

Rehearsal Mannerisms and Guidelines

by Mark Preece

There are so many things to learn when one decides to play an instrument. For the most part, lessons tend to concentrate on high range, low range, breathing, tonguing, tone, and intonation. However, another important aspect of playing is ensemble manners and etiquette, and how a player acts with their colleagues. There are certain “unwritten rules” that most players come to know through experience, and those who do not follow the rules usually find themselves being rejected from others within the ensemble and are invited to join fewer and fewer groups.

The result that I have seen personally is that some outstanding young players who were destined for major careers never realized their potential, some giving up, or feeling bitter at their lack of success. It is not that these players were not “good enough,” but rather that they alienated themselves from their colleagues by unprofessional behavior. The tragedy is that they were probably unaware of the negative impression they were making on their peers until it was too late.

As with all manners, ensemble etiquette is largely based on consideration and common sense. The way one interacts productively differs, to some extent, with the nature of the ensemble. However, certain rules apply to all ensembles—both instrumental and vocal, and they apply to musicians of ALL levels. Here are some important things to consider:

1. Come to rehearsals *with your music prepared*. If you do not know your part, you are not ready to rehearse. The exception to this rule is of course a reading session or a rehearsal intended to read new music. Most rehearsals are really concerts in disguise!
2. *Always arrive early* enough so that you are warmed up and ready to play at the starting time of the rehearsal. A person who walks in at 5:30 for a 5:30 rehearsal can be really irritating for the conductor and those players who were considerate enough to have come earlier, warmed up, tuned up, etc.
3. *Bring a pencil to rehearsals*. No player can remember everything that is discussed in rehearsals, and time will be wasted at the next session repeating things for the players who did not mark their parts.

4. Never miss rehearsal (or concerts) except for very *extreme emergencies*, even if your reason might be a legitimate one. Even players who are ill frequently will be avoided because they will be considered unreliable.
5. Always be *conscious of your personal hygiene*. It is difficult to perform when a person's perfume/cologne, bad breath, or body odor interferes with your breathing.
6. *Always honor your commitments*. Once you have agreed to play a concert with the necessary rehearsals, it is unwise to cancel that commitment—even if something more important or more rewarding is offered to you. Would you be anxious to play in a group where people only honored their commitment if nothing better came along?
7. *Think twice about criticizing your colleagues* to others by revealing the mistakes they may have made in rehearsals or in concerts. Music making is a very intimate time of sharing, and the players must be able to trust each other in order to achieve the best results. By mocking one member of the group, you are tarnishing the reputation of the entire ensemble.

Certain guidelines in rehearsal apply especially to large ensembles such as wind/brass bands or orchestras.

1. Always try to *match the style and intonation of the section leader or principal player*. It is not appropriate to make suggestions to the principal player unless you are very close and are sure that your comments will be welcomed. It is better to be silent than sorry! This applies to all members of the section. The section leader is usually the one to make suggestions to the section, and this should not happen too often if the other players are listening and matching his/her style.
2. Before or after rehearsals, it is vitally important *not to play passages from parts other than what you are playing yourself*. No one will want to have you around if you play flawlessly the solo that is giving someone else problems. Practicing the other parts *at home* will help you grow but do not alienate your colleagues by doing it in public—this includes busy practice rooms! This notion also applies to the music being rehearsed on a particular day. *Do not practice music in rehearsal time that is not being rehearsed by that ensemble*. It is difficult and annoying for an ensemble to keep the mindset of rehearsal and concentrate on their parts, only to hear “Ride of the Valkeries” coming from the back row at the start of every rehearsal!
3. When someone in your section or sitting close to you has a solo—freeze! *Do not make any sudden movements that might startle or distract the player*. Even emptying your instrument, page turns, or other adjustments must be done slowly if it is absolutely necessary at the time.
4. *Do not stare at a player* when they are playing, especially during a solo. Rehearsals are not the time to examine your neighbor's technique... and remember someday it will be you with the solo!

5. If you are in a section that has a lot of measures rest, *give a small hand or finger acknowledgement of all rehearsal letters, numbers, or double bars*. This allows all the players in the section to double check that they have the correct count. If you are unsure of the count, do not make a motion but wait to see a cue from the other players. With all players counting carefully, no section should ever get lost. The motions should be small enough so the audience cannot see them.
6. Generally speaking, if you have a question about your part or a concern about the playing style of a certain passage and you are not the section leader, *quietly direct your questions to the principal player* not the conductor.
7. If someone in your section makes a mistake, *do not immediately look at the culprit*. In a performance, do not let your manner dictate that a mistake has been made, either by a colleague or yourself. It serves no purpose to call attention to an error that the audience may not have noticed.

Other guidelines apply more to chamber ensembles, that is, groups without a conductor such as wind/brass quintets, and string quartets:

1. The success of a good chamber group depends on the *good ideas of all the members*, but each member must strike a balance between saying and suggesting too little or too much. No one will have his or her ideas agreed with or followed all of the time. The collective judgment must prevail and players whose ideas have been rejected must not feel rejected themselves. This can create a very destructive tension in the group.
2. When suggesting a change to another player, try to convey respect along with the suggestion or criticism you are making. *This is very important for section leaders of large ensembles as well.*
For example:

“Our pitch does not seem to match very well at section F. I may be high, or you may be low. Can we check?”

This would be preferable to: “You are flat. Can you bring your pitch up?”

The longer a group plays together, the easier the communication can become. This is especially true if the members respect each other and they are each secure in their self image and rapport within the group. In some groups I have been in, I could be very blunt and accept blunt criticism. With others, I needed to be more careful and more diplomatic. We must all try to be sensitive to the degree of frankness that will be welcomed by others.

Finally, there are customs of behavior that apply to an ensembles player’s relationship with the conductor:

1. *Always speak to the conductor in a respectful manner*, whether or not you think that respect is deserved. You must at least respect the conductor’s position, and alienating the conductor is

never in the player's best interest. Many players seem to view the conductor as *the enemy*. This in a sense is quite natural since we are all creative musicians with individual and valid ideas, and it is easy to resent someone who tells us what to do according to their personal ideas (this can also be linked to section leaders). In solo or chamber playing, there is more freedom of expression, but a player in a large ensemble must be able to adjust to the necessary dominance of a conductor or he/she will waste time being frustrated. Large ensemble repertoire includes some of the greatest music ever written, so try to develop a positive relationship with your conductors and your own life will be more enjoyable.

2. *Do not take up rehearsal time by asking questions that only apply to you, or that could wait until the end of rehearsal or at a break.* Most conductors are more relaxed when they are approached privately rather than in the midst of a rehearsal.
3. *Stop playing immediately* when the conductor stops the rehearsal. Continuing is rude and wastes time.
4. When a conductor makes a suggestion to you or your section, *acknowledge that you understand* by a nod or some facial response—preferably not a grimace.
5. If a conductor usually cues your entrances, look up to acknowledge that cue. Most conductors *enjoy eye contact* from their players.
6. When approaching the end of a rehearsal, *it is extremely rude to start packing up your instrument, music etc. when the conductor is still speaking to the group!* This shows a lack of respect to the conductor, and to fellow musicians who are paying attention. It is not good enough to just hear what is being said. You must also use direct eye contact when the conductor is speaking.

These “rules” may seem obvious or even petty to some people, but they are too frequently overlooked or ignored and following them can help groups to function smoothly and allow the music to become the major issue. If our energies are not diverted by difficulties in working together, we can then bring our full attention to the joy of creative music making.

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