What does the percussion section look like?

This is a very good question! The percussion section looks different for every piece of music it plays in. Some pieces of music have no percussion at all, whilst others will require several percussionists and many instruments. The percussion section is usually placed at the very back of the orchestra, often on a raised platform. As percussion instruments are often only used for special musical moments, you may notice that percussionists spend quite a lot of time sitting down. When it does play the percussion section can be a hive of activity, with players swapping instruments and positions on a regular basis. Next time you go to an NZSO concert see if you can count how many instruments and how many players there are in the percussion section.

Percussion in the orchestra

Percussion is one of the most versatile sections of the orchestra as it can be used to achieve so many musical colours and textures. The snare-drum, bass-drum and cymbals were the first percussion instruments to join the orchestra (after the timpani, see the timpani worksheet to learn more about this instrument). They were used mainly to emphasise musical climaxes or to achieve particular programmatic effects. From the mid-19th century onwards however, composers began to really explore the possibilities of the percussion section, largely motivated by an increasing interest in the use of rhythm. Beginning with Berlioz, who was followed by composers such as Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, de Falla, Strauss and Debussy, the percussion section began to be used to create impressionist textures and render more complex, obscure sonorities. By the late 20th century percussion was one of the most important sections of the orchestra. A large symphony orchestra will usually have two or three permanent percussionists as well as a timpani player.

Modern percussion

The life of a modern percussionist is very different from his or her counterpart of 100 years ago. The changes in the role of the percussion section have been driven by the growing influence of world-music and jazz on classical composers, and on our general perception of the world around us. The human environment is now constantly filled with noises, both natural and mechanical, and composers have found the percussion section the perfect way to express what they hear around them.

Research Task...

What is programmatic music? Use the internet or a music dictionary to discover the meaning of this phrase. Can you think of an example of a piece of programmatic music?
Percussion section

Build your own percussion section. Collect as many items as you can that will make a sound when you strike, rub or rattle them. Try and write a short piece of music for your new percussion section.

- Did you research what programmatic music was?
- Can you tell a story with your own percussion section?

See, there is music all around!

Auxiliary instruments

There is an endless array of percussion instruments that are not used that frequently and may be considered auxiliary. Here are the names of just a few auxiliary percussion instruments: wood-block, shaker, finger cymbals, bongos, claves, cow bell, ride cymbal.