

A MANUAL – GUIDE TO CONDUCTORS – BY NAUGHTY ORCHESTRAL PLAYERS

(A GUIDE FOR KEEPING CONDUCTORS IN-LINE AND IN-CHECK)

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Please note: the basis or prototype of this article one appeared in a Web page, which seems to have disappeared. In any case Johnstone has greatly expanded it, offering many new sections, but if the initial author came forward (with a copy of his/her sketching) then **Johnstone-Music** would happily acknowledge the original offering)

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There are many orchestral sight-reading books for both promising and already fully professional musicians. Some of these even come with a CD of the useful extracts played by a decent professional orchestra, or a decent principal player of the section in the case of orchestral solos. However there are very few basic training manuals for orchestral players. Real manuals that is, about the real life in the orchestral world. About people working together in music. What is really needed as we establish ourselves in the twenty-first century is a manual which includes ways not only to practise music but in how to practise putting pride into your performance and your behaviour both on stage and in concert performances. They always told you “The orchestral world is simply wonderful, a big happy family, just like a big-sized chamber ensemble – you are all important ...” Really?!! Well. In that case, go forth – let’s put that into practice, eh?!! So if we are all equally important, the first thing is to be able to Get Rid Of The Conductor especially when he/she is totally undesirable, incompetent, and pompous – but this has to be at all times subtle! Subtle is really the key word throughout the whole of this little manual. The following rules are intended as a guide to the intrinsic development of habits that will surely irritate the conductor, but it must be stated that it is so important that variations, ornamentations, and even additional methods depend upon the imagination and producing skill of the individual player. Joint sessions in the same musical family or between differing ones are occasionally necessary to be able to work out collective strategies more fruitfully.

So without further ado, let's start off:-

- 1) Never be satisfied with the tuning note. Fuss about the pitch – give strange glances at the woodwinds especially in concert performances – this takes a little attention away from the podium and puts it on you – where it belongs!
- 2) When raising the music stand in the rehearsal, why not try ensuring that the top comes right off – if the music spills across the floor all the better – we have at least a 40% chance that the conductor will have to stop ...
- 3) What happened to the Trades Unions? Let's remember the good old days. Complain about the temperature of the rehearsal room in a loud voice. If there is no cause for complaint in this case, well complain about the lighting, the crowded space in the pit, or the draft. For heaven's sake, there is always something to complain about, so this should be quite easy, even for novices. However this works best when the conductor is already under pressure. Picking that right moment is what practise is all about, and an experienced pro knows just when to lay his foot into it!
- 4) The whole section should look the other way just as the conductor gives an important cue. It's amazing how this starts to wear his/her confidence down, especially if this is the first visit or if we are talking about a relative youngster. In a concert this can be a decisive moment in the de-crowning of a maestro.
- 5) In a specially complex work involving those wonderful timbres and orchestral colourings from impressionism onwards it is always a good idea once in a while for *not* one string player to have a mute, for wind players to generally *not* have their doubling instrument, and it hardly needs to be said that percussionists should *never* have all their equipment on these special occasions. It's amazing how this destroys the work pattern that the conductor was planning on using in this particular rehearsal, resulting in all being sent home as we approach the interval break. However this procedure should not be followed more than once a month in case the conductor remembers ...

At this moment a little pause to assimilate the lessons being learnt. In fact maybe a little joke to ease off the pressure ... Q - What's the difference between the Greek language and the Viola tenor clef? A- Well, some conductors can actually read Greek!

OK, let's get back to business ... now we are onto a new level, requiring a little more skill and judgment – but for those who have assimilated the first part well we, as editors, do not envisage many problems for you to pass this section with flying colours

...

- 6) Ask for a re-audition or a seating change. Not just you – the entire section, including the front desk. This is sure to put the conductor nervous. Why, they'll wonder, what's going on here?! Ask often, like twice a month for example. Let him know you are not happy, that none of you are happy. Any changes actually carried out should only last about one month before new requests are made. Even give the impression that you are about to quit in block, as a group. This is because the conductor should know that you are ALL there as a special personal favour to help him out. The conductor should be made to see that he/she has in fact, the mentality of a civil servant, and that we are the artists..

- 7) When the conductor is giving a lot of absolutely irrelevant and useless instructions (let's face it, this is normal!) do please pluck the strings as loud as you can get away with, as if checking the tuning at every opportunity. It is difficult choice for a conductor to tell you to stop trying to have everything 'in tune' when he/she spends approximately 55% of the rehearsal time on rehearsing passages so that they are, yes you've guessed, 'in tune' – well it could be nearer to only 15% in the very rare case of a truly professional musician who is also a conductor, but we all know that the great majority of these so proud people usually have so much trouble in deciding which instrument or player is actually the offender, thus rising the average statistics to the already-quoted 55% (and this percentage seems to be rising each decade!).. So the supposed good tuning 'intentions' by string players usually pays off dividends, and our conductor colleague simply has to put up with us.

- 8) However, to the contrary (and so unfortunate for the woodwind) this could easily rise to almost 85% when our generally useless 'boss' refers to the clarinets in A, horns in transposition other than in 'F', or even our lovely viola tenor clef comes into good use here. What fun can be had asking the 'dope' for example: "my trumpet part says in 'D', but the C# in bar 41 doesn't sound right – what note should actually be sounding?" Almost sure to waste another five minutes, and get over half the conductors sweating!

- 9) When the conductor is giving unusually long instructions about a section of the score then new techniques are hereby required, these involving the help of the brass and percussionists because of their placement in being far from the conductor, but – warning – these have to be practiced first before employing in real life. The golden rule is that the conductor should never see you do the following. What, you say?! Easy; brass players should drop their mutes as the conductor puts on his glasses (or not) to study an awkward bar in the score that he/she had not prepared sufficiently at home. Of course percussionists have a wide variety of droppable items, but cymbals are unquestionably the very best because if released correctly from your lower arm they roll around the floor for over ten seconds, after which comes the laughter and the conductor has to go back to the beginning of studying the particular complicated bar which dumbfounded him/her in the first place! Remember the loud ‘bass drum’ sforzando to which the conductor astounded said ‘Who did that?’ – well, as I always say ‘Distance is the key’, and anyway, anyone who drops his Amati or Montagnana on the floor from the first desk of strings has even greater personal problems than merely playing in a duff run orchestra and that is beyond the scope of this present small offering ...
- 10) Loudly blow water from the keys during pause bars or soft silences – this should not come hard to many, as the horn, oboe, and clarinet players are trained to do just this almost from birth. But this still works a treat in the G.P. bars, destroying the conductor’s sense of orgasmic arrival (musically speaking I mean ...).
- 11) After a long passage has gone by, ask the conductor if your C sharp was in tune ... which one he/she might ask? So try to have difficulty in counting the bar numbers so as to drag the thing along and waste more time, and the conductor’s patience. Of course, this is especially useful if you had *no* C sharp, or were *not* even playing at the time. Of course if, for once, you have an intelligent conductor (unlikely though) and he actually catches you out, then plan B is to be pretending to be correcting a note in your part – “oh, of course, it should be C natural and not C sharp”. So ‘Don’t worry, be happy’.
- 12) If the conductor becomes emotional at a dramatic or soaring moment in the music it might be a good idea for the entire section to simultaneously be busy marking the music so that the glorious moment has very little glory left. The climax will sound empty and disappointing and will surely hit the conductor’s ego. Especially in the dress rehearsal – there’s nothing like putting him/her uptight for the evening performance.

- 13) If very, very occasionally you come to the rehearsal without the music, it is a must that you always wait until the music has started before trying to communicate to the conductor that you have no part. This is always annoying to a conductor. Best to take turns in this though, you can then always legitimately say 'But. Maestro, this is the first time that this has ever happened to me!'
- 14) When the conductor stops a passage near the break time, look at your watch (I mean, many of you simultaneously, that is). Look mystified; even shake it in disbelief occasionally. Make the conductor feel bad at 'extending' the rehearsal time even though we are inside 'normal' rehearsal time, as it were.

I think we need another brief pause – so another quick joke: Q – What's the difference between a Conductor and God? A – God knows he shouldn't try to be a conductor!

Now, if one follows all these lessons from the Orchestral playing Manual one is sure to notice the big psychological damage being implanted on our conductor. That is a sure sign that all our valuable classes in this manual are paying off. We now need to study this a stage further. So now is exactly the time to carry out the final onslaught, the *Big offensive* to get him out altogether.

- 15) Tell the conductor "I just can't find your beat". Of course it's normally true, but conductors are always sensitive about their 'stick technique', so now is the time to challenge it frequently. What is even better for its stabbing effect (although one has to learn just when and where to utilize it) is to use the classic phrase "Maestro, interesting beat you have there" – by the way, really meaning implied but not said "which Conservatoire did you study at?" That always gets them thinking, but they can't actually hammer you for being offensive, arrogant, disruptive, etc.

- 16) Just casually ask the conductor if he has listened to the Bernstein recording of the piece. Imply very subtly that he/she could learn something from it, but put in such a way as “it’s incredible, surely we *all* can learn from that, what a *real* musician!” If they become irritable, one could also mention off the cuff “Hey, I once did this with Abbado, it was an amazing experience”, again really meaning that *your* version truly is nothing!
- 17) Innocently ask “Is this the first time you have conducted this work?” Works really well, they are always left guessing (because they can’t *prove* anything) at which way you intend it to be taken ... We of course know which way, and the probability is that the conductor does as well.
- 18) When rehearsing a difficult passage, screw up your faces – the whole section. Shake your heads. Indicate by your expressions that you can collectively *never* play this passage. But do not say anything at all. Let the conductor put the solutions, make him/her sweat! Now this is important; in spite of love for music, the principal and sub-principal players should give the appearance of being lost in this particular situation. If somewhat pressured by the ‘boss’ to give a solution, they have to merely roll the ball back into in the conductor’s court again, showing that they prefer the analysis to come directly from the man with the baton.
- 19) Find an excuse (but only once each three months) for over half the section to leave the rehearsal, one by one, between an hour and a half-hour before the end. And all with valid, and different, reasons (feels bad, visit to dentist etc.). The others should obviously then become restless and start to fidget – the overwhelming chances are that the conductor sends everyone home early.
- 20) During applause, smile weakly or not at all. Don’t look at the public – look glum as if it’s a rotten experience. Hold the instruments low. Shoulders down! Always hesitate somewhat before getting up if the conductor beckons you for an outstanding contribution – better still look baffled as if ‘What, me? You mean me? Why me? OK then, I suppose I’ll comply with you if you *really* need me to do this, just this once!’ The public have to be made aware that you like music, and so very, very much, but there are unsustainable problems of work with this conductor – you know, with this conductor you feel that he is unnecessarily keeping you from doing something really important which is playing for love of the instrument.

21) If one section find that they have different articulations, do not change ... important, wait until backstage just before the concert starts before asking collectively – let the conductor become nervous seeing that you are all nervous Now there are three main possibilities here, and it's worthwhile explaining them. Firstly, there could be a discrepancy between various desks of the same section, for example, the bowings are radically different in the viola desks, or the wind phrasing is not at all unified between themselves (such as the first and second flute). Secondly, it could be that all desks are accurate at this point, but that the same type of figure-motive-cell is rather changed at other point/s of the same movement. Or thirdly, it could be that all desks of the same section are accurate, but that they differ substantially with other sections playing the same musical design. Of these three possibilities, from long experience, I can tell you that undoubtedly the third case works best of all – because it involves the maximum fuss. For example a problem between first and second violins, or between cellos and basses, requires collecting up many individual player parts. It's difficult to correct all parts quickly, especially if some-one should be tucked up in a changing room, or other back-stage area, giving a little personal practise before the concert (indeed this can be done deliberately!)

All these pre-concert manouvres have their rewards! Now we get to half-way through the concert. It always functions so well; you get to this very passage, the conductor becomes rather tense and thinks about the question delivered to him/her just before the concert, and hey presto he/she *forgets* to give the right cue to the woodwind – so *of course* they don't come in and the music becomes a fiasco, not to mention an aural chaos – when cornered by the board of directors they insist that they always rehearsed it perfectly every rehearsal, but in the concert the maestro forgot to give them their entry due to the pressure of the occasion. Fantastic, the conductor gets *many* marks down from the board of directors thus making it less likely of renewing his/her contract!

In conclusion:

If one puts into practice these little gems of advice it is guaranteed that an orchestra can rid itself of any undesirable conductor. Or if not, we offer a full money-back guarantee!

This manual serves of special value as applied to principal conductors, those who, for example, have already spent more than three years at the front of your orchestra and who are not wanted by a clear majority of the musicians (this situation is frequently common in 'state-run' national and regional orchestras). However, the implications can be the same for regular guest conductors, and other occasional but undesirable visitors. Some of these may well have very dubious reasons for being there in the first place, such as personal friends of the principal conductor (especially those personal friends who offer him/her a *return* gig with his/her orchestra!). Some are also occasionally chosen because they are 'local' and thus feel it is right to add to the little experience they have at this point at the expense of expert professional players.

So now for the first time, and this inside the twenty-first century, we are able to say that players have the power to remind conductors of the facts of life: just who do conductors think they are, anyway?

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(*produced as a result of simply too many years playing in orchestras!*)



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