

Orchestral Etiquette

A Guide for the Working Musician

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"If you are the only one doing something, you probably should not be doing that."

◆ Mindset & Professionalism

- Be more prepared than the most prepared person there.
 - No one owes you opportunities or future work; you earn those through preparation, consistency, and repetition.
 - Play your ass off every time.
 - You never know who is listening.
 - Give your colleagues the same allowances you would want: if someone seems cold or grumpy, assume they are going through something you know nothing about. Don't take it personally or accost them for details.
 - Present yourself such that nobody would doubt that you deserve to be there. Assume everyone else is on stage because they deserve to be there, too — do not start or share rumors suggesting otherwise.
 - Never talk poorly about anyone. It only reflects on your own insecurities.
 - Don't judge someone going through a playing slump — you might be the new hotshot now, but you might be next.
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◆ Punctuality & Preparation

- Better to be half an hour early than half a minute late. 10 minutes before rehearsal start is too late — aim to arrive at least 30 minutes in advance and be in your seat 10 minutes ahead.
 - Read your contracts very carefully. Know your times, dress, rep, and locations well.
 - If you forget a stand or show up late, apologize to the personnel manager and your sectionmates.
 - Get your music ahead of time; don't sight-read on the job if you can help it. Don't wait for someone to send you a PDF — ask for the music or find it on IMSLP. There is never an excuse to arrive unprepared.
 - Listen to at least one recording before the first rehearsal. Look at the scores in advance. There's no excuse for missed entrances.
 - Know your part inside and out before you get to rehearsal. Be methodical about learning your part — write in cues and accidentals as needed.
 - Don't over-mark your part. Keep your markings concise and neat. Erase any excess markings at the end of the concert cycle.
 - Come prepared for the first rehearsal. Know which mutes you need and don't forget them.
 - If you are called last minute, be a great sight-reader!
 - Always have a pencil.
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◆ Warming Up

- Warm up at home. Do not warm up loudly on or off stage before rehearsal.
- No triple-fff warm-ups on stage or in small spaces with other people — ever.
- Don't warm up to show off.
- Bring a practice mute for warming up discreetly.
- If you are playing assistant, don't warm up next to the principal. Give them space to prepare. Use a practice mute if you need to warm up next to them.
- Never warm up when the harp or piano is tuning.
- Be aware of your surroundings. Do not play if you hear others rehearsing or checking intonation.

◆ On-Stage Behavior

- Do not play excerpts or concertos on stage or during break — no one wants to hear that.
- Do not practice your other solos, excerpts, or anything not relevant to the current concert or rehearsal while on stage.
- Do not repeatedly play passages, even if they are on that evening's program.
- Do not play someone else's solo anywhere you could be heard.
- Be still during someone else's solo, especially if they can see you. Find a different place to empty water if possible.
- Do not tap your feet or hands, and do not conduct. It is acceptable to tap your toes lightly in your shoes.
- Do not move around excessively when playing in the section.
- NEVER turn around to see who is playing — ever.
- Do not stare at someone playing a solo or right after they play.
- Do not react to someone else's mistakes.
- Have awareness for what your colleagues are doing, even during a tacet. Don't use a tacet as an opportunity to pull out supplies and perform instrument maintenance.
- Oil your valves so they are not loud enough to be distracting.
- Avoid digital distractions: as a general rule, keep phones offstage. In situations where devices are necessary, use discretion — but never have a phone onstage during concerts. All devices (phones, iPads, watches) should be on silent, with vibration disabled, and set to Do Not Disturb to prevent lighting up or displaying notifications. Disable visual alerts and cover any blinking indicator lights (e.g., on foot pedals) with black tape. Maintaining focus is essential to strong performance — ensure that your devices, even those used for music, do not distract you or your colleagues.
- Do not attack sooner than your neighbor or hang over longer on releases. Be aware of balance, and keep count during rests.
- Avoid farting, burping, sniffing, or coughing loudly. Nobody is impressed.
- Do not wear perfume or any strong-smelling products.
- Don't wear hats or caps in rehearsals or concerts. They cause sightline issues.

◆ Section Etiquette

- If you are not the principal, avoid emoting, bobbing, or cueing excessively. (Exception: in repertoire like Brahms or Dvorak, where horns are written in pairs, it is fine for the 3rd horn to cue the 4th for their duo moments.)

- If someone plays the phrase before you, follow their lead.
 - If you play something differently than the principal, write it in — don't play it differently a second time.
 - The job of the second horn is to make the first horn sound good. If you aren't in tune with the principal, you are out of tune — no matter what.
 - Don't ask about something you could learn by listening.
 - No talking during rehearsal unless absolutely necessary for musical purposes. If you have a question, pass it up to your section leader or wait until the break.
 - Let the principal ask questions of the conductor. If you are the principal, direct questions to another principal.
 - Never "conduct" at members of the section.
 - Unsolicited advice is rude. When addressing a problem, use words like "let's" or "we" — for example, "Could we try this together?" or "What do you hear?"
 - Congratulate your peers for their hard work, great solos, etc. Being respectful and supportive goes a long way in creating a healthy work environment.
 - Be open to feedback.
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◆ **If You Are the Principal**

- Direct questions to another principal rather than to the conductor when possible.
 - Give your sectionmates time to work out the kinks before offering feedback.
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◆ **If You Are Playing Assistant**

- Get the markings ahead of time, but learn the whole part.
 - Give the principal space on stage — don't play loudly right next to them. Use a mute to work out passages while the principal is nearby.
 - Don't be chatty with the principal — speak when spoken to.
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◆ **When Freelancing**

- Assimilate quickly; read the room, respect the ensemble's culture, and follow the lead of the regulars so you fit in seamlessly — especially when subbing.
 - Avoid name-dropping an orchestra or personnel.
 - Listen to everything happening around you — on and off stage.
 - You are being paid for the whole service. If you are asked to do "extra" work within that timeframe, just say yes.
 - Learn from other people's mistakes.
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◆ **Social & Professional Conduct**

- Be nice to everyone. Do not let yourself feel, act, or speak as if you are superior.
 - Don't assume anything — you don't know the quirks of people's personalities, and it will take a while to learn them.
 - Don't be a distraction.
 - Don't overshare.
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- Don't gossip.
- Don't name-drop.
- Don't suck up, and don't be an obvious flatterer — including don't touch or act overly friendly with section mates you don't know well.
- Be cautious with social media, politics, and personal opinions in professional settings.
- Avoid relationships with conductors, contractors, or players that could come back to haunt you.
- Don't drink or smoke before the gig or between services.
- Dress classy — look like a professional, not like you're going clubbing or getting ready for bed.
- If someone could possibly consider it "stupid stuff," don't do it.

◆ After the Gig

- At the end of a gig: "Thanks for having me, everyone — it's been a pleasure."
- Thank the personnel manager for hiring you.

* Pre-Gig Checklist

<input type="checkbox"/> Read the contract — know your times, dress, rep, and location	<input type="checkbox"/> Arrive at least 30 minutes early — be in your seat 10 minutes before downbeat
<input type="checkbox"/> Listen to at least one recording of the program	<input type="checkbox"/> Leave your phone offstage
<input type="checkbox"/> Study the score in advance	<input type="checkbox"/> Dress professionally
<input type="checkbox"/> Know your part: no wrong notes, no missed entrances	<input type="checkbox"/> No perfume or strong-smelling products
<input type="checkbox"/> Write in cues, principal's markings, and any necessary accidentals	<input type="checkbox"/> No excerpts or off-program material on stage
<input type="checkbox"/> If playing assistant, get markings ahead of time and learn the whole part	<input type="checkbox"/> No loud warm-ups on stage or in small shared spaces
<input type="checkbox"/> Warm up at home before you arrive	<input type="checkbox"/> Never warm up when the harp or piano is tuning
<input type="checkbox"/> Pack all necessary mutes	<input type="checkbox"/> Follow the principal's lead
<input type="checkbox"/> Always have a pencil	<input type="checkbox"/> Thank the personnel manager at the end of the gig

Present yourself such that nobody would doubt that you deserve to be there.

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