

Clarinet in the orchestra: the stand sheet

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

1 Practise the entry, not just the notes

The clarinet often sits quiet for many bars and then has to arrive cleanly, in tune and exactly on time, and that is where parts most often go wrong. The difficulty is rarely the notes; it is the counting and the nerve. Know what you are listening for and which instrument hands you the line, so that you arrive ready rather than hoping.

2 Keep the right hand down

Hold the right-hand fingers down while you play the open throat notes, G, G sharp, A and B flat, and above all as you approach the change of register. Those notes sit on a very short length of tube, which leaves them thin and quick to go sharp, and the throat B flat is the worst of them. Resting the right hand in place adds tube and resonance beneath them, so they steady in pitch and take the colour of their neighbours instead of standing out. It is the habit most often skipped and the one that changes a clarinet sound most.

3 Crossing the break

The B on the middle line, the first note over the break, is for many players the hardest on the instrument, and two things make it so. First, you move almost every finger at once, so one finger a fraction late leaves a hole open and the note squeaks. Second, the tube suddenly becomes much longer, so the note needs noticeably more air than the throat note before it. Shaping the inside of the mouth as if quietly saying eee, with the tongue arched high, lifts it over and stops it spreading.

4 No two clarinets answer alike

An alternate fingering that steadies a note on somebody else's instrument may not steady it on yours. Keep your own written list of the ones that do work: a steadier throat B flat, an easier option for an awkward corner, a cleaner approach to a difficult trill, each tried slowly against a tuner before you trust it at speed.

5 You are in conversation with the wind around you

Your line was written to sit inside the ensemble: answering the oboe, leaning on the bassoon, waiting through long rests for one exposed entry. Know whose phrase you are finishing and whose you are handing on, and match its length and its colour as you take it over. A line that arrives in a different shape from the one before it sounds like a join, however well you play it.

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.

