in the Baroque. Like Bach, he was a celebrated keyboardist, especially on the organ. Throughout this text you will hear Handel’s name mentioned often as we examine different forms of music. Today, his reputation as a composer stands alongside Bach, Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven as one of the greatest composers of all time.

The passion is another important large-scale work for the concert hall that combines both vocalists and instrumentalists. It is very much like an oratorio making use of aria and recitative to tell a story—in this case always the story of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. In fact, this is the primary difference between an oratorio and a passion.

Passions combine vocal soloists (usually as characters in the story) with large mixed choruses and full orchestra. Though they are religious works they are written for performance in the concert hall, not as part of a church service. Passions are usually performed around Easter or Christmas time. J. S. Bach wrote the best examples of passions and his *Passion According to St. Matthew* and *St. John Passion* are still performed today.

Another important form of vocal music for the concert hall is the non-liturgical or requiem mass. These masses are not intended for use as a Catholic church service like the masses studied in Chapter 4. These masses can be either Catholic or Protestant works. If the mass is a Catholic mass it will probably follow the form outlined in Chapter 4. If it is a Protestant mass it will probably not, and is more in the form of an oratorio. In either case they are written for chorus, vocal soloists, and orchestra just like an oratorio was. And, again there is no scenery, costuming, or acting.

A requiem mass usually is written in honor of a deceased person, often in celebration of that person’s life. This form of music has been in existence since the Middle Ages but its concert hall form began in the Baroque era and composers still write in this form today. One of the most loved large choral and orchestral works is *A German Requiem* by Johannes Brahms. This work is a requiem to console the living rather than in honor of the deceased. Brahms chose text for the work from two parts of the Bible

These three forms of music; the oratorio, the passion, and the nonliturgical mass are commonly heard today in concert halls. They often mix an amateur chorus with a professional orchestra and professional singers. Sometimes a professional orchestra in a large city will also have a professional chorus as part of its regular membership and in that case it will perform the choral sections of these types of works.