

Orchestral Etiquette and Being a Good Colleague

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All of these details can be summed up as: be prepared, look interested, and be considerate of the people around you! Your playing itself is obviously very important both to winning a job or being asked back to sub with an orchestra again, but your behavior and attitude can also easily make or break your career. No matter how well you play, it's important to be the sort of colleague that people will want to sit on stage with. It's worth noting that the music world can be very, very small so it's never too soon to start putting these into practice. At some point in your professional career you will almost certainly find yourself working alongside people you played with in youth orchestras, summer festivals, and college ensembles.

Before You Get to Rehearsal

1. Learn your part and get to know the pieces. Most professional orchestras make music available at least 2 weeks in advance of the first rehearsal, with the expectation that you will already know your part at the first rehearsal. Listen to recordings and look at scores to make sure you know the tempi, where your entrances are, when you have solos, and who you are playing with.
2. Respond to emails or calls in a timely fashion. The personnel manager will appreciate knowing whether you are available or not sooner rather than later. Some contractors for smaller ad hoc gigs hire by "cattle call" -- if they emailed 5 people and you're not the first one to reply, you're not getting hired.
3. Know the schedule and location of all rehearsals and performances. This includes knowing where to park and where to enter the building.
4. BE EARLY. Expect heavy traffic and difficulty finding parking, and allow plenty of time for warming up. If you're not in your chair a minimum of 15 minutes before the downbeat, you're late!

Rehearsal Behavior

1. Don't turn around to see who is playing, to watch someone play, or for any other reason.
2. Try to warm up at the proper pitch.
3. Don't crowd your reeds during rests or work on them during rehearsal. You can adjust them while warming up before rehearsal or during breaks if needed.
4. Don't wear perfume, cologne, or any other strongly-scented products.
5. Don't tap your foot; it's disruptive to the people around you. If needed, tap your toe inside your shoe.
6. Shuffling your feet or clapping on your leg when someone plays something well is appreciated in some orchestras but not in others. If you're new to the group, wait to see what the people who have been there for a while do. If you're unsure, it's probably best to just compliment the person at break or after rehearsal.
7. Don't read magazines, books, or play with your phone during rehearsal. As with the above rule, behavior varies from orchestra to orchestra. There are orchestras that entirely ban cell phones from the stage during all rehearsals. In other orchestras, it's common to see people reading on their phones when they don't play a piece or movement. Your best bet in any case is to just sit quietly and listen to the music being played around you, especially when you're new -- it's unlikely that any orchestra's CBA specifically says phone usage during rehearsals is fine, and it absolutely could be held against you.
8. Most orchestras are fine with musicians having a water bottle with a resealable cap, especially in the wind section, but do not bring any other beverages or use a container that will spill if knocked over.
9. Try to look attentive and engaged even when you're not playing -- no yawning, crossing your legs, etc.

Performance Behavior

1. All of the above rehearsal rules apply to performances. Don't shuffle your feet or read even if you're playing with a group that does it during rehearsals.
2. Don't play your solos over and over on stage before the concert. It's also bad form to play anyone else's part or practice concertos.
3. Don't make a face or stop playing if someone makes a mistake, including you.

4. If you do not play all of the pieces on the program, find out before the concert if you can leave the stage between pieces. Check the roster for other people who are off on the same pieces and ask them, or check with the personnel manager. If you are exiting the stage between pieces, make sure that you have anything you're taking with you handy and that you have a clear path to the exit so that you don't cause delays.

Being a Good Neighbor

1. Sit quietly and don't cause any distractions. Some orchestras talk more than others, but it's probably a bad idea in any case to initiate conversation during rehearsal if you're new.
2. Don't swab your instrument during a neighbor's solos or other tricky passages.
3. Don't blow water out of your keys unless it's an exceptionally loud passage during rehearsal or at all during concerts.
4. Try not to attack notes sooner or end them later than everyone else.
5. Know whether you have the main part or if you're accompanying someone else and try to balance accordingly.
6. Try to know the count during rests. It's not your job but the person next to you will appreciate it if they lose count.
7. Don't finger solos along with someone else's playing.
8. It's nice to have extra pencils and cigarette paper if a colleague needs them, even if it's not your job.

Conductor Etiquette

1. Look at the conductor a lot. Eye contact goes a long way in determining the conductor's opinion of you.
2. If you're asked to play something differently, say yes. Don't try to make your case for a different interpretation or explain why you can't do something during rehearsal.
3. It used to be common practice to always refer to the conductor as "maestro" but there are an increasing number of conductors who prefer to be addressed by first name. If you're new to the group, follow the example of players who have been there longer.
4. If the conductor blames someone else for your mistake, speak up and admit it was you.
5. Don't ask questions about someone else's part.
6. Especially in bands and wind ensembles, conductors often forget about the oboes! If the conductor asks the flutes and clarinets to play and you have the same part, they probably meant to include you. Unless you have a good reason to think they truly only wanted the other instruments to play and not you, go ahead and play. It'll save time.
7. If you have a question that applies only to your part, such as a solo, wait until the break or after rehearsal to ask. Most orchestras have very little rehearsal time for most programs and the conductor is probably already having to pick and choose which problems are pressing enough to take the time to fix.

Being a Good Section Player (2nd or 3rd Oboe, English Horn, etc.)

1. Communication with the conductor should be routed through the principal player. Let them ask questions about articulations, dynamics, notes, etc. on behalf of the section. The exception to this is if you are playing English horn and you're not with the oboes in the passage you have a question about, but consider whether it's a question specific to you or whether others in the orchestra will also need to know the answer.
2. Follow the principal's lead for making entrances, ending notes, articulation style, etc. Your job as a 2nd player consists in large part of doing your best to make the principal sound good!
3. Tune very quietly and only after everyone else has had a chance to hear the principal's A. You should already know where your pitch is, and you don't have pegs or a tuning slide to make adjustments with.

Keep in mind that even if you have won a job, you can be fired for ANY reason if you don't have tenure. If you're easy to work with and pleasant to sit next to, it's much more likely that a tenure committee will forgive minor flaws in your playing. The same is true if you're subbing with an orchestra and hope to be asked back. Personnel managers and contractors for church gigs, backing orchestras for touring performers, and other incidental work talk to each other, so earning a reputation for being rude or unreliable will likely cost you far more work than you realize. By the same token, if you're a good colleague, you're much more likely to be recommended when someone is in need of an oboe player.