

When the part is too hard

Every orchestra rehearses music somebody cannot play yet. What to thin out, in what order, so the section never notices.

1 Keep the count, whatever else you drop

The player who loses the notes is missed for a bar. The player who loses the count is missed for a page. Whatever you stop playing, never stop counting.

2 Rhythm before pitch

The right rhythm on nearly the right notes holds the section together. The right notes in the wrong rhythm derail it. If something must give, let it be pitch.

3 Play the frame

In a fast run, play the first note, the last note and the notes that land on the beats, and touch the rest lightly or leave them. Inside the full texture, the frame is what carries.

4 First beats are sacred

If a bar is collapsing, play its first beat and rest. You stay in the texture and in the count, and you rejoin whole at the next bar.

5 Drop the decoration first

Trills, turns, grace notes: ornament goes before structure. Nobody was ever asked to leave an amateur orchestra for omitting a mordent.

6 Thin quietly

A passage you are thinning belongs under the section, not over it: at mezzo, half the notes pass unnoticed; at forte they become a solo. Let the players who have it carry the volume.

7 Divide the labour

In divisi (where the section splits into two lines) and in doubled passages, agree with your desk partner who takes which line or which octave. Two players covering half each beats two players drowning in all of it.

8 Do not rush the hard bars

Difficulty pulls players ahead of the beat, and hurrying is the loudest mistake on this card. Anchor to the pulse, sit if anything a hair behind it, and let the bar come to you.

9 Drop the octave, not the note

In loud passages where your line is doubled, if the register defeats you, take it an octave down: a secure note in the wrong octave supports the harmony; a cracked one supports nothing. Never in exposed lines, and tell your desk partner.

10 Never stop; rejoin at a landmark

If it goes, keep your place with your eyes and come back in at the next rehearsal letter, the next tune you know, or the next first beat you can play. Stopping to find your bar is how one lost player becomes a lost section.

11 Mark what you thinned

A small pencil cross over every passage you left out. That is this week's practice list, and next rehearsal you thin out less.

12 Practise starting anywhere

At home, begin cold from each rehearsal letter and from mid-phrase, with no run-up. Rehearsals never start where you practised from, and the player who can start anywhere is never lost for long.

Triage is not defeat. It is what professionals do on a first read-through; they are simply faster at it.

