MaestroMeet

Counting rests without losing your place

Most wrong entries are born in a long rest. Six habits that stop them.

1 Count bars, not beats

The beats are the clock; the bars are what you count. In a four-bar rest think “one two three four, two two three four, three two three four, four two three four”: the first number is the bar. However you keep the tally, the habit is the same: mark the bar on its first beat, every bar, without fail.

2 Keep the count on your hand

The count in your head is the first thing a distraction wipes, so store it where you can see it. Close a finger on the first beat of every bar; five bars closes the fist. With both hands free, the second hand collects the fists: close one finger on it each time the counting hand fills, and twenty-three bars sits there as four fingers and three. With one hand on the instrument, the free hand still counts the bars and only the fists go in your head. That trade works because a number that changes once every five bars is far harder to lose than one that changes every bar. Professionals do this. It is not cheating; it is the method.

3 Write in the cue

Above the bar before your entry, write what you will hear: “after the flute tune”, “cellos alone”, “timpani roll”. If the part gives you small cue notes, circle them. If it gives you nothing, listen to a recording and add your own in pencil.

4 Turn one long rest into several short ones

A rehearsal letter in the middle of a rest is a landmark. Circle it and write beside it what happens there. A 40-bar rest with a letter after 24 bars is a 24-bar rest and then a 16-bar rest, and the second one is easy.

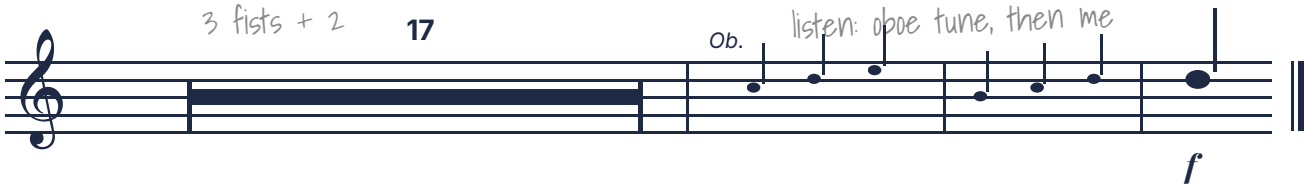
5 Prepare during the final bars

Preparation is time, not bars: give it about ten seconds, which is four bars at a moderate tempo and more at a quick one. First, sit up and get your eyes moving between the part and the conductor. Halfway in, raise your instrument. The breath is the one thing that never moves: take it in tempo, on the last beat or two, so the air lands you on the entry. String players, set the bow in the same window and breathe with the section anyway; a section that breathes together starts together. Prepared like this, the entry arrives rather than ambushes you.

6 When you have lost count

Do not guess. Look at the section leader; they are counting too. Wait for the next letter, or for the cue you wrote in, and come in there. A late entry is a small thing. An early entry in a silence is the thing the whole room remembers.

WORKED EXAMPLE — a 17-bar rest, the cue, the entry



Printed music, pencil habits: fists counted above the rest, the cue named, the entry prepared.