

Double bass in the orchestra: the stand sheet

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

1 You are the floor

The orchestra takes its harmony and much of its time from the bottom, and everyone above places their notes in relation to yours. A chord is tuned from its root upward, so when you have the root you are not adjusting to the chord: you are what it is measured from. Put the note where you mean it and hold it there.

2 The string speaks slowly, so start early

Thick strings take a moment to answer, especially low down. 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 Intonation is decided before the note sounds

The bass has the longest strings of any bowed instrument, so a semitone covers a long distance and you are shifting almost constantly. There is no room to play a note and then correct it. Hear the pitch clearly before you place the hand, use the natural harmonics along the string to check where you are, and move the arm economically rather than lunging.

4 Pizzicato is a craft of its own

Orchestral writing asks the bass to pluck far more often than the other strings, and orchestral pizzicato is not a jazz line: the aim is a clean, full, ringing note with a dry attack and no fingerboard buzz, drawn from the fleshy pad of the finger rather than snatched. Practise it as deliberately as you practise the bow, because in the orchestra it carries the bass line as surely as the bow does.

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.

