

Playing in an Orchestra: How to make the best of rehearsals and concerts.

By Carlos Jimenez Fernandez.

As trombone players, one of the most rewarding things to do is to play with other people. Brass instruments work very well in homogenous ensembles (trombone choir, trumpet choir, brass quintet, brass trio, trombone quartet, tuba quartet... the list is long). But, perhaps, the orchestra deserves a special chapter when considering how to make the best of the rehearsal time in order to have a successful performance. Here I will share some tips and best practices that will help you have a better experience as a trombone player in an orchestra.

Spoiler alert: it's all about the preparation. The best tip I can give you to make the most out of a rehearsal is to know the music ahead of time. The more familiar you become with the piece or pieces that you will play, the less surprises you will encounter in rehearsal. There are several steps to achieve this:

1. If you are able to, get your hands on a copy of the music. imslp.org is a great resource to obtaining digital sheet music of a huge portion of the music that you will play. This includes your part, the rest of the section's parts (if possible), and preferably a score. You probably may not be used to interpreting a score or reading it, but you will get better at it the more you do it. And trust me, it is great practice for the future, so the earlier you start, the better!
2. Listen to recordings of the repertoire. Again, the more, the better. Go on YouTube, Spotify, or Apple Music and listen to how professional orchestras play these pieces. When you do this, make sure you are following along with your part (and the score if you have it) so that you can build a "mental roadmap" of what the piece sounds like with the information you have on the

page. Note that different recordings will sound different (some sections will be faster, or slower, or have a different character, etc.) and they will be different from what the rehearsal and performance will be like. At this stage, there is something crucial that if you get used to doing early on, it will save you tons of uncomfortable situations in rehearsals: mark up your part! Grab a pencil (never a pen!) and write everything that you need to write to feel really comfortable with the music. These can be cues for when an instrument comes in (especially useful during those long rests!), highlighting tempo or key changes, intonation tendencies, places in which the low brass is in the forefront versus in the background, or anything you need. That information is for you, so don't leave anything out!

3. Play along to those recordings. Once you have found a few recordings that you like, play along with them. By doing this you will be able to see for yourself if the notes you made on the page are helpful or sufficient. And once you are comfortable playing along to those recordings, you will be very much ready to make the most out of your rehearsal time.

Now, the big reason why I have told you about all those things you should do ahead of time is because they will allow you to be more focused on what is going on *around you* in the music, which is the whole point of making music together! Because you will have practiced your part and listened to recordings, you will need to put less attention into what notes are on your page, and you will react better to the different indications given by the conductor in real time. Continue to mark your part with that new information; listen, listen, listen (did I say listen?) to how the rest of the section and the orchestra are playing (this is a fundamental skill to have as musicians, no matter who we are playing with), and you will see that all these steps you took will lead to a much more engaging and enriching experience when you playing in an orchestra.