



Orchestra Etiquette and Protocol

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Free handout for orchestras and students

Please find 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!