

The String Family

The String Family: Strings are Everywhere!

The string family makes up over half the orchestra. Although many of the string instruments look similar, they are very different in size and sound. As you can probably guess from the name, all of the instruments in this family have strings, which are made of gut, steel, or nylon. You play string instruments by drawing a horsehair bow across the strings, or by plucking or tapping the strings.

All of the string instruments, except for the harp, have curvy hollow bodies and long necks. The strings are stretched from pegs at the top of the neck, over the body, and down to the tailpiece.

Violin: This is the little one. The violin is the smallest and highest pitched member of the string family.

The sound of the violin is high, bright, and sweet.

There are more violins in the orchestra than any other instrument. There can be as many as 30 or more violins in an orchestra!

In an orchestra, violins get divided into two groups: first and second. First violins often play the melody.

A standard violin is around 24 inches long.

A violin bow is around 29 inches long.

You play the violin by tucking it between your chin and shoulder. Your left hand presses down on the strings to change the pitch, and your right hand moves the bow or plucks the strings.

Viola: This may look like a violin, but don't be fooled, it's a viola. It's a bit larger in size and lower in pitch than a violin.

The sound of the viola is deeper and warmer than a violin.

There are 10-14 violas in an orchestra.

A standard viola is about 27 inches long.

A viola bow is around 29 inches long. It's a little thicker and heavier than a violin bow, since the strings of a viola are a little thicker than a violin's strings.

Like the violin, you play the viola by tucking it between your chin and shoulder. Your left hand presses down on the strings to change the pitch, and your right hand moves the bow or plucks the strings.

Cello: The cello looks like the violin, but it is much larger with a shorter neck and a lower pitch.

The cello makes a wide range of beautiful sounds, from warm low notes to rich high notes.

There are 8-12 cellos in an orchestra.

A standard cello is around 4 feet long.

The cello bow is around 28 inches long and is thicker than a viola bow.

To play it, you sit in a chair with the body of the cello between your knees, and with the neck of the cello on your left shoulder. The cello rests on the ground, supported by a metal peg. With your left hand, you press down on the strings to change the pitch, and with your right hand, you move the bow or pluck the strings.

Double Bass: Here is the big one. The double bass is the biggest and lowest pitched instrument in the string family.

The deep, very low sounds of the double bass are often used to help hold together the harmonies and to help carry the rhythm.

There are 6-8 double basses in an orchestra.

A standard double bass is just over 6 feet in length.

The double bass has sloping shoulders, which make its shape slightly different from a violin, viola, or cello.

A double bass bow is 26-27 inches long and very thick and heavy.

The double bass is so large that you have to stand up or sit on a very tall stool to play. It stands on the ground, supported by a metal peg, and rests on your left shoulder. It has very long strings which gives it a very low sound.

Like most of the other string instruments, you use your left hand to press down on the strings to change the pitch, and your right hand to move the bow or plucks the strings.

Harp: The harp is a large instrument with 47 strings, which are stretched across a wooden frame. The bottom part of the wooden frame is hollow.

There are 1 or 2 harps on an orchestra.

A standard harp is over 6 feet tall and weighs 80-90 pounds.

To play it, sit down with your legs on either side of the harp. The harp leans slightly on your right shoulder. Each string sounds a different note, and you play them using one hand on each side of the strings. You pluck and brush against the strings with your fingertips and thumb.

At the bottom of the harp on the back are 7 pedals, which are operated by the feet. The pedals allow each string to sound 3 different notes.



Harp

Violin

Viola



Cello



Double bass