

Organ, harp and piano players are the orchestra's loners
[Sandy Tabachnick](#) on Thursday 01/01/2009 ,



A symphony orchestra is like a nesting doll. Under the orchestral umbrella are smaller sections — strings, woodwind, brass and percussion — and further divisions within those get smaller and smaller.

Then come the loners, which have no like creatures around them: harp, piano and organ. Far from being antisocial, though, these instruments help their neighbors by adding depth and texture. Their pitch range is uniquely wide, so much so that they can support any instrument in the orchestra.

The musicians who play these loners in the Madison Symphony Orchestra talked about their instruments, their jobs and what it's like to be a group of one.

Pure power: The organist

Before the grand opening of the Overture Center in 2004, Samuel Hutchison, principal organist for the Madison Symphony Orchestra, helped plan for the arrival of the Overture Concert Organ from the firm of Orgelbau Klais in Bonn, Germany. He has been with the MSO since 2001, and on the day we spoke, the organ console was on the far right of Overture Hall stage in preparation for a performance of Gustav Holst's *The Planets* for about 6,000 school kids.

Hutchison had spent some of the day thinking about how to explain the weight of the heaviest pipe, 1,212 pounds, in language that his young audience could relate to. When we met at 3 o'clock, he had figured it out. "I'll tell them that it weighs as much as 23.4 third-graders," he said. The big pipe is just one of the 4,040 pipes Hutchison keeps tabs on through various stops, keyboards, pedals and couplers.

A solo organist can pull out all the stops and have free rein in a concert hall, but a good orchestral organist tames the instrument. "You can feel the organ in your bones," said Hutchison. "It rumbles, so it's critical to get the balance right, and that's why I need a good pair of ears in the hall."

Unlike other players in the orchestra, organists are sonic chemists who mix sounds to create the right effects. "In *The Planets*, Holst only indicated the pitch levels, not the stops that decide color, oboe versus flute, so it's up to the organist to choose," said Hutchison. "Strings add a soft edge and sizzle,

while reeds are brassy. Loud playing adds depth and majesty, while soft playing is for blend and contrast."

"Musician, know thy instrument" is an adage that Hutchison takes seriously, so on our tour of the organ he was at ease walking up several flights of stairs that led to multiple chambers of pipes. I followed gingerly behind as he climbed higher and higher. On the catwalks he stopped to explain the materials used.

"This pipe is made of spruce because it repels wood-eating insects like termites and carpenter ants," he said, pointing to a pipe as we entered the first chamber. "These pipes are made of metals like lead, zinc and tin." Reed pipes had hoods to protect the vibrating reed inside from dust, and some pipes were so sensitive that body heat from someone standing close could change their pitch.

Besides knowing their instruments, organists know how to make friends, a trait passed down from the old days. "It used to be that the organ stops came out almost two feet and someone had to pump air into the instrument, too," said Hutchison. "If you wanted to be an organist back then, you had to have three really good friends, two to operate the stops and one to pump the air."

It also takes two people to tune the organ — one at the console and the other among the pipes wearing protective ear gear. But Hutchison sits alone at the organ on stage. "I don't think I feel any lonelier than a violinist," he said, "but what might come close to loneliness, if you can call it that, is sitting and counting for 32 minutes before I play my 12 bars."

On the business side, as principal organist Hutchison is paid at the same rate as other MSO principals, but opportunities to perform with the orchestra aren't as great. So even the most prolific concert artist needs another job. Composers who use orchestral organ fall within a limited range from the 19th to the 20th century — they include Saint-Saëns, Strauss, Mahler, Poulenc and Janáček. But today, Hutchison says, most major concert halls have a Romantic, symphonic-style organ, and several new organ concertos have emerged in the past five years, so the instrument has potential to become more prominent in the orchestral setting.

Hutchison is also curator of this 174-ton organ, believed to be the heaviest moveable object in any theater in the world. He is responsible for its care, how it's used and for planning organ events, like Farmers' Market concerts and community hymn sings. He administers Friends of the Overture Concert Organ, a group of organ enthusiasts with about 300 members. Hutchison is also a solo artist, and in 1985 he went all out and played every organ work of J.S. Bach in a series of 11 weekly recitals.

Being an orchestral organist offers Hutchison unique opportunities: "It's fun to play pieces I've heard on recordings, but not live, like when we did Mahler's 'Eighth Symphony.' To hear it live and be part of the creation of sound is magnificent."

At the end of our tour, Hutchison offered me a chance to play the organ. "How about playing a C chord?" Okay.... He pulled out several stops and suggested that I also play the lowest C pedal that would engage the 32-foot monster pipe. When I played, the sound floated above me but I knew anyone sitting in the hall would have been blasted. The vibrations went through my body, and in playing this simple chord, I suddenly felt the world at my command. Ah, the power of it all!

Feeling the vibrations: The harpist

The harp is shrouded in myths, and I was guilty of harboring a few of them until I spoke with Karen Beth Atz, the MSO's principal harpist. She has been with the MSO for over 30 years, and when we talked about her instrument, I could tell that she was smiling on the other end of the phone line.

"The harp brings me such joy," she said. "You embrace it and feel the vibrations in your body." In Overture Hall, you will see Atz and the gentle curves of the harp sitting beside the percussion section against the back wall. She says this is an ideal spot because the wall helps bounce the sound out.

One myth I harbored was that the harp would be hard to balance with all the other instruments because it's soft. "There's no problem balancing harp with orchestra if the music is written well," says Atz. "Every once in awhile, there is a need for two harps, like in *The Planets*, and in a huge Mahler orchestra, the harp may add color rather than be soloistic, but the harp projects very well and can even be percussive when it has to."

She praised Puccini's harp writing in the score to *Madama Butterfly*, and if you attended the recent Madison Opera production, you heard the harp ring clear and easy, never battling to be heard. But the golden age of harp came with Debussy and Ravel. It's hard to forget the instrument's warm dreaminess in Debussy's *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*.

Atz enjoys being her own section in the MSO, and whether she's playing, counting rests or following phrases, she's with the group every minute. But being the only player can be daunting for some harpists, especially her beginning students in the Wisconsin Youth Symphony Orchestras, where Atz is harp director. "There are six harpists in WYSO, and two or three are in the orchestra, so they're not alone," says Atz. "Beginning orchestras generally don't have harp parts, and if they do, they're often too difficult, so I write easy harp parts into the music for them."

She works with WYSO assistant director Amanda Basich, who rehearses with the harpists on Saturday mornings and reviews essentials like counting and following the conductor. Teaching young harpists takes Atz back to her first harp lessons as a child growing up in a suburb of Chicago. "I was 5 or 6, and a harp teacher in town offered a summer program. I joined, and I've loved it ever since."

A harp like the one Atz plays stands about 6'2" and weighs about 90 pounds. It has 47 strings and seven pedals along the bottom, which give her the option to play flats, sharps and naturals. The transport and storage of her harp can be challenging, but thanks to the MSO's move from the Oscar Mayer Theater to the Overture Center, she now stores her harp in a humidity- and climate-controlled room. "Now I can hop on a bus and get to rehearsals and performances," she says. "It's wonderful."

The cost of a harp today is anywhere from \$8,000 to \$20,000, and Atz says the instrument lasts a lifetime. Atz is also artist-in-residence at the UW-Madison School of Music and keeps a musical calendar filled with teaching and playing — for weddings, corporate parties and former presidents like Jimmy Carter.

Since the harp is a bear to tune, I thought it also might be hard to play. Another myth dispelled. "No," she says. "There's a lot to do, and you're moving lots of body parts, but I teach young children, and I teach seniors. It's not hard. It's fun."

Recent hire: The pianist

When the venerable Ann Stanke retired from her post as MSO's principal pianist in 2008, she opened a position that had not been auditioned for in about 25 years. Stanke's successor would replace an icon, someone who knew the orchestra backward and forward and had served it for over five decades, a daunting transition for the newcomer. After a bevy of pianists played their auditions behind a screen, the honors went to 28-year-old Louise Chan of Chicago, who recently played an eclectic mix of Beethoven, Rzewski and Schumann for her doctoral recital at Northwestern University.

A job as principal pianist creates only a small signal on the radar screen of likely piano professions, so the academic world doesn't yet have a lot to offer those who aspire to the position. "I started playing with orchestras in graduate school and found that I enjoyed it, but very few professors could tell me about orchestral piano," says Chan.

A conducting class would be helpful, but Chan says this is not required of piano majors, so following a conductor is often learned on the job. "The piano is so far back on stage (between harp and percussion) that it makes the conductor's downbeat challenging," she says. "There's a little delay between the downbeat and my first note, and I have to anticipate that lag so I don't come in early. It's tricky, especially if the downbeat is slow."

As principal pianist, Chan also plays the celeste, a percussion instrument that looks like a small upright piano and has a bell-like tone. The celeste is soft by nature, and if it is played too lightly, you get nothing. Composers add it for color, but Chan says she doesn't play it as often as the piano, which becomes part of the fabric of the orchestra and can have a solo act now and then. Twentieth-century Russian composers like Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Rachmaninoff tended to use the piano's percussive yet lyrical voice. Ravel liked the celeste.

Chan performs in four or five MSO concerts per season and gets her piano part about two weeks before a performance — a part usually filled with rests. "Pianists are used to following a score full of notes, but in *Bolero* I only played about 15 measures, so orchestral pianists must count," she says. "Sometimes I feel like no one plays such a small part but me, but then there are percussionists who only play the gong at the end. If I'm feeling a little lonely, I commiserate with them."

Chan is on the piano faculty of the Music Institute of Chicago, and as a chamber music lover, she is pianist for the city's Louise Chan Horn Trio. She will put the finishing touches on her degree when she completes her thesis, but in the meantime she is enjoying her surroundings at the MSO. "It's such a good experience to play with a professional orchestra," she says. "You learn so much wonderful repertoire. Pianists are alone much of the time, so I enjoy the sound of the orchestra around me."

These are some of the lone musicians who play in symphony orchestras little changed in look or size since the late 19th century. Maybe composers of the future will defy old ideas and have several harps

and pianos on stage at once. But the organ, I predict, will continue to prowl the orchestral frontier alone.