

Cello in the orchestra: the stand sheet

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

1 You have two jobs and the music decides which

Much of the time you are laying the bass line with the double basses: match their length and weight and give the orchestra a floor to stand on. Then the writing lifts you up and you are the tenor voice, singing over the texture. Listen downward in one passage and upward in the next, and know which you are doing.

2 When you have the bass, you are the reference

A chord is tuned from its root upward, so when the cello carries the bass line the players above are measuring themselves against you rather than you against them. Put the note where you mean it and hold it there; if the bass moves, the whole chord moves with it. When the line lifts you into the middle of the chord instead, know which note you are holding before you decide where to place it.

3 Three clefs, and no stumbling between them

Bass clef most of the time, tenor for the upper-middle register, treble higher still, and a part can move between them inside a phrase. A cellist is expected to switch more readily than a violist, so read each until it is automatic. A hesitation at a clef change costs you the line, and it is entirely avoidable.

4 Weight, not grip

Tone comes from the weight of the whole arm, from the shoulder, through a relaxed hand into the string, and shifts are led by the arm with the hand frame intact. This matters most in thumb position: anchor the thumb by pouring arm weight onto it rather than squeezing, keep the hand arched, and use light to moderate pressure. Holding the string down by thumb strength alone tires you, pulls you out of tune and risks injury.

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.

