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Two Essays on the Development of Student Orchestras

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Orchestra Etiquette and Protocol

For my students and any other interested parties, I have listed below, in no particular order, a few things string students and parents should know. All of the following concerns will not be relevant for younger groups, but are important in the Youth Symphony and then later, in High School orchestra and professional or semi-professional orchestras:

1. Never be late to a rehearsal. Early is better. Students should be in their seats and warmed up at least 10 minutes prior to the rehearsal. It goes without saying, never be late to a performance!
2. Do not talk during a rehearsal (certainly not during a performance). Sometimes if you're marking parts (bowing, etc.), you may whisper in the sections, but not loudly and better not at all.
3. Always position your stand so that you can see both the music and the conductor. You are learning how to play in orchestra, so you will need to develop the ability to watch the conductor, if only out of the corner of your eye, at the same time you are reading the music.
4. A note on posture: The best way to sit is *centered*, with legs slightly apart and feet flat. Women fought for years to be able to wear dress slacks to perform, for this very reason: centered with legs apart promotes breathing and comfort. It's not unusual in professional life to play 10 or 12 hours a day—performances, rehearsals and practice included. Please do not cross your legs, or wrap them around a chair leg. Sit slightly forward and don't slouch as it might in time injure your back.
5. Both you and your stand partner can mark the music, but often the inside person on the stand (the person on the other side of the audience), should mark the parts. If you do not have time to mark the parts during the rehearsal, during the break take your part to the first stand and see if you can get the rest of the bowings. Bowings must be consistent within the section; it is up to the first chairs and conductor, however, to coordinate the bowings between sections.
6. Always bring several sharpened pencils to the rehearsal. Pay close attention to what the conductor says, and *lightly* mark the music in easily erasable, **black** pencil (not red or blue!), and NEVER in pen!! Don't overmark the parts with unnecessary markings.

7. Pay careful attention to the conductor and section leaders regarding protocols for entering and exiting the stage, and for acknowledging applause after the concert. The rule is to sit or stand when your section leaders do, unless the concertmaster is individually greeting a soloist or shaking hands with the conductor. Do what everyone else does--and don't forget to SMILE at the end of the concert!
8. Follow the leadership of the first stand players, even if you disagree. Be kind, courteous, unassuming, pleasant, etc. Don't gossip. Be encouraging to others. Listen to others in your section and blend in.
9. Always practice the parts and be able to play everything well. During rehearsals you may place an * in the margins next to the hard bits, and look at them during your practice sessions at home. More often than not, the musicians who become professional players are those who go home and practice their parts after the rehearsals. (In other words, they care about their playing and performance.)
10. If they're available, try to listen to recordings of the pieces you're playing in orchestra, and more than one interpretation. If you can't find the exact piece, listen to pieces by that composer. Best yet if you can find an orchestra score and examine all the parts, so you know where your section fits in. This would be an activity that future composers and conductors would follow; anyone college bound would benefit enormously as well.
11. If you're playing standard repertoire, it would be helpful to have a copy of the first violin part (or viola, or cello part) for study purposes, to be placed in your library. Copies correctly marked with good bowings are helpful when you have auditions or unexpected performance opportunities. However, there are copyright issues involved: some works are in public domain, and may be copied, but to be safe, it is advisable to buy a CD ROM with the repertoire, and then print out and mark copies in that way. [*See endnote.] This is an important legal issue that musicians should be aware of; apparently some schools have gotten heavy fines for unauthorized copying of materials. No original copyrighted materials may be copied and used in large quantities for ensembles, without express permission.
12. Try to always have your instrument in top condition; carry an extra set of strings, have a mute on the instrument or near you if the part unexpectedly says "con sordino," and be sure your bow hair is in good condition. You may want to have an extra bow if you have passages in "col legno" or if you are performing outside, or in a large venue with very hot lights, like a circus or rock concert. Carbon fiber bows are good for this purpose and will save wear and tear on your good bow.
13. Keep your focus up by sleeping well the night before a performance, and eating right: bananas are good for nerves if you get nervous before a concert, though if you don't have a solo there's not much reason to feel nervous, in my opinion. Your colleagues are all there and you have nothing to fear. Enjoy your youth and freedom; when you become professionals, you'll have even less time (and less time for sleep.)
14. Enjoy yourself but pay close attention. If you make a mistake, don't let it show by your face or demeanor.
15. Regarding auditioning, see "[How to avoid being nervous at an audition](#)" (from the *Violin/Viola FAQ*). I think with young people, especially, you shouldn't stress about it. Just show that you're working hard and you care about your playing, do your best, be yourself, and you'll do fine.

I'm sure there are other things I could mention, but these are the ones that come to mind. I hope you enjoy playing in orchestras as much as I do. When you're immersed in that sound, there's really nothing as wonderful!

[*] **Orchestral Masterworks CD-ROM**

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** Wagner



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Orchestra Discipline

Typical Concerns:

1. **Balance:** There is always a concern in orchestras about balance, so that each section can be heard in the way the composer intended. Depending on the training and sophistication of the group, as well as the size of the string sections and the quality of all the instruments, one of the concerns is that the brass sections don't overshadow the rest of the orchestra, particularly if you have brass players who have formerly only played in bands. It must be emphasized that orchestral playing is sometimes more subtle and more soloistic than some other kinds of musical experience, and thus careful attention needs to be paid for ensemble playing between the smaller choirs of instruments.

2. Intonation: Players need to be periodically reminded about intonation, as this is affected by the hall, the temperature, the quality of the instruments, and numerous other more subtle factors. Thus retuning is called for, particularly at the beginning of the orchestral musician's training. Casals likened developing good intonation to having a conscience. What typically happens is that young musicians who have not had their attention drawn to this important factor will, at the beginning of their more professional training, find that it seems as if they are playing more and more out of tune, when in fact what is happening is that they are only just realizing that they are playing out of tune.

3. Rhythmic accuracy: Rhythm is the "soul of music," and generally students will not maintain a very high accuracy unless they have been trained to do so. For example, it is likely that the distinction between dotted rhythms and triplets is not going to be very great, unless this is carefully demonstrated and the teacher insists on correctness.

4. Bowing/breathing articulations: Articulations are created differently by the different instruments, but the similarities are striking. The stringed instruments are "singing" instruments, and thus should be played with vocal articulations in mind. For the most part, articulations in the strings are created through bowing technique. It is important to get the string sections to understand that their bowings must be consistent, both within their section and with respect to the other string sections, as well as consistently phrasing in a coordinated way with the non-string sections. This is primarily the work of the conductor, but also of and with the concert master and the section leaders. Decisions about bowings should be made prior to rehearsal, as much as possible, and parts should be marked. See "Sectional Rehearsals."

Responses to conducting gestures must be consistent and reliable in order to produce the required sounds. These gestures include attacks, various articulations (e.g., staccato, legato, passages or notes), cut-offs, dynamic changes, changes in meter, reception of cues, and so on. The success in most of this is dependent on the skills and training of the conductor, particularly the communication of the tactus, and the general musicianship, imagination, and self-discipline. It is really bad form for a conductor to get angry with a group when they are not producing what the conductor is imagining; mind reading is not one of the required skills in orchestral playing, though sometimes it helps.

5. Orchestral discipline: There must be some strong, overriding conception of each piece, which is agreed upon by the time of performance. The better trained and more professional the group, the less rehearsal time is required. Just like a University is not a democracy but a benevolent dictatorship, so an orchestra is more like an army than anything else. There may be, and often is, grumbling in the ranks, but the leader of the orchestra must lead or nothing can be accomplished. I've seen orchestras fall apart because of lack of respect for conductors; conducting is a *very* demanding job.

Thus, the respect factor is worth a second look. And not to belabor a point, and at least to some extent with women especially, it is good to let the students know from the beginning that the director has extensive experience in the professional world (if this is the case), a high level of training, and a low tolerance for unprofessional behavior.

6. Seating: Seating is a more important issue than many conductors think it is. I think policy decisions have to be made in teaching situations; are you going to rotate, so more students can get different kinds of experiences-- OR are you going to seat students primarily on the basis of your evaluation of ability, in order to get the maximum potential, musically—OR are you going to consider other factors, such as

seniority, good behavior, etc.? And what do I mean by "good" behavior? Are the most musical students the most polite, the least resistant, the more pliable? No, unfortunately not. I think often the best musicians may be the most difficult, but lessons have to be learned about reliability, and sometimes this is going to be the ideal time for these lessons to be learned.

With older groups, it might be helpful to point out what professional life is like for musicians; being on time, being prepared, attitude, etc., can mean the difference between being hired again, or taken off a list--since there are so many good players to choose from, anyway, as a rule, and professional people do not want to be bothered with prima donna behaviors. These are the cold facts of professional life, whether in the musical sphere or elsewhere, and students would do well to be prepared for this.

7. Sectional Rehearsals: These rehearsals are sometimes dismissed as unimportant, but really they are a great time to teach technique, ensemble playing, and to continue the focus on professional behaviors and responsibilities. Graduate students or section leaders can be good resources for leadership during these rehearsals, though that can engender resentment if it's not handled properly. Throughout professional life, there is always some underlying negativity which is based on competition or other negative feelings. Rehearsal time is a great time to demonstrate professional attitudes. Personal issues can and should be set aside for the greater good of producing beautiful music, which is really the point of everything. It is important not to lose this sense of purpose.

8. Motivation: In a teaching situation, the agenda is to impart knowledge, demonstrate or encourage the development of skills, and harness youthful enthusiasm. While I maintain that too many long lectures during orchestra are counterproductive, students as they are developing need to have the experience of knowing the commonly shared cultural information that so many have shared before them; that Beethoven wouldn't take any nonsense from anybody, that Mozart was brilliant and funny, that the world is both larger and smaller than they think it is, and the 18th, or any other century, is not as far away in time as they think it is. Music is a way of rising above the petty concerns of life, a way of connecting with the best minds in history, and of connecting with the world at large. Hopefully, students will develop the sense that playing music is a privilege, and find that working toward a better performance is a positive and enriching experience.