

## Chapter Three: Rehearsal Techniques

### **H**ow important is it to rehearse at all?

Surely the musicians must already know: (a) the repertoire, (b) how the tunes go, (c) are capable of reading the parts in front of them, and (d) can play their instruments acceptably well. So what is it you are expected to contribute beyond actually starting and finishing the ensemble. Well, there is no quick answer to this frequently posed question, and you will surely get as many differing opinions as the number of people you are prepared to take the trouble to ask. However, I would caution against including musicians in your survey, should you unwisely opt to venture down that particular path. Besides, I can tell you here and now what any orchestral musician will say, and that is:

*‘...that the vast amount of rehearsing is an utter waste of time, and they only do it so that the ‘carver’ (one of their many words for a conductor) can get through it without cocking it up.’* Take my word for it, I’ve heard it many times.

No, the whole purpose of this book is to rule out such trial and error. Rehearsing is an exact science and there are rules, disciplines, precedents, and traditions, all of which can and should be observed, as you will see.

First, it is as well to become acquainted with the unique language of the rehearsal studio. By way of illustration, here are a small selection of familiar phrases followed by their precise meanings...

*Good morning, may I say what a pleasure it is being back here to conduct you again.*

***Don’t think for one moment that I have forgotten the last time I had the misfortune to be conducting you anarchic lot.***

*Thank you all very much for a very successful performance last night. It’s a good job the audience was watching me rather than listening to*

*you. It's a miracle the concert didn't fall apart, and it's no thanks to you we managed to reach the end in one piece.*

*Let's run it through one more time before we take a break.*

*Tough luck. I bet you thought you'd get out early, didn't you?*

*I'm really looking forward to our next concert together.*

*If I don't see you again for another billion years it'll be too soon.*

*Yes.*

*No.*

*No.*

*No.*

*No.*

*Arrrrrrgh!*

*I think it would be nice to move the tempo along a bit here.*

*If the music gets any slower, it'll start going backwards.*

*Please could you all follow the baton carefully.*

*I'll be following whoever can play the loudest.*

*Try not to rush.*

*How the hell can I conduct when you won't play together.*

*I think the string bowing is not working here.*

***Bowing, Shmowing! What the hell do I know, or care, about bloody bowing. Just play the damn thing right!***

*Of course I'm always open to any suggestions.*

***Help!***

Rehearsal time is finite, therefore it is prudent to have a clear notion of how you intend to divide it up to its best advantage. Of course, it is important to cover everything thoroughly, but also you do not want to *over rehearse*, which could cause the players to lose concentration. And it is the important topic of **concentration** upon which it is worth

quoting the appropriate attention-spans across the orchestral spectrum, as compiled by a predecessor of mine - Ernst Potzoff Bargeld (1907-1988). The reality of musicians' '*Particular cerebral impediment*' (to use the term coined by Herr Bargeld) has, on occasion, raised the odd eyebrow amongst those who are less familiar with the orchestra behind the scenes. Of course, for us conductors, we know what to expect as it has become second nature.

The following list (which all conducting scholars should memorize) has now been widely adopted as the definitive guide:

Trombones (all)	-	-	24 hours
5 <sup>th</sup> Horn	-	-	3 ½ hours
The Leader	-	-	1 hour 39 minutes
3 <sup>rd</sup> Horn	-	-	48 minutes
Front-row Woodwind (except English Horn)	-	-	32 minutes
Timpani	-	-	27 minutes
Harps	-	-	14 minutes
Back-row Woodwind (except Bass Clarinet)	-	-	10 minutes
Other String Principals (excluding violas and basses)	-	-	10 minutes
Trumpets (all)	-	-	5 minutes
1 <sup>st</sup> Horn-	-	-	4 minutes
Bass Clarinet	-	-	3 minutes
2 <sup>nd</sup> Horn	-	-	2 ½ minutes
Principal Viola	-	-	2 minutes
English Horn	-	-	1 ½ minutes
Principal Double Bass	-	-	49 seconds
The Co-leader	-	-	37 seconds
Rank and file Strings (excluding violas and basses)	-	-	10 seconds
R&F Double basses	-	-	7 seconds
4 <sup>th</sup> Horn-	-	-	3 ½ seconds
R&F Violas	-	-	3 seconds
Tuba	-	-	1 second

Percussion - - - 0 seconds

Some of the statistics may look surprising to those who are less familiar with orchestras, so a brief explanation may be helpful:



The Percussionist.

Top of the list (by far) for concentration is the trombonist. You may wonder (since there are frequently long stretches of music which don't require them playing at all) why they don't simply fall asleep, like the basses or cellos for instance. The reason for this is that they have a very strongly established socially interactive structure entirely self-contained within their own section, which derives enormous stimulation through debate – a sort of intellectual microcosm, or 'think-tank' if you like. Therefore, although they don't play very many notes (compared to

the violins for example), they spend the rest of their time in deep discussion on subjects as varied as *particle physics*, or *classical Greek theatre*, or their favorite topic: *How to run an orchestra*.

Or take the other end of the scale – the percussion section. In this particular case, their training has taken hold to such an extent that their minds have no focal point whatsoever; everything they do is absolutely instinctive, to the degree that they are often completely unaware of where they are, or what day of the week it is; every action they are required to perform requires almost no intervention from their brains. Hence, they have evolved extraordinary reflexes which has made them so unerringly accurate with their timing (despite some conductors' occasional, though fruitless, efforts to unseat them) that, hypothetically speaking, should one of them endeavour to make a conscious effort to count an entry, it would in all probability be disastrous. Of course, you may expect small variations in these timings from one individual orchestra to another, but these are not as common as one might imagine. It is always best policy to stick to this list when formulating a rehearsal plan in order to optimize the use of available time.

As mentioned in the previous chapter there are a number of right and wrong ways regarding your use of language when in the company of an orchestra. That which may be considered acceptable from the players, is not necessarily appropriate speech from their maestro. A conductor must be aware at all times both on and off the podium, of how he conducts himself before presuming to conducting others. Please refer to chapter five for full details.

Here are a few examples of the differences that may be encountered:

- Maestro: *Violins, that was good for a first read-through.*  
 Player: ***A toddler, blindfolded, handcuffed and wearing boxing gloves could have played it with more finesse.***
- Maestro: *I'd rather not if you don't mind.*  
 Player: ***You must be bloody joking.***

- Maestro: *We'll consider the options.*  
 Player: ***I'm right and everyone else is wrong.***
- Maestro: *If I might suggest.*  
 Player: ***Listen up you lot.***
- Maestro: *We'll take a short break here.*  
 Player: ***I'm gasping for a fag.***
- Maestro: *There were a few untidy corners in last night's performance which need to be sorted out. Apart from that it all went very well indeed.*  
 Player: ***What a crap gig.***
- Maestro: *Excuse me.*  
 Player: ***Oi! You.***
- Maestro: *Wagner's operas are quite a feat of endurance.*  
 Player: ***This opera is bloody knackerling.***
- Maestro: *We don't have a lot of time so I would appreciate your utmost concentration.*  
 Player: ***One wrong note from you, pal, and you're dead.***
- Maestro: *I think that all went very well.*  
 Player: ***Thank God that's over.***
- Maestro: *I only want what is best for the music.*  
 Player: ***Me Me Me.***
- Maestro: *This piece doesn't get the credit it deserves.*  
 Player: ***Streuth! what a load of bollocks.***

**Rehearsing is frequently about making accurate assessments of the situation.** You need to keep a level head at all times. Don't allow yourself to get in a flap (no joke intended), Stay cool, Stay calm, Stay in control, Stay serene. Well, all this sounds very fine on paper, but the reality of rehearsing a...

*...grumpy, tired, hot, fed up, uncomfortable orchestra on a public holiday in August, when they haven't had a free day for twelve weeks, and have just had the announcement that their pay negotiations have broken down yet again, at a time when essential maintenance work has necessitated deactivating the air conditioners in the studio, while the canteen staff are on strike so there is no food or refreshments available, and you are about to start work on a brand new score, which has been rejected by ten other orchestras for being too difficult, thus requiring the necessity to go into overtime for the remainder of the week, while the continuing rising cost of conductors' fees may shortly require some redundancies across the entire orchestra...*

What is the best way to turn the situation around, and come out on top? You must never allow the force of the apparent collective personality of the orchestra to weigh upon you. An orchestra, not dissimilar to many predatory animals, can be quick to smell your fear. The unwary conductor, faced with a discontented orchestra, could easily panic and fall prey to the ruthless hunting pack. On an individual basis (and at the risk of appearing overly anthropomorphic) one may easily fall into the trap of regarding the vast majority of symphonic musicians as being an approximation to human. But never let yourself be lulled... *there are viola players out there!*

This is typical of the sort of extreme situation that will certainly crop up at least once in every conductor's career sooner or later. And when it does you must endeavour to embrace it in as positive a light as possible. Beg them to consider how much worse things could be if...

*...it was freezing cold, it could be Christmas, you could be missing Terminator II (the best movie ever) on your surround sound TV, rather than just a dreary bank holiday which no one wanted anyway (except the banks, whose cash dispensers only work when you don't need them), and at least we are in gainful employment, and when the engineers have fixed the life-support systems it will be like a fresh spring day in the studio, and what's the use of having discontented canteen staff – let's show them some solidarity, and haven't we always flown the flag for new and*

*challenging music, and if we want to get the best conductors then we must all tighten our belts in the interest of perpetuating our art for future generations who will reap the rewards that were sown by us through our selfless sacrifice.*

So once you have explained this persuasive counter-argument to the assembled orchestra, and have departed the rehearsal studio in triumph, they will certainly be *right behind you* all the way.

**Features:**

Things to be seen with, which all conductors would do well to be aware of whilst in company. Make careful note of the order of importance:

1. Other conductors
2. Conducting scholars
3. Music journalists
4. Royalty/ Statesmen
4. Politicians
5. The public
6. Musicians

Although some of these features do not strictly qualify as part of ‘rehearsal technique’, nevertheless I have included it in this chapter since, as during the rehearsal, it is largely about projecting a tangible image of your personality that plays such a significant role in all which we endeavour to achieve. I have compiled a list that should be regarded chiefly as a guideline for young conductors as they carve a career for themselves in the world of symphonic music. Of course, as your career develops, and as you become better known, then you will be accepted more for what you *are* rather than what you outwardly *appear* to be, then maybe some of these features take on slightly less importance. It will then be up to you to decide.



<b>Feature</b>	<b>Essential</b>	<b>Acceptable</b>	<b>Unacceptable</b>	<b>Comment</b>
Pony tail			•	No way.
Body piercing			•	Absolutely not.
Tattoos			•	Ditto.
Swiss watch	•			It is better to wear <i>no</i> watch than the wrong one. Don't get too macho though.
Designer clothes		•		Avoid the 'hippy' look at all costs.
Beards		•		Preferably distinguished gray ones, and not too bushy either.
Colouring your hair			•	We don't want to look younger. We always strive to look older!
Chauffeur		•		Can be expensive but always a good idea to have one or two.
Shaved head		•		Later on in life – maybe.
Luxury yacht		•		Do we want people to think we're snobs? Yes!
More than one home	•			This is something the young maestro will have to work towards. Try to have one in Europe and another in the States to start with.
Rare coins			•	Far too geeky.
Race horse		•		Very useful accessory – but costly.
Record collection	•			Massive, obviously.

<b>Feature</b>	<b>Essential</b>	<b>Acceptable</b>	<b>Unacceptable</b>	<b>Comment</b>
Original Paintings	•			Treat modern art with caution. If in doubt, stick to the 18 <sup>th</sup> century or earlier.
Designer baton case		•		Surprisingly, people tend not to look at these, so I wouldn't bother personally.
Grand piano	•			It must be either a Steinway, or one that was owned by a great composer.
First edition books		•		Not modern, though.
Rare stamps		•		One or two look good in frames in the bathroom.
Guns	•			Antique ones are good. Otherwise stick to hand built shotguns either Italian or English.
Cars	•			One per home, plus a few vintage models. Not American!
Original manuscripts	•			Stick to vocal scores – they're cheaper, and people will be impressed at your diversity of interests.

Feature	Essential	Acceptable	Unacceptable	Comment
Photos	•			Lots - all over the house. You must be in all of them together with another great musician, royalty, or head of state.
Cookery books		•		Write your own – it's very easy. Then get a celebrity to sing its praises.
Designer shoes	•			Probably one of the most important features of all.
Wife		•		Either a soloist, author, or minor royalty. Definitely no politicians.
New scores			•	Your music must always be dog-eared, falling apart, and covered in thick crayon marks, in at least three different colours,
Children		•		Preferably adult ones.

While we're on the topic of lists, it's probably worth mentioning a few important *rights* and *wrongs* regarding your use of **expletive and profanity** in front of the orchestra. You should avoid all swearing and bad language, unless you are doing it to be funny – and even so, use extreme self-restraint and make these events extremely rare ones. There have, in the past, been a number of conductors who have indulged in

bad language, and it is important one should understand the sequence of events that unfold as they do...

**At first:** The orchestra is shocked, and even somewhat surprised because they weren't expecting their maestro to employ the sort of vocabulary that they would themselves. Indeed, it never occurred to them that you even knew such words.

**Secondly:** They think it's a laugh that a conductor is exposing his human side (with all its fallibility) for once, which is not always a bad thing to do on occasions. However, be aware that coming down to the orchestra's level has an associated risk factor akin to that which one might expect from stepping into a pool of grumpy sharks who haven't had a square meal in a month. Proceed with extreme caution.

**Thirdly:** They begin to get irritated because they have always expected the maestro to be above this sort of behaviour, and it demonstrates to one-and-all that you are losing your cool.

**Fourthly:** You have irrevocably lost their respect (with the possible exception of the trumpets who don't give a damn, and the percussion who didn't notice because they were all in a trance).

**Finally:**

The final important topic regarding rehearsing the orchestra, takes us onto foreign soil. You have been honoured with an invitation to work with a foreign orchestra who, of course, are unlikely to understand English any more than your knowledge of their native tongue.

Here is an opportunity to demonstrate to one and all that you require no other language than that conveyed through your artistry as the Maestro. The visceral image of your baton, with all its eloquent and subtle nuances, should be worth a thousand words. Everything else you wish to communicate will be conveyed simply by the way you stand, the look in your eyes, the set of your jaw and, of course, the all important wristwatch and shoes - there is never any excuse for a slovenly

appearance.

Here is a cautionary tale of the English conductor Mortimer Slapstick (1937-) who, on his first trip to Germany, decided it would be best to employ the services of a translator so that the players wouldn't misconstrue his intentions. The translator, unfortunately in this instance, happened to be neither British nor German.

Here is what happened:

Mortimer: *It's an enormous pleasure being here to conduct you.*

Translator: ***I am hugely stimulated by beating you.***

Mortimer: *I hope to produce some fine work.*

Translator: ***I want to levy a charge.***

Mortimer: *I'll give you a bar for nothing.*

Translator: ***All the drinks are on me.***

Mortimer: *We'll start with the first movement.*

Translator: ***We will first go to the toilet.***

Mortimer: *B flat Nocturne.*

Translator: ***Lie down at night.***

Mortimer: *Cor Anglais, a little stronger attack.*

Translator: ***Wow, English are slightly better at starting fights.***

Mortimer: *I'll give you a downbeat.*

Translator: ***I am presenting you with a tramp.***

Mortimer: *Let's start with a little work from the top of the piece.*

Translator: ***My toupee needs a light trim.***

Mortimer: *I'll be holding up in that bar.*

Translator: ***You will find me in the pub.***

Mortimer: *Violins, can you all come in together.*

Translator: ***Violins, will you have a simultaneous orgasm.***

Mortimer: *To give him his credit, that was very fine.*

Translator: ***I would rather lend him some money than severely penalize him.***

Mortimer: *There's no pause when it goes into A flat.*

Translator: ***Pets are not permitted in the apartment.***

Mortimer: *May I suggest a good fingering for that passage?*

Translator: ***I strongly recommend an internal examination.***

Mortimer: *Strings, will you sort out your bowings.*

Translator: ***Get knotted.***

Mortimer: *Quieter, but more intense sound.*

Translator: ***You may only make more noise whilst camping.***

Mortimer: *Flutes, softer tonguing please.*

Translator: ***????????***

To Mortimer's lasting bewilderment, no further invitations were forthcoming from that particular orchestra.



Mortimer Slapstick.

