

The Musician's Role

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Like any system designed to work smoothly and produce desired results, an ensemble of musicians must function as a group of individual parts cooperating towards a common purpose. For this reason, groups of musicians often have guidelines and rules that help them work together. It doesn't take much to disrupt a rehearsal or performance by introducing some sort of confusion or disorder, so it is very important that every member of the group approach their role with an understanding of these rules. This can be complicated by the fact that performance guidelines for a particular ensemble or style are often unwritten, have to be learned through experience, and may change according to the musical context. As an instrumental musician, there are a few rules that are important for any ensemble.

First of all, when playing in an ensemble, always listen to the other players in the group. Playing in tune is one area where this is very important. The fact that you matched your pitch to an electronic tuner before rehearsal doesn't mean that you are still in tune. Your pitch can change over time. More importantly: even if you match the tuner but the rest of the group is playing together at a different pitch center...you are wrong! Listen to key members of the ensemble for your pitch references. Playing in tune is more of a group consensus than anything during a performance, and it is most important that you are in tune with the other instruments in your section since discrepancies between similar voices are easier for the audience to hear. Listening to the other group members also means blending. This includes your overall volume, but also can involve matching the tone and timbre of other instruments. Be aware of which members are playing melody lines and harmony lines and play your part accordingly. Listening to other players will help you know if you should be playing your part prominently or in more of a supporting manner.

Second, follow your section leader. For an ensemble to play well as a whole, it really helps if each individual matches their playing to the first chair player in their section. Matching articulation styles, phrasing, breathing, dynamics, and intonation at that level brings the ensemble as a whole one step closer to a unified performance. If you disagree with the way your section leader is playing something, you should share your idea with them, but ultimately you should play your part the way they choose. That choice is their responsibility. If the director doesn't like it, he will ask the section leader to change their playing and you should follow along.

Third, follow your conductor. Ensembles don't always have a conductor, but when they do, that conductor depends on you to be aware of his gestures and follow his directions. Most conductors feel that their most important job is to interpret the music, shape the phrases, and balance the ensemble...not just keep the time. You should watch the conductor and play your part expressively to match their motions. They might give cues to tell you when to enter, but they don't have to. You should be counting your own rests. They might conduct every measure, but again they don't have to. The ensemble should be able to internalize the beat and continue playing through sections of music on their own. In situations like that, a conductor will often be content to leave the responsibility for the pulse of the piece in the hands of the ensemble. That frees him up to focus more on the interpretation of the music. Sometimes, the conductor may actually prefer to be consistently ahead or behind the pulse of the ensemble for expressive reasons. At these times, stay with the ensemble's rhythmic pulse, but be aware of the conductor's emotional communication. And always be ready in case the conductor wants to retake specific control. You can usually tell these moments because he may look directly at you, lean forward, or make more exaggerated motions. The bottom line is that you have to learn to read your conductor's body language and preferences. No two conductors are alike!

Fourth, always arrive prepared. This includes arriving a few minutes early to get settled, warm up, and prepare your music for the day. You should be ready to play exactly when the rehearsal is scheduled to start. You should also always have a pencil and any accessories required for the music.

In order for a performance to succeed, an ensemble must play together effectively. Other instrumentalists depend on you to fulfill your role in the group. I've described several rules that are true for most ensembles, but there can be many more, and most of them are unwritten. It is up to you as a musician to be sensitive enough to listen and learn the rules over time. Fulfilling your role in the ensemble will result better performances for yourself, the group, and the audience.