

Flute in the orchestra: the stand sheet

Six things to remember when you sit down in the section.

1 You sit at the top, where everything shows

The flute is the top of the wind, and often the top line of all, so when you are in tune the whole sound gains its shine and when you are not it is the first thing an audience hears. Judge yourself against the players beneath you rather than against a tuner. A tuner tells you how a note compares with an equal-tempered reference. It cannot tell you whether your top A agrees with the oboe an octave below.

2 Plan the breath before you play a note

The flute uses more air than almost any other instrument, because much of what you blow streams across the lip plate rather than entering the tube, and long phrases run out of air before they run out of notes. Pencil your breaths in early, while the music is still new, and put them where a phrase naturally joins, not in the closing note or two, where the gap shows most. If a breath forces a choice, give up the legato before the pulse: a clipped slur goes unnoticed where a dropped beat does not.

3 Learn where each note wants to sit

The pitch rises as you play louder or as the instrument warms, sinks as you play softer, and the top register is especially keen to go sharp. Correct with the air and the angle rather than the lip: aim the air down and roll in a touch to stop a loud note going sharp, lift the air and roll out to stop a soft one dropping. Map the tendencies against a drone before you meet them in a piece.

4 Use the fingerings the part does not print

Harmonic fingerings, where you finger a lower note and overblow to its upper partials, even out fast passages and give a softer colour to exposed high notes. Alternate fingerings smooth awkward trills and the corners a standard fingering fights. Working them in is often the difference between a passage that is possible and one that is comfortable.

5 Exposed entries are prepared in the silence

Many of the best-loved moments in the repertoire are quiet flute solos arriving after rests, with nowhere to hide. The note that cracks or comes in under pitch is rarely a finger problem; it is the preparation. Practise the silence and the in-breath as carefully as the entry, with the first note already sounding in your head before you play it. A long rest leaves the instrument cold, and a cold flute plays flat, so warm it with your breath during the rest rather than find out on the note.

6 Ensemble is a matter of sight

Across a large platform sound arrives late, so playing by ear alone puts you behind the beat. Take the beat from the conductor and your ensemble from the principal of your own section, kept at the edge of your vision while you read. Where what you hear and what you see disagree, follow your eyes.

