

# There Are Only Six Ways to Orchestrate a Melody

A Summary for Composers

## The core idea

Orchestrating a melody feels overwhelming because the orchestra presents endless *combinations*. But most orchestration choices fall into a small number of *categories*. When you think in categories first, instrument choice becomes clearer, faster, and more deliberate.

The six categories below describe how a melodic line is **presented, weighted, separated, or synthesised**.

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## The Six Orchestration Categories

### 1) The Solo Line

**What it does:** maximum clarity and intimacy; the listener perceives a single voice.

**Trade-off:** can be swallowed by heavy accompaniment if you are not careful.

**Dvořák example – *The Golden Spinning Wheel* - RM3/4 *Larghetto***

The image shows a musical score for 'The Golden Spinning Wheel' by Dvořák, marked 'Larghetto' with a tempo of 69. The score is in G major and 3/4 time. It features several staves: Fl. I. II., Cor. ingl., Cl. I. II. B., Viol. I., Viol. II., and Vle. The Cor Anglais part (measures 110-115) and the Violin I part (measures 110-115) are highlighted with a red background and labeled 'Solo line'. The Cor Anglais part is marked 'mp' and 'a 2'. The Violin I part is marked 'p' and 'con sord.'. The Violin II and Viola parts are marked 'p' and 'quattro Viol. II. Soli'. The Flute and Clarinet parts are marked 'a 2'.

- **Solo cor anglais** against **solo violin** (melody/counter melody pairing).
- The effect is expressive, restrained, and narratively intimate: a shift from public nobility into personal focus.

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### 2) Different Instruments at the Unison

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<https://anyoldmusic.kit.com/df6a400039>

**What it does:** blend + new colour through synthesis; adds weight and profile compared with solo.

**Trade-off:** clarity can soften; balance and intonation begin to matter.

### Dvořák example – *The Golden Spinning Wheel* - RM10

Same @ unison      Diff. @ uni

FL. I. 450 455  
FL. II.  
CL. I. II. A  
Cor. III. IV. E  
Arpa  
I.  
Viol.  
II.  
Vle.  
Vlc. *pp* *pizz*

- **Flutes + clarinets at the unison** (two flutes and two clarinets).
- To the ear, the clarinets can “project” the flutes—producing a colour that feels subtly synthetic at the unison, before separating more clearly once the parts break into dyads.

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### 3) Different Instruments at the Octave

**What it does:** presence and projection with natural separation across registers; often powerful without becoming overly dense.

**Trade-off:** balance still matters, but separation can reduce blend problems.

### Dvořák example – *The Golden Spinning Wheel*



- **Two clarinets at the unison** in a mischievous oscillating figure.
- Compared with the solo woodwinds around it, the paired unison has more weight but slightly less “presence”; the subtle inflections of tuning and blend can set the line back a touch.

## 5) The Same Instrument at the Octave

**What it does:** crispness and breadth; lower octave supplies sonority, upper octave supplies brilliance.

**Trade-off:** in woodwinds, register differences can create imbalance or overly distinct colour changes.

### Dvořák example – *The Golden Spinning Wheel* - RM1

- **First and second violins in octaves** (firsts above, seconds below).
- The melody gains mass and projection because each line is carried by a section, and the octave separation gives a clear, confident profile.

## 6) Doubling at Intervals Other Than Unison/Octave

**What it does:** harmonic richness *within the melodic presentation*; can create synthetic colours and expressive shading.

**Trade-off:** register and balance become decisive (especially in woodwinds).

### Dvořák example – *The Golden Spinning Wheel* - Opening

The image shows a musical score for a horn section. The top staff is for the Cor. I. II. F. (Cornets I, II, and Flute). A blue highlight covers a section of the score with the annotation "Non-uni/8ve double" and "Soli". The dynamics are marked "mp". Below this, there are staves for C. fag. (Cello/Double Bass), Piatti (Percussion), Gr. Cassa (Grand Cassa), I. Viol. (Violin I), II. Viol. (Violin II), Vle. (Viola), Vlo. (Violoncello), and Cb. (Contrabass). The Cello/Double Bass part has a "sim." marking.

- Opening gesture: **two horns** not in unison or octaves, with spacing that widens low and closes to thirds higher up—often described as **natural brass spacing**, echoing the harmonic series and the character of natural brass.
- The result evokes nobility and fanfare-like authority, supporting the Prince’s presence in the narrative.

(Additional reference: Ravel’s *Boléro* shows how intervallic doublings and dynamic layering can create new synthetic colours over time.)

## The practical takeaway

Before choosing instruments, ask what you want the listener to perceive:

- **Clarity or weight?**
- **Separation or synthesis?**
- **Intimacy or projection?**

Those answers usually place you in one of the six categories. From there, orchestration becomes less about guessing combinations and more about shaping perception.