

How to practise an orchestral part in 25 minutes

Not from the top. Never from the top. Five steps, with the clock.

- 0 Listen** (0 to 3 minutes)
Play a recording of the passage you are working on (there is always one online), part in hand, pencil out. Mark the bars you cannot yet play. Those bars are today's practice; everything else is tomorrow's.
- 3 Entries only** (3 to 7 minutes)
Every entry after a rest. Count the last two bars of the rest, breathe on the beat, play the first note at its written dynamic, stop. Ten times each. The entry is the note that decides whether the passage goes well; the rest of the phrase looks after itself.
- 7 The hard bars, and only those** (7 to 15 minutes)
Take two bars. Play them at half speed, perfectly, three times. Raise the metronome by six or eight beats per minute, three more times. Stop at the speed where it is still clean and write that number beside the bars; tomorrow start there. Practise the bar before and the bar after as well: the join is where it falls apart in rehearsal, not the difficult bar itself.
- 15 The exposed bits, at their real dynamic** (15 to 20 minutes)
Anything marked solo, anything pianissimo, anything high after a rest. Play it as it will be heard. Loud practice of a soft passage teaches your body the wrong thing.
- 20 One run, no stopping** (20 to 25 minutes)
The whole passage, at tempo, with the recording or with the orchestra around you, without stopping for anything. Mark what went wrong. That is tomorrow's list. Then put the instrument down.

Three rules

- Never spend the time on the tune you can already play. It feels like practice. It is not.
- Record thirty seconds once a week and listen the next day. It is always better than it felt and worse than you hoped, and both are useful.
- Twenty-five minutes on five days beats two hours on Sunday, for almost everyone, almost every time.

