

# THE ESSENTIAL ORCHESTRATION OF CHARLES KOECHLIN

edited by Barney B. Johnson

## THE PERFECT FIFTH IN THE LEFT HAND OF THE PIANO

Volume IV: Orchestration Itself: Orchestration of a Piano Work, pages 141-142

When it comes to the perfect fifth in the left hand of the piano, and in general with tightly spaced chords near the bass, you will find them frequently for the piano. This comes from the necessity to play the chords with the left hand, which cannot, except by large arpeggios or jumping the hand, play the bass and the medium register. Therefore, these notes, which in ideal terms would be placed in medium registers, are placed an octave (or two) lower.

And for a piano work, the ear can tolerate and enjoy this 'incorrect writing,' because the sound is clear and transparent. However, this will cease to be the case for the orchestra, in which the bassons, the cellos, and most definitely, the double basses will bring a lot of heaviness to the sound when written in closely spaced intervals in lower registers. This heaviness & sluggishness of sound is a special effect that Berlioz made use of (I have already cited certain passages from *Symphonie Fantastique*: the opening of the fifth movement, *Roméo et Juliette*: Scène des tombeaux - and *Funérailles de l'Empereur*).

Therefore, if you would like your orchestration to remain clear and easy to understand, especially for **fortissimo**, you must avoid perfect fifths in lower registers of your orchestration: You certainly will not find it in the symphonies of Mozart, Beethoven, and Mendelsson, especially for a **forte** or louder.

Musicians of our times use them frequently, but typically for a softer texture: piano or mezzo forte (for example: Debussy). But, even though piano the following writing at **forte** or **fortissimo** works well:

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Perfect Fifths in the  
Left Hand of the Piano

Ex. 1      Ex. 2

The image shows two musical examples, Ex. 1 and Ex. 2, on a single staff with a bass clef and a sharp sign on the staff. Ex. 1 shows a chord with notes G2 and D3. Ex. 2 shows a chord with notes G2, D3, and G#2.

For the orchestra, this kind of writing brings a heaviness to the orchestration, except if you write it for the brass, in which these chords can still sound clear and transparent. You will see shortly how you can orchestrate these types of chords so that they sound good for orchestra.

But, if the piano writing is part of a polytonal texture, the vast majority of times you must keep the original voicing of the piano because to do so otherwise would fundamentally destroy the listener's understanding of the harmony. (see *Orchestration of Polytonality*, and you will discover that the solution is not easy).

*"This translation will be continually updated as I find the time to bring the genius of the French understanding of how to orchestrate to a wider public. The translation is an accurate capture of the spirit and thinking of Charles Koechlin, and the French in general. I have not done a word by word translation, but have focused on getting the equivalent or superior in English.*

-Barney B. Johnson (Oct 21st)