

My Thoughts On Better Orchestral Preparation for Wind Players

(This article was written with the undergraduate music student in mind. While it will be very useful for these players, young professionals may find helpful ideas in this document.)

Many young orchestra players may think that “being prepared” is mostly learning the notes well. Nothing can be further from the truth. Complete preparation of an orchestral part is key to knowing what to do in a wind section. The steps below should be considered imperative to attaining a good performance as much as it is to finding a good reed or plugging in a mouthpiece. *This preparation is vital to being a professional.*

Most of the notes below apply to both wind and brass players. While wind players may end up marking more little solos and the like, brass players need to identify when they are playing *tutti* so they can “step back” – more on that below.

1. **Obtain your part well in advance.** Most professional orchestral players pick up their music from the orchestra library many weeks in advance and start preparation then. I know players who get all their parts *for the season* before the first rehearsal of the season. Sometimes rental parts are not available, but in that case, a good player will have their own copy from that have kept from a previous performance or that they received from their teacher. *The excerpts alone are not adequate with which to prepare; you must prepare from a full part.* This point, in its entirety, may not be practicable for university students, but a basic rule for getting your hands on your part: the sooner the better.
2. **Make a copy of your full part to keep for your personal library.** Many players have their own library of parts on which they have made notes or marked up. *Make a photocopy and keep your work.* You will spending a few hours preparing your part *without playing a note*, and you can save that work for the next time if you make notes on your own part. Photocopying a part is usually permissible under university copyright policies as the school has arrangements with publishers that allow copying for educational purposes. *If it is a rental part, it is imperative that you make a copy for future study purposes.* You may not be able to get your hands on that part when you need it again, for example, an audition. Worse, if you make a copy later in life, it may not be legal. You should do it now.
3. **Listen to the work *with the full score*.** You will discover more things about the wind writing and your part in particular.

4. **Go over your part with the full score.** In all the sections you have marked in the previous step, note down on the part who is playing with you. For example: “solo”, “w/znd cl, 3rd horn, bass trombone”. By looking at the score, you will find more spots that are transparent enough to be heard. Note these places and write down with whom you are playing.
5. **Play the entire part through**, including rests and *do this with a metronome*. The most important thing about this exercise is that *you must play the part in time. Rhythm is right or wrong; one cannot be “too” accurate.* Watch for the spots that you tend to speed up and slow down; mark them with eyeglasses or some other identifiable mark. Determine what you believe to be the big solos. Play the *tutti* passages with the focus of mind and clarity of notes that you would play a major solo. If you have long held notes, *check your pitches as outlined below* while you are playing the part through.
6. **Listen to the work with your part.** *This is an important step in preparation.* Mark on your part where you can be readily heard in the work.
7. **Note if your part is “tutti”.** Who has the tune? If your part is “tutti”, mark it as such, and be prepared to “give way” or “lay back” in performance.
8. **Who has the steady time?** Are there straight 8ths or 16ths that constrain when you change notes? Find who has them, write it in your part.
9. **Mark what voice you are playing in a chord.** Find out where the root of the chord is, write that down, and listen to that root in order to tune. Do you have a major third? If so, play it low against the root, and be sure to find out if anyone else is playing it, so you both can play the interval a bit narrow. Write down who is playing in unisons/octaves or other pitches with you so you can listen for that when in the section.

The process above is known as *learning the vertical score*. You need to know, at all times, all of these things. If you do this in a focused manner, *this process should take you six or seven times the length of the piece*. If you spend time less than that in preparing, you can be assured that are not preparing in an *appropriate and professional manner*.

“Stepping Out-Stepping Back”

When is *piano* not *piano*?

Many students do not understand orchestral dynamic levels One thing is for sure: an orchestral *piano* is not normally the same as a “chamber music“ *piano*. *In short, excerpt dynamics are often unrelated to the correct, in context orchestral dynamic.* Depending on the circumstances, the orchestral *piano* is generally louder, but in some cases, it might be *much* softer. How do you know this? *You study and know the vertical score.*

What does a *p* mean if it is a *solo* and 75 other people are playing *p*? *That’s where knowing the vertical score comes in*, and this knowledge will tell you when a *piano* actually calls for a *forte* (or more accurately, an orchestral solo *p* which is a *forte* with a *piano* sound). In order to properly prepare properly, you must do everything that is on the previous pages of this guideline. This preparation will also tell you when *mezzo*

forte means *piano* or even *pianissimo*: for example, in tutti sections such as held chords (brass players: please note). It will also tell brass players when to back off “white notes” to allow the tune through.

It is a crucial skill to be able to play *ppp*. An example of the use of this dynamic would be long held notes that have a solo underneath them, or a held note that has a *diminuendo*. Practice playing long (high or low) notes at extreme dynamic ranges to hone this skill.

Knowing the vertical score, or having “situational awareness” is key to playing in a wind section.

1. Be aware of the accompaniment of your orchestral solos (do this by knowing the vertical score): sometimes it is thick and requires you to really step out. Sometimes the texture is very thin and light, and a printed *pp* can be played like a chamber music *pp*.
2. If you have the melody, “step forward” in the group. *Stand out*. Mark the part *Hauptstimme*; H----- . Play with a focused, ringing, projected sound. If in doubt, play too much. It is the conductor’s job to dial you back.
3. If you have a countermelody, know where the melody is, and play off it. Mark your part *Nebstimme*: N----- . “Step forward”, but not as much as the *Hauptstimme*.
4. If you have tutti chords or passagework, “step back” in the group. Blend, or have your sound be one that is a ‘soaking’ kind of sound. Identifying and marking the tutti passages is as important as marking the solo passages. Play almost “too” soft, all the while making sure that your pitch is good and is discernable by people around you – see more below on pitches. Be sure to keep the 1/3 - 2/3 balance with the first player (see below: *Balancing Between First And Second*). The first player should be playing softly in tutti passages, just loud enough to balance with other lead voices. This is where experience comes in, or to have learned these things through the advice of an experienced player.
5. Be on the alert for things like passing tones, notes that grind and make dissonance, appoggiatura. These notes are mini “step out” moments. Mark them and “step forward” like you would in a major solo. When they are done, get back into the texture.
6. There are different qualities of sound that you need to make when playing in an orchestra. I mention the direct sound and soaking sound above in Point 4. Also, especially for brass players, you need to have a “transparent sound” in your bag of tricks. This is a sound that has fewer harmonics, maybe less fundamental in the sound. It allows other orchestral solos and soli to get through. A heavy sound is the opposite: lots of fundamental, wide, thick. The *solo* sound is generally neither – it is clear, ringing, lots of overtones that help project the sound.
7. *Playing in a wind section is not like playing an orchestral audition*. A friend of mine has said that “the goal lately (at auditions) seems to be to insult the fewest people, and, actually playing as loud as we do in an orchestra, while totally necessary to do the job, insults some people at the auditions.” I tell my students that playing in a wind section is not always about being pretty. In an orchestra, *forte* can be extremely loud and sometimes coarse, the attacks of notes can be very hard-sounding, and the staccati can sound silly when they are played as short as they need to be in the wind section context. Know that there is a difference between playing an audition and playing the part in the middle of a wind section.

Marking Your Parts

You all will come up with your own way of marking parts. The *Hauptstimme* (as mentioned above) is one I use along with a small *note* to clarify - *w/2nd fl* etc. You may want to bracket [] passing tones, etc. to know to bring them out. Some draw a line in coloured pencil above a passage that needs to be brought out.

Balancing Between First And Second

Most students think that playing second is sneaking around underneath the second player. Nothing could be further from the truth. *The average proportion of sound/volume should be about 1/3 first, 2/3 second.* The specifics vary on the exact situation, but this is a good rule-of-thumb. The first player has more ring and focus in the sound, the second player more weight and fundamental. This gives the wind band a rich, full sonority. It also makes tuning much easier, both in your section and within the entire wind section.

Tuning

As an orchestral player, you must practice with your tuner (and metronome) *daily*. Your pitch will change slightly from day to day for various reasons: reeds, weather; atmospheric pressure; how your chops feel that day.

1. **Know the general tendencies of your instrument and those of other woodwinds.** For example -- Clarinet: high clarinet=sharp; low chalumeau - flat. Flute: low notes, especially played softly=flat. Low oboe=flat. Bassoon low B=sharp.
2. **Play long tones against the “singing tuner”.** If you do drill this in 1 flat, no sharps no flats, and 1 sharp keys, you will get a good idea as to where your pitch is. You are listening for “beats” in the sound, and you need to get rid of them and remember where the correct pitches were.
3. **Play your orchestra part with the tuner “singing”.** Pick a passage and set the tuner to sing the I, IV or V degree of the tonal centre you are in. Listen for beats, and be particularly aware of the perfect 4th s and 5th s you hit, making sure the intervals are indeed, perfect.
4. **Have the tuner on the stand “listening”.** After you have checked out your scale for pitch, have the tuner reading your pitch as you practice. When you get to a long note, glance at the tuner. While using this trick is, at best, a guide as to where your pitches are, it will give you a

- good idea as to where your pitch is so you can react in context to adjust the pitches to match others in the wind section.
5. **Awareness of your pitch tendencies is key to helping out others in the wind section.** *It is an important wind section skill to recognize and be able to adjust to another player's pitch.* For example, Dvorak writes a lot of solos for second oboe in the low register. While great players will be better able to fix the problem, the oboe is often flat at the very bottom of the instrument. If the second clarinet has a unison concert C (this note can be sharp on the clarinet, especially in softer dynamics) with the second oboe, it is much easier for the clarinet to adjust.
 6. **Some tuners allow you to tune major thirds.** If you put the tuner on its listening function and put it an octave below where you are testing, it may well read the harmonics "as they belong". In other words, you set the tuner to a B flat in the bass clef, play a D at the bottom of the treble clef, they tuner may recognize the D as the third partial, a 18th (sounding like a major 3rd of the B flat) and read it accordingly. You can then pitch the D to be a true major third.
 7. **Pitch wins over "sound" every time in section playing.** If you are playing an inner voice, you may have to sacrifice the sound on specific notes to get to the proper pitch. The sound can be sagging and have little focus, but if the pitch is right, then you're right. A good example is the two clarinet soli in Brahms' Piano Concerto No. 2, slow movement. In the 2nd clarinet part, the long C is usually sharp, and at the *ppp* dynamics needed in this excerpt, I lower that C dropping my jaw so the pitch is considerably lower, specially at the end of the first phrase. The sound gets quite loose, but the pitch is good. That way I can play the other notes in the soli in tune and with less adjusting (and panic as I run out of air!) in this very difficult spot in the second clarinet repertoire. Some may disagree with this concept, but I feel that if the pitch is correct in the chord, then the note/sound is "correct".
 8. **Find fingerings that alter the pitch of held notes.** Opening and closing keys on certain notes is part of great wind playing. You will find that you need to add certain keys much of the time to be at the correct pitch. Playing extreme dynamics always requires an adjustment – opening or closing keys (shading tone holes) is a requisite technique to alter these pitches.
 9. **How you make your sound.** A key element of a good sound is the way the harmonics "live" in the note are crucial to making a good sound. Do you have a note that is "fuzzy"? Have you ever played with a player and no matter what way you move, pitch does not settle in? Chance are that the harmonics in that note are not exactly right – for the clarinet, a *perfect* 12th above the fundamental, which sounds the notes of a *perfect* fifth (no beats). The instruments that overblow all harmonics (oboe, bassoon, flute, brasses) have the same constraints. Is the third partial ringing in the sound and is it a *perfect* interval? Do you have trouble finding the pitches of some notes, or the some of the pitches of certain notes of other players? Do you have wonky 4th, 5th, 8th partials living in your notes? Do other players have "iffy" partials? If your harmonics are lining up, you are making a beautiful sound *and* you will be easy to tune with *and* you will find it easier to find other's pitch. I use this listening skill in my playing and I teach it to my students. Bassoon players often utilize the skill, in fact, that is where I learned it. I think that this concept is worth mentioning, and you will need to speak to your teacher about this.
 10. **Before playing in the orchestra, you must warm up and know where your pitches are.** This takes me at least 15 minutes if it is a midday rehearsal, at least 30 minutes if it is my

- first warm up of the day. *The “A” given by the oboe is only a last minute check.* The tuning must be done *offstage* before the rehearsal, and as per the guidelines above.
- II. **Mind your pitch as the rehearsal/concert wears on.** We all tend to get higher as we get more tired. *Be aware of pitch rising and take measures to stay at pitch.*

These are things that I have done in my 30 years in the clarinet section of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra. They are only general guidelines for preparation and playing in a professional wind section. Experience is invaluable, and expert coaching will help you gain the knowledge sooner and more thoroughly.