

Bassoon in the orchestra: the stand sheet

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

1 Two players in one sitting

Much of the time your line moves with the cellos and basses, so listen downward and match them in pitch, in length and in weight. Then the writing hands you a solo, exposed and sometimes wry, and you are the voice everyone follows. Know which of the two you are doing before the phrase starts, because the playing is not the same.

2 Flick, and most cracks stop being your fault

The notes that crack most readily, the A on the top line of the bass staff and the B flat, B and C just above it, and at times the D, are how the instrument behaves rather than evidence of weak playing. As the note begins, give the correct left-thumb key a brief touch, on and straight off, opening a small vent that lets the reed settle onto the note you want instead of dropping an octave. Flick every one of them while a passage is new; once it is secure you can judge where it is no longer needed.

3 Check the whisper-key lock

It is the trap that catches players unawares. Left engaged, the lock works directly against the flick and brings back the very cracks in that register you were trying to prevent. Know whether it is on before you start rather than after the first note has gone.

4 Start the note as a release, not an attack

Much of the bassoon's cleanliness is decided in the first instant. Picture that instant as the moment you let already-moving air reach the reed rather than as a stroke of the tongue against it: the breath is prepared and waiting, and the tongue simply lets it through. When a note keeps cracking, aim the tongue at a corner of the reed's tip instead of its centre. Those two habits settle more split notes than any amount of extra force.

5 Every register wants its own voicing

The range is broad and the upper register is notated in the tenor clef, occasionally the treble in the highest passages, which will trip you if you spend most of your time in the bass. Read every clef until none of them slows you. And give the top its own study: each register asks for a subtly different setting of the mouth and throat to sit in tune and in character, and the high notes repay that care far more than they repay force.

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.

