The symphony orchestra has been a fixture of Western concert music since the early 18th century. It grew in size over the course of the 19th century as composers added new instruments and increased the number of players. Today, a professional orchestra is likely to contain about a hundred musicians. These are divided into sections of various sizes based on the instruments they play.

Orchestras include four different types, or families, of instruments. These are known as the strings, woodwinds, brass, and percussion. The instruments contained in each family share a means of sound production, but they come in different sizes and might be made of different materials. As a result, they play in different ranges and with different timbres. Each instrument of the orchestra also has different strengths and weaknesses. Some can play with great agility, while others are better suited to sustained pitches. Some are loud and piercing, suited to prominent solo lines, while others are more subtle. Composers who write for the orchestra must carefully consider the characteristics of each instrument. When the symphony orchestra is used well, however, it is capable of producing an extraordinary variety of sounds.

To hear each of the instruments in the orchestra and see a demonstration of its capabilities, please visit this webpage maintained by the London-based Philharmonia Orchestra: https://www.philharmonia.co.uk/explore/instruments.