

Viola in the orchestra: the stand sheet

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

1 The middle is where the harmony lives

Much of the time you are filling out the chord, doubling, answering, binding the violins above to the cellos below. Value warmth over brilliance: the section wants a tone that sits inside the sound, not on top of it. Where you are doubling, find out whose line you are on and match it; a doubling that is nearly together is worse than none. Nobody in the audience could name your line, and without it the whole thing would sound thin.

2 You are usually the note that has to move

When the viola has the third of a chord, it has the one note that cannot sit where a tuner puts it, and the third falls to an inner part more readily than to an outer one. 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, and the fifth barely moves. Know which note you have and whether the chord is major or minor. It is the note a tuner can help you with least.

3 The alto clef has to be silent

Read it until you are not translating but simply seeing notes: the middle line is middle C, and the part climbs into treble clef when it goes high. Hesitation over the clef is attention taken from tuning and ensemble, which is where you need it.

4 Weight, not pressure

Thicker strings and a longer string length want a slower, more deliberate bow and the relaxed weight of the arm released into the string, rather than force squeezed out of the hand. The left hand reaches wider too, so settle a hand frame comfortable at that spacing rather than stretching note by note. Violas are not built to one standard size, because a body in true proportion to the tuning would be too large to hold under the chin. The viola next to you may be a different length from yours, and what suits it may not suit you.

5 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.

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

A part gives the notes and the composer's markings: slurs, staccato, accents, dynamics, pizzicato and arco. It does not usually give bow directions or fingerings. Settle your fingerings before the first rehearsal and keep them. Copy your principal's bowings in as soon as they are given. 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.

