

Violin in the orchestra: the stand sheet

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

1 You are one voice, not a solo line

Blend rather than project: match the players around you in colour, in weight, and above all in the width of your vibrato, and listen across the desk rather than to yourself. A section sounding like one instrument is harder than it looks, and nobody claps for it.

2 Accompanying is a skill of its own

Much of what a violin section plays is accompaniment, and for the seconds it is most of the evening: offbeat chords, repeated figures, held harmony under somebody else's tune. Place offbeats against the bass rather than the beat in your own head, because the pull is towards arriving early. Where the same figure runs for a page, count the bars or mark where it changes; the bar you lose is rarely the difficult one.

3 Ensemble is a matter of sight

Across a large platform sound arrives late, so a section playing by ear alone sits behind the beat. Take the beat from the conductor, and your ensemble from the leader's bow and the desk in front, kept at the edge of your vision while you read. Where what you hear and what you see disagree, follow your eyes.

4 The bowings are the section's, the fingerings are yours

A part gives the notes and the composer's own markings, but not usually the bow directions or the fingerings. Settle your fingerings before the first rehearsal and keep them, and copy the leader's bowings in as soon as they are given.

5 Two kinds of in tune

In a moving line a leading note leans up towards the note it resolves to. In a sustained chord the harmony decides instead. With the root fixed by the bass, the major third sits noticeably low, about a seventh of a semitone below what a tuner shows; the minor third of a minor chord sits high by about the same. Know which of them you are holding. In a dominant chord the leading note is the major third, so there it comes down. An open string cannot be leaned, so where the note that must move is open, finger it instead: the open string has one opinion and will not be talked out of it.

6 Match the bow, and know when not to

Two players can take the same notes at the same moment and still sound ragged if their bows are in different places, so match the part of the bow, the amount you use and the speed of the stroke. The exception is the long held note: there a section staggers its changes on purpose, each player changing at a different moment so no join is heard. The audience sees the bows before it hears the notes.

7 A desk is a pair, not two players

Usually the inside player turns the page while the outside player keeps going, so plan the turn and lose a note rather than the place. Where the part divides, the outside player commonly takes the upper line, but the leader decides, so ask rather than assume. Anything you settle goes on the part, not in your heads.

