

Tuba in the orchestra: the stand sheet

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

1 The chord is tuned down to you

Most chords are tuned downward to the bottom, and the bass line you play sets the pitch and the time for everyone above. A clear, centred low note is not only better for you, it is a service to the whole ensemble tuning down to it.

2 The instrument speaks slowly, so start early

A tuba carries anything from about twelve to eighteen feet of tubing, and there is a real delay between the air arriving and the note sounding. Your note has to arrive on the beat, which means starting it a fraction ahead so that the sound lands on time.

This is not hurrying: the beat you are placing to is still the one you can see, and only the start of the note moves.

3 Breathe more than you think, and breathe low

The tuba asks for as much air as any instrument in the orchestra, and the breath must be large and, above all, low. Let the belly and the back fill first and keep the throat open, the feeling of a quiet, cool O. Lifting the shoulders tightens the throat and strangles the sound. A great deal of tuba playing is really breath management.

4 Keep the bottom clear

The low register is where the tuba earns its place and also where the sound most easily turns to mud. Clarity comes from a relaxed, open embouchure, with no pinching and no smiling, from fast and plentiful air, and from articulation clean enough to define the front of each note.

5 Centre the pitch with your ear

Several notes live on each fingering, drawn from the harmonic series, so the fingering is only half the answer and your ear and lips place the note. Buzzing on the mouthpiece alone, and matching pitches to a drone, trains you to centre a note before you play it. Since the orchestra rests its tuning on you, that matters more here than almost anywhere else.

6 You are usually the only one

There is one tuba in most scoring, so there is no section to blend into, nobody a semitone away to check yourself against, and no second player to carry the line while you find the breath. Everything above is tuning downward to what you play, so a note that is cloudy or late is not a small local problem. Plan the breaths and the recoveries, because there is nobody to improvise behind.

7 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.

