

# All-State: Some Thoughts on Orchestral Cello Playing

by Paul Vance

*The following is intended to help cellists prepare for an orchestral performance. While some of these suggestions stem from my “pet peeves” as a conductor of student and community orchestras, most of them are practices I’ve found to be effective in my career as a professional cellist. I hope that you will find these ideas useful and that you will continue playing in orchestras beyond high school regardless of your career path. Orchestra is a noble endeavor that will enhance your life!*

## Getting Started

If you receive music for the concert you’ve been asked to play in advance of the first scheduled rehearsal, look the music over (away from the cello) to get a general sense of what’s involved. Do the notes appear to be difficult to play? Is the music rhythmically tricky? Are there a lot of meter changes? Do you understand the notation? Do you need a mute or other “accoutrements” in order to do all that the composer asks for?

The next step, obviously, is to try to play through each piece on the program from top to bottom. As you go along, make a note of passages that you find especially difficult so that you can locate them easily the next time you practice. Look up musical terms that are unfamiliar to you—this may provide you with important information you need to make sense of the music. Pay careful attention to any and all tempo markings indicated in your part, and be alert to dynamic markings, too.

If you do not receive music before the first rehearsal try to obtain it from somewhere: ask the librarian of the ensemble if a part could be made available; ask your teacher if they have a part you could borrow, or if they happen to know where one can be purchased. You can save yourself a lot of time (and stress!) by having the music prepared prior to the first rehearsal. *Generally speaking, there is no excuse for showing up unprepared for the first rehearsal.* To do so is to show disrespect for the performing group, your colleagues in the cello section, and—most importantly—for the music!

Some people find it helpful to listen to a recording of the piece. This is generally a good idea, but you need to know that you are learning one interpretation and not necessarily the “definitive” version of the piece. Listen to more than one recording if you can, but better yet rely on your knowledge of the score (see below) to guide you through the process of learning the music.

## Know the score:

I *strongly* recommend that any and all members of an orchestra acquaint themselves with the full score of the piece(s) they are playing in a rehearsal/concert cycle. Libraries are great resources for these, and many scores are available for purchase at a reasonable price (Dover Scores and the *Masterworks Library* published by Boosey & Hawkes are both very good.) Your teacher might also be able to help you locate a score.

The score can answer many questions. In many cases specific metronome markings are in the score but not in the individual parts. The composer also writes about the intent or interpretation of the music in the score, some of which (especially in the age after Hector Berlioz) is quite detailed. You may have to look up some unfamiliar foreign words in a music or language dictionary, but knowledge of these terms often reaps rewards in preparation for future concerts.

Another benefit of score study is to know what other voices are playing with the cello section at a given time. For example, it is very important to know that the cello passage is *very* exposed from beat two of measure 21 to the downbeat of measure 27 in Tchaikovsky’s

*Romeo and Juliet!* In the same piece, if you are aware of the fact that the harp plays a series of arpeggiated chords in measures 27 through 37 it should influence the type of sound you use in the pizzicato section starting in measure 38 (i.e., it should sound “harp-like”). In Wagner’s *Ride of the Valkyries*, the cello section (together with the bassoons) is basically the foundation of the orchestra throughout the piece, as the double basses (when present) play a bass melody with the trombones, tuba, and bass trumpet. The sound employed by the cello during these sections should be dense and, well, more like that of a double bass!

In short, score study can greatly enhance your understanding of the piece, and your role in bringing it to life.

## In the Rehearsals

Be at all rehearsals at least fifteen minutes before the appointed time. This gives you time to warm up and get yourself settled before you begin work. *If you’re on time for a rehearsal, you’re late!* Being late for a rehearsal is irresponsible and unprofessional.

Ask questions before a rehearsal begins—it helps you focus and can save a lot of time. If you’ve looked at the score for Bernstein’s *Candide* overture, for example, you’d know that there are discrepancies between the tempo markings in it and in the playing parts (e.g., the part says that the Piu Mosso at measure 231 goes at 96 to the whole note, while the score that I own says that it goes at 152 to the half note!). In this case, what the conductor may not know won’t hurt you, but it is always better to be safe than sorry.

The time before a rehearsal is also a good opportunity to “bond” with your stand partner. I never begin a rehearsal without greeting my partner! It is also a good time to go over a few tricky passages together, as it is very likely that the places you find difficult are tough for them, too. By doing this, you can expand on your own individual practice and begin the process of building unity within the section.

Leave your ego at the door! Playing in an orchestra—any orchestra—is a privilege. An orchestra is bigger than any individual player, no matter how gifted or accomplished they may be. You may feel that someone less deserving than you has been made Principal or has otherwise been placed ahead of you—get over it! There is no better way to prove that the person in charge of doing the seating of your section has made the right choice than to bring a lousy attitude to your orchestral experience because of placement. Remember that you may very well get an opportunity to be section leader—how you respond to being a “rank and file player” should reflect the way in which you would like others to conduct themselves when you are Principal.

When the rehearsal is in progress, stop playing when the conductor stops conducting. Don’t talk when the conductor or a section leader is talking, or when someone is asking a question. You can save a lot of time by exercising common courtesy in rehearsals. Do not use question and answer portions of a rehearsal to practice a passage you should have learned at home!

As you play in rehearsal and in concert, remember that there is no “consensus” in matters of intonation or rhythm! Uniformity of pitch and rhythm are perhaps the most essential elements in making a fine orchestra. Dynamics, phrasing, and articulation are the next most important considerations.

### **In the Concert**

Again, arrive early. Use your time before the concert to warm up and play through the music in your mind. Do not practice concertos or other solo literature while on stage before the concert begins! Save your best energy for the performance.

Stay alert during the performance—act, don't react! Things happen during live performance that haven't been scripted—this can be a good thing if you stay focused. Remember: at this point you should be having a very rewarding experience, and you will, if you're prepared properly!

When the audience is reacting to your performance with thunderous (or even tepid) applause, acknowledge them with a smile. An audience can change their perception of the success of a performance by the performers' reaction to it. Make them love it! *Do not organize your music or pack up your equipment while the audience is applauding!*

### **After the Concert**

I always tell my students that you never know a piece of music as well as you do after having performed it. It is a very useful practice to make note (either in writing in your mind) of what you feel you learned from the performance experience. What went better than you thought it might? Why? What didn't go as well as you'd expected? Why not? How has the performance experience changed you as a player?

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