



YLSS: Yorkshire Late Starters Strings



What happens in an orchestra?

If you are about to experience your first orchestral rehearsal - or if you aren't a novice but are puzzled as to why the conductor is getting a little tetchy! - then these small pointers may come in handy. This is the sort of stuff that many people learn in youth orchestras and which practising musicians take for granted but which adult beginners often miss out on. It may well be obvious to you but please bear with me!

Where do I sit?

If the orchestra is organised with regular players at the front then you'll have been given a seat, or you won't - in which case near the back is good! String players sit in pairs, known as 'desks'. A player will describe him/herself as sitting '2nd desk', 4th desk', etc. In professional orchestras, some positions may be individually numbered (and described thus in advertisements, e.g. *The London Symphony Orchestra wishes to appoint a no.5 1st violin playing no.3 as required*). One sits on the 'outside', one on the 'inside' - the outside player is nearer the audience, the inside player is, yes, you've got it. Inside players turn the pages. If you are required to find a bar and write in the part, then one of you counts and the other writes. If the part calls for the section to be divided into 2 parts (upper and lower), the outside players generally take the upper line. In an orchestra run primarily for educational purposes, seating positions are really not significant. However, the principle that 2 players share one stand is universal. Only very bad eyesight can justify an individual player having his/her own stand. Too many music stands on stage or in a rehearsal room lead to unsightly and potentially dangerous clutter and overcrowding.

How is rehearsal organised?

You are in your seat 5 minutes before the starting time, with all the necessary bits and pieces like rosin, a duster, a pencil (B or softer) and an eraser - and your mute. You will have all your music for the particular orchestra you play in on the stand. If you know what you're going to play first then get it ready; if you're waiting to find out, then be sure you can find any piece quickly and easily. Don't leave music on the floor - someone will walk over it and leave footprints. Don't fold music, or roll it up - unless you want it to fall off the stand all the time. At the end of the rehearsal, you or your desk partner takes the music away and is responsible for that music arriving at the next rehearsal. That music *must* be there next time even if you cannot attend. Make the arrangements: think about it. If you need a spare copy to practise from, ask the long-suffering librarian, but keep that part for practice *only*.

I don't have a mute.

Get one.

But the piece doesn't need it.

I don't care. Whether or not you expect to use the mute is irrelevant.

What about tuning?

At a signal, either from the conductor or the orchestra leader, you will tune to a given A. It is at this point that casual chit-chat stops. Tuning should be done quietly and efficiently and once completed you should stop playing so that others have a chance to hear themselves. This process may be repeated in a learning orchestra with all other strings (although tuning the double bass E with the violin E is not generally helpful ... they are 4 octaves apart after all).

And then?

The conductor will make any necessary announcements, specify what piece is to be played, and start it either from the beginning or some other point as he/she judges necessary. When the conductor stops beating time (or whatever...) you stop. It should be possible for the conductor to stop, make his/her suggestions, and restart 'from the bar we just stopped in' - with no additional explanations like bar numbers or rehearsal figures. If you need to ask your desk partner something, or feel impelled to help your partner in some way, it is important that you whisper as quietly, clearly and concisely as possible.

How should I behave generally?

With consideration for your colleagues and with constant attentiveness.

Meaning more specifically?

Any sound of any kind whatever that is heard in an orchestral rehearsal should be directly relevant to the work that is being undertaken at the time. Make sure that you are not blocking someone else's sight lines - turn round and check that you are not in the way - don't wait to be asked. Before the rehearsal begins, make sure that you and those round you have enough room to play - don't leave it until the first *fortissimo*, or the first time you need an up-bow starting at the tip. Don't mutter under your breath; don't make unasked for comments; above all don't turn to look at players who make mistakes (it will be you tomorrow). Never, ever, for any reason at all, touch another player's instrument, or step over it. If a cello is in the way, find the player and explain the problem. Cellists should always retract the spike when putting the instrument down on its side, even if it's only for a few minutes.

But something really amusing happened to me on the way here/I really fancy that viola player/you'll never guess what I did last night...

I don't care - keep it for the break (but point to the viola player).

How are musical problems sorted out?

If the conductor wants something done differently/better, he/she will identify the passage in question, say what's happening now and what he/she wants to happen instead. With professionals, that's enough (already too much, sometimes). With others, he/she may offer a technical suggestion or explanation. The passage is played again, the process is repeated until it's as good as it's going to get.

I think I have a wrong note printed in a part.

You may think that there's a mistake in your part, in which case it's perfectly OK to ask. However, make sure that you have the conductor's attention, that your question can be heard easily, and that you express it as briefly as possible. It may well turn out to have implications for other parts, so it is important that the orchestra is aware of the question. If something has to be changed - most often a dynamic marking - don't wait to be asked to get out your pencil but make the alteration immediately and very legibly.

How dare you - my writing has won prizes!

In an orchestra, 'legibly' means so clear that a total stranger, unfamiliar with the music, could make sense of the part easily.

I don't know where we're going from.

Your part may be provided either with rehearsal cues in the form of letters or numbers, or bar numbers, or some combination of these. So you will either be asked to find '6 bars before letter D', '10 bars after figure 19' or 'bar 25'. If you have bar numbers, they will be either at the start of each line of music, or every 5 or 10 bars. In the time it takes to read this sentence you should be able to find any bar on the page in front of you no matter how it is described.

What does the conductor expect of me?

Your total and undivided attention.

What do I expect of him/her?

Absolute clarity of intention. Everything else - humour, tolerance, inspirational leadership, amazing good looks - is a bonus.

Is it different depending on whether the orchestra is made up of learners like me, experienced amateurs of a high standard, or professionals?

No.

Is it different in a large as opposed to a small group?

No.