



THE ULTIMATE GUIDE

Playing Together

Chamber music, ensembles and the orchestra, in one pack

Everything from the first rehearsal of a duo to the back desk of a symphony orchestra: what the words mean, twelve chamber sheets, how a large group is run, how to play in tune, and what to listen to next.

Nobody learns to play with other people on their own.



Your photograph, or one from Wikimedia Commons

Print it, or take what you need

Every sheet stands on its own and prints on one side of A4. Print the whole pack for a folder, or pull out the two or three sheets your group needs this term.

ALSO ON THE SITE

Wall charts for [orchestral seating](#), [the orchestra through history](#) and [instrument ranges](#), printed A3 for the practice-room wall.

Contents

Four parts, twenty-one sheets. Part one settles the vocabulary; part two is a full course in chamber playing; part three is what changes once a group is too big to lead itself; part four is everything around the rehearsal. Read in order, or start wherever your group is stuck.

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Chamber music, ensembles & orchestra

Three words used loosely and often swapped by mistake. *Ensemble* is the umbrella word for any group. *Chamber music* is a way of playing — one player to each line, nobody in charge. An *orchestra* is a particular large ensemble, with several players sharing each line and a conductor to hold them together.

SIDE BY SIDE

	Chamber group	Ensemble	Orchestra
WHAT THE WORD MEANS	A way of playing, and the music written for it	Any group of musicians playing together — the general term	One named kind of large ensemble, arranged in sections
PLAYERS PER LINE	Exactly one. Your part is heard on its own	Either — depends which ensemble	Several share a line; strings often eight to sixteen a part
TYPICAL SIZE	2–9 players	2 to 100+	30–100+ players
WHO LEADS	Nobody. First violin or the group breathes the start together	Whoever the group appoints — leader, director or conductor	A conductor, with section leaders passing it on
HOW YOU KEEP TIME	By eye and ear — watch each other across the group	Varies with size	Watch the stick, follow your section leader
YOUR JOB	Carry your line. If you drop out, it is gone	Know which of the two rooms you are in	Blend in, match bowing and balance

CHAMBER GROUPS BY NUMBER

Duo	Two players. Violin and piano, or two guitars.
Trio	Three. A piano trio is violin, cello and piano.
Quartet	Four. String quartet: two violins, viola, cello.
Quintet	Five. Wind quintet adds horn to the four woodwinds.
Sextet	Six — often a string quartet plus two extra players.
Septet · Octet	Seven and eight. Usually mixed strings and winds.
Nonet	Nine. About the largest group still called chamber music.

ENSEMBLES YOU WILL MEET

String quartet	Chamber. The central group of the repertoire.
Brass band	Ensemble. Cornets, horns, trombones, tubas, percussion.
Choir	Ensemble. Many voices per part, directed not conducted-in-the-pit.
String orchestra	Orchestra. Strings only, several to each part.
Chamber orchestra	Orchestra — but small, 20–40 players, sometimes unconducted.
Symphony orchestra	Orchestra. Full strings, winds, brass, percussion, harp.
Big band	Ensemble. Saxes, brass, rhythm section; one player per part.

THE ONE TEST THAT DECIDES IT

Count the players on your line. One means chamber playing, whatever the group is called. More than one means orchestral playing, and your job becomes blending.

WHERE THEY OVERLAP

A chamber orchestra is both words at once: small enough to feel like chamber music, big enough to double the parts. Conductorless orchestras exist too.

WRITING FOR EACH

In chamber music every line is exposed, so give each player something worth playing. In orchestral writing you write for sections, and doubling is your colour.

Concert band & brass band

Most students play in one of these long before they sit in an orchestra. A *concert band* is woodwind, brass and percussion — an orchestra with the strings taken out and the clarinets promoted. A *brass band* is a fixed British line-up of brass and percussion only, written almost entirely in treble clef so a player can move between instruments.

SIDE BY SIDE

	Concert band	Brass band	Orchestra
WHAT IS IN IT	Woodwind, brass, percussion — no strings except an optional double bass	Cornets, horns, baritones, trombones, basses, percussion. No woodwind at all	Strings first, then woodwind, brass, percussion, harp
LINE-UP	Flexible — publishers write for what schools have	Fixed by tradition; the same twenty-five brass players everywhere	Fixed core, extras added by the piece
SIZE	30–70 players	Twenty-five brass plus two or three percussion	30–100+ players
PLAYERS PER PART	Several clarinets and flutes share a part; one or two on each brass part	Several cornets share a part; mostly one to a part elsewhere	Whole string sections share a part
CLEFS	Treble for most, bass clef for trombone, bassoon, euphonium, tuba	Treble throughout — even the tubas. Bass trombone is the one exception	Every clef — and clarinets, horns and trumpets written transposed, not at concert pitch

CONCERT BAND, FRONT TO BACK

Flutes · piccolo	Top line. Piccolo doubles it an octave up for brilliance.
Oboe · bassoon	Colour and character; one or two of each, often optional.
Clarinets 1-2-3	The heart of the band. Several to a part, like a violin section.
Bass clarinet	Joins the low line and softens the tubas.
Saxophones	Alto, tenor, baritone — the glue between woodwind and brass.
Trumpets · horns	Trumpets for melody and fanfare, horns for harmony and warmth.
Trombones	Chords, weight, and the slide effects nothing else can do.
Euph. · tuba	Euphonium sings a tenor tune; tuba is the bass line.
Percussion	Timpani plus a kit of three to six players.

BRASS BAND, THE STANDARD 25

Soprano cornet	One, in E flat. The highest voice in the band.
Cornets in B flat	Nine: solo (four), repiano, seconds, thirds.
Flugelhorn	One. Mellower than a cornet; sits between cornets and horns.
Tenor horns	Three in E flat — solo, first, second. The band's viola.
Baritones	Two in B flat. Lighter than a euphonium, and not the same thing.
Trombones	Two tenors in treble clef, one bass trombone in bass clef.
Euphoniums	Two. The band's tenor soloist.
Basses	Two E flat and two B flat. Written treble clef, sounding very low.
Percussion	Two or three players, kit and timpani.

WRITING FOR BAND

Treat the clarinets as your string section: they can sustain, divide and play quietly for a long time. Give the tune to something that can be heard over brass, and let the saxes join the two halves of the band together.

TRANSPOSING, IN PRACTICE

Nearly every part is transposed, so the written note is not the sounding note. Score at concert pitch, then transpose the parts — or write in your notation program and let it produce both.

SEATING & RANGES

Woodwind sit at the front, brass and percussion behind, with the low voices furthest back. Keep young brass under a written top G, and never write a page without rests — loud and high at once is what tires a section.

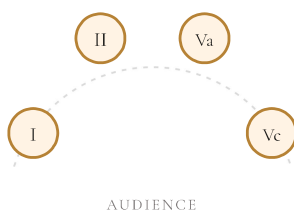
The groups

Chamber music means one player to a part, small enough to play without a conductor — from two people up to about nine. Beyond that somebody has to beat time and it becomes an ensemble.

THE STANDARD GROUPS

GROUP	WHO IS IN IT	WHERE TO START
Duo	Any instrument with piano; or two of the same	Sonatas, and almost every exam piece you have played.
String trio	Violin, viola, cello	Exposed — every line is heard. Mozart K. 563; arrangements.
Piano trio	Violin, cello, piano	Haydn trios are the friendliest way in.
String quartet	Two violins, viola, cello	The central repertoire. Early Haydn and early Mozart first.
Piano quartet / quintet	Strings plus piano	Schumann, Dvořák. The piano carries the harmony.
Wind quintet	Flute, oboe, clarinet, horn, bassoon	Five different colours, no blending — every entry shows.
Brass quintet	Two trumpets, horn, trombone, tuba	Arrangements of everything; loud, cheerful, portable.
Percussion ensemble	Three to six players, tuned and untuned	Counting is the whole game. Reich, Cage, arrangements.
Vocal consort	One or two voices per part, SATB	Renaissance madrigals — the original chamber music.

SITTING A QUARTET



First violin outside left, cello opposite — everyone should see every bow arm without turning their head.

HOW TO FIND A GROUP

Ask your teacher, your school music department, or a local music service. Violists, cellists and horn players are always wanted. If nothing exists, three friends and a photocopier is a group.

ONE TO A PART

In an orchestra a mistake hides inside sixteen violins. Here it does not, and that is the point: a term of quartet playing improves rhythm more than a year of solo practice.

NO CONDUCTOR

Tempo, dynamics, when to start and when to stop are agreed between you. Somebody usually leads a given passage, but leadership moves around with the melody.

Reading from a part

A part shows your line only. Everything you need to know about the other three is printed in shorthand — learn the shorthand and you stop getting lost.

MARKS YOU WILL FIND

MARK	WHAT IT MEANS	WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT
Bar numbers	Every bar, or every fifth, or at each system start.	If they are missing, pencil one at the start of every line before you play a note.
Rehearsal letters	A boxed A, B, C at structural points.	“From B” is quicker to find than “from bar 63”. Use them.
Multi-bar rest	One bar with a number over it — that many bars of silence.	Count them, and also listen for a landmark so you can recover if you lose count.
Cue notes	Small notes, someone else's line, printed before your entry.	Learn the sound of the cue, not the count. Write in who is playing it.
V. S.	<i>Volti subito</i> — turn the page quickly.	Plan the turn: pencil a bracket where your free hand starts, or photocopy one page.
Divisi / a2	Split into two parts, or both play the same line.	Rare with one player to a part — you meet it in string orchestra and choral music.
Tacet	You do not play in this movement at all.	Turn to the next movement before it starts, quietly.
D.C. / D.S. al Fine	Go back to the beginning, or to the sign, and play to <i>Fine</i> .	Mark the journey with arrows the first time you read it, or the group will split in two.

MARKING YOUR OWN PART

PENCIL ONLY

Parts are usually borrowed and always outlive you. Soft pencil, light marks, rub out what turned out to be wrong.

MARK WHAT YOU FORGET, NOT WHAT YOU KNOW

A part covered in reminders is unreadable. Circle the accidental you missed twice; leave the obvious alone.

WRITE IN THE OTHER PARTS

“with vla”, “after cello”, “melody here”. Knowing who you are with is worth more than any dynamic marking.

BREATHE AND BOW TOGETHER

Agreed bowings, breaths and page turns go in the part in rehearsal, not at the concert.

IF YOU GET LOST

Stop playing, keep looking at the music, find the next rehearsal letter or the next long note in your part, and come in there. Do not hunt for the exact bar while playing — one player quietly rejoining is invisible; one player guessing is not.

Starting, ending, breathing together

With no conductor, the group has to show itself the beat. It is done with breath and movement, and it is almost entirely decided in advance.

WHO LEADS WHAT

MOMENT	WHO SHOWS IT	HOW
The start	Whoever plays first, or the melody	A breath in, then a clear upbeat movement of the instrument on the beat before.
A new tempo	The player who owns the new material	The upbeat is taken at the new speed, not the old one.
After a pause	The player who ends the pause	Eye contact first, then breathe together. Never restart without looking up.
A ritardando	Usually the bass line	The lowest part decides how much slower; everybody follows the bass, not the tune.
The final chord	Agreed in rehearsal	One player lifts; everyone stops on the lift, not on a count.
Between movements	First violin, or the pianist	Settle, look round, wait for the room to be quiet, then breathe.

THREE HABITS WORTH BUILDING

- Breathe where the music breathes** — even on strings and percussion. A shared breath before an entry is the only signal every player understands.
- Look up at the ends of phrases**, not at the difficult bits. If you must read the difficult bar, look up in the bar before it.
- Move only where it helps** — a small, early, rhythmic movement of the instrument is a cue; swaying all the way through is noise.

COUNTING OUT LOUD

In rehearsal, count the empty bars aloud together at least once. It fixes tempo, subdivision and who arrives early — faster than any discussion about it.

SUBDIVIDING

In slow music, agree what you are feeling underneath — quavers or semiquavers. Two players subdividing differently will drift apart in four bars.

FOLLOWING, DELIBERATELY

When you have the accompaniment, place your note *with* the melody rather than trying to be exactly on your own beat. Somebody has to give way; it is whoever is not carrying the tune.

RUBATO IN A GROUP

Only one player can stretch a beat at a time, and everyone else must know it is coming. Mark it in the parts: *ten.*, an arrow, a comma.

How to run a rehearsal

A group with no plan plays the piece through four times and goes home. Sixty minutes, roughly like this, is worth three of those.

0 – 5 min	Tune, agree what you are working on today, and name the one bar that went wrong last time.
5 – 12 min	Play a whole movement without stopping, however bad. You are finding out where the problems are, not fixing them.
12 – 40 min	Two or three passages only. Slow, then in tempo, then once with the run-in before it. Stop when it works twice in a row.
40 – 50 min	The joins — starts, endings, tempo changes, the bar after each pause. These fail in concerts far more often than the hard notes.
50 – 58 min	Run the movement again, no stopping and no comments until the end.
58 – 60 min	Write down what to practise alone and what to start with next week. One line each.

HOW TO SAY THINGS

ASK, DON'T TELL

“Could we try it softer there?” gets a better result than “you're too loud”, and it is usually more accurate — the problem is generally balance, not one person.

NAME THE BAR

“The upbeat to 42”. Always say where you are starting *and* whether it is with or without the upbeat, then wait for pencils.

ONE PROBLEM AT A TIME

Tuning or rhythm or dynamic — not all three. Fix rhythm first; it is usually what made the other two sound wrong.

TRY IT, DON'T DEBATE IT

If two people disagree about a tempo, play it both ways once each and choose. Two minutes of playing settles what twenty minutes of talking will not.

WHAT WE FIXED TODAY

Balance, blend and tuning

Every dynamic in a part is relative to the other players. A *forte* accompaniment under a *forte* melody is still too loud — the marking tells you the character, and your ears tell you the volume.

KNOW WHICH JOB YOU HAVE, BAR BY BAR

ROLE	SOUND LIKE	TEST FOR IT
Melody	The thing a listener would hum. Slightly ahead in the ear, shaped freely.	If you cannot hear yourself over the others, say so.
Bass line	The foundation: tuning and tempo both come from here.	Everyone should be able to hear the bass at all times, even in a <i>piano</i> .
Harmony / inner parts	Warm, even, never on top. The colour, not the drawing.	If a listener notices your line, you are probably too loud.
Rhythmic figure	Crisp and quiet. Repeated quavers can be soft and still be felt.	Play it half as loud as feels right, then ask.
Counter-melody	A second voice answering the first — audible, but yielding at the tune's phrase ends.	Decide which of you owns each bar and mark it in.

TUNING IN A SMALL GROUP

Tune to one source. Piano if there is one; otherwise the oboe, or the cello's A. Not four separate tuning apps.

Tune from the top down. The A first, then the lower strings, then check octaves and fifths between players.

Chords, not notes. Hold the final chord of a phrase and adjust until it stops beating. The fifth and the third are where it goes wrong.

Re-tune after ten minutes. Instruments warm up and go sharp; wind more than strings.

The bass is right. When two players disagree, the lower part holds and the upper part moves.

BLEND

Match the attack. Notes starting together matters more than notes ending together — but rehearse both.

Match the length. One player's short quaver against another's long one sounds like a mistake, not a colour.

Match the vibrato or the lack of it. Agree it for sustained chords; wide vibrato under a tune muddies the harmony.

Piano players: lift the lid one notch. A fully raised lid buries a single string player. Balance from the room, not the keyboard.

Record one run. A phone at the far end of the room tells you more about balance in three minutes than an hour of guessing.

Your first rehearsal

Nobody expects you to play it well the first time. They do expect you to have the right part, a pencil, and some idea of how the piece goes.

BEFORE YOU GO

- ☐ Your part, printed, with your name on it
- ☐ Bar numbers pencilled at every line start
- ☐ Pencil and rubber — two pencils is better
- ☐ Listened to a recording once, following your part
- ☐ Practised the fast bars slowly, and the entries after long rests
- ☐ Music stand, if you were asked to bring one
- ☐ Tuner, spare strings, reeds, valve oil, mute
- ☐ Where it is, when it starts, and whose phone number

ON THE DAY

- ☐ Arrive ten minutes early and be warmed up before the start
- ☐ Tune before anyone asks you to
- ☐ Say what you play and how long you have been playing — then stop apologising
- ☐ Count aloud with the group at least once
- ☐ Ask for the bar number rather than guessing
- ☐ Silence while somebody is speaking; no noodling
- ☐ Write down what to practise before you pack up
- ☐ Agree the next date before anyone leaves the room

WORDS YOU WILL HEAR IN THE ROOM

From the top — from the beginning.

Letter B — the boxed rehearsal letter.

V. S. — turn the page quickly.

Give way — let the other part come through.

Tenuto — hold the note its full length, a little broader.

Upbeat to 42 — start on the beat before bar 42.

Tacet — you do not play in this movement.

Take it down — play it quieter.

Sub-divide — count in smaller units.

Second time bar — the different ending on the repeat.

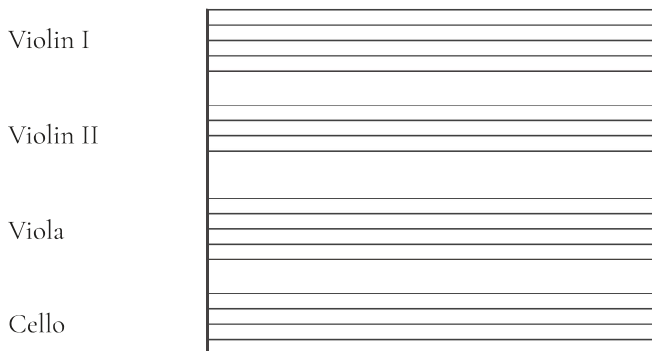
AND ONE THING TO REMEMBER

Chamber music is a conversation. The best players in a group are not the ones who play the most notes correctly — they are the ones the others can follow.

Reading the score behind your part

A part tells you what to play; only the score tells you why. Twenty minutes with a score, alone, will fix more entries than an hour of rehearsal.

HOW A CHAMBER SCORE IS LAID OUT



Highest at the top, lowest at the bottom, one system for the whole group — so a chord in the music is a vertical column on the page. With a piano in the group, the piano goes underneath everyone.

READ DOWN, NOT ACROSS

To hear a bar, read the column: what note is each player on, and what chord do the four of them spell? Reading across one line at a time tells you nothing about the harmony.

FIND THE TUNE, BAR BY BAR

Mark the melody in your score with a coloured pencil as it moves between the players. In good chamber music it moves constantly, and the marked line is the piece's shape.

FIVE THINGS TO DO TO A SCORE BEFORE THE NEXT REHEARSAL

- 1 **Number the bars** in the score to match the parts, and bracket the sections: A, B, development, return.
- 2 **Mark your entries after long rests** and write beside each one whose note you should be listening for.
- 3 **Circle every change of key and tempo**, then check what your line is doing at that moment — usually it is the thing that must not wobble.
- 4 **Bracket the loudest and quietest bars in the movement.** Everything else is graded between them; a page of *forte* markings does not mean six equal *fortes*.
- 5 **Sing another player's line** while playing your own, slowly. If you can do that, you will never lose your place in that passage.

WHERE TO GET SCORES

Most of the standard repertoire is old enough to be out of copyright, and public-domain score libraries have the full scores and parts free to download — check the terms where you live. Print the score two pages to a sheet and keep it in the case with your part.

Four textures

Almost every bar of chamber music is one of four things. Name the texture and you know instantly how loud to be, whether to lead or follow, and what to listen to.

MELODY AND ACCOMPANIMENT

One leads · three give way

One player has the tune; the rest supply harmony and pulse. The tune shapes the tempo, and the accompaniment places its notes with the tune rather than on its own beat. Listen for: the melody's phrase ends, where you should thin out rather than fill in.

DIALOGUE

Question and answer

A figure is passed between players, each answering the last. The rule is imitation: match the shape, length and volume of what you were handed, then hand it on. Listen for: how the previous player ended, and copy it exactly.

HOMOPHONY — ALL TOGETHER

Four parts, one rhythm

Chords moving in the same rhythm: chorale writing, and almost every ending. Nobody leads, so the attack and the length of each chord must be agreed. Listen for: the bass line, which decides the tuning, and the top line, which decides the shape.

COUNTERPOINT AND FUGATO

Everyone independent

Several equal lines at once, often entering in turn with the same subject. Play your own line as a melody, but drop a dynamic level whenever a new voice enters so the entry can be heard. Listen for: entries, and the moment your line becomes accompaniment again.

TRY IT ON THE PIECE YOU ARE PLAYING

Take one page of the score and write a texture beside every four bars. Then check whether you are playing each of those four bars the way the texture asks.

IF YOU ARE UNSURE

Ask which line a listener would notice. If none stands out, it is homophony; if two do, it is counterpoint.

TEXTURES CHANGE FAST

Haydn will change texture four times in eight bars. That is what makes the music sound like conversation.

FOR COMPOSERS

Write in one texture for too long and the piece goes flat. Change texture at every structural point.

Phrasing and articulation together

Four players who each phrase sensibly on their own still sound untidy. The work is agreeing where a phrase goes to, and making the same note sound the same length in four different hands.

DECIDING A PHRASE, AS A GROUP

- 1 **Find the high point.** One note in the phrase is the destination — usually the highest, or the one on the strongest harmony. Everybody marks the same bar.
- 2 **Decide the direction.** Growing towards it, then easing away. Write an arrow in every part, not just the one with the tune.
- 3 **Decide where it ends.** Does the phrase stop, or run on into the next one? Mark a comma or a tie-over, and agree whether anybody breathes.
- 4 **Grade the repeats.** When a phrase comes back, it must be different — quieter, warmer, more urgent. Choose which, and write the word in.

THE SAME MARKING ON DIFFERENT INSTRUMENTS

MARKING	STRINGS	WIND	PIANO
Staccato	Short stroke, bow stays on the string	Light tongue, note kept warm	Finger lifts, wrist stays quiet
Slur	One bow, no re-articulation	One breath, first note tongued only	Legato fingers, no pedal blur
Accent	Faster bow at the start, not more pressure	Firmer air, not a harder tongue	Weight from the arm, released at once
Tenuto	Full bow length, sustained to the next note	Full air to the end of the note	Held to its full value, then lifted
Sforzando	Attack then immediate release	A push of air that decays	One loud note inside a soft bar

The words mean the same thing musically and something different physically. That is why “play it shorter” often fails: agree how *short* sounds by all playing one note together and copying whoever is nearest right.

MATCH THE NOTE BEFORE THE NOTE

Ensemble problems live in the note before an entry, not the entry itself. Rehearse the approach, not the arrival.

COPY, DO NOT COMPROMISE

When two players articulate differently, pick one version and both play it. A middle way sounds like neither.

Six weeks to a concert

Groups run out of time in the last fortnight because the first four weeks had no deadline in them. Give each week one job — week six is the one furthest from the concert.

Week 6	Read the whole programme through. Decide the order, time it, and cut anything you cannot learn. Everyone takes a score home.
Week 5	Slow work on the hardest passages, in tempo by the end of the rehearsal. Fix bowings, breaths and page turns now, in pencil, in every part.
Week 4	Structure: tempos for each movement, the transitions between them, and how the piece is graded from quietest to loudest.
Week 3	First full run of each piece with no stopping. Record it and listen once, together, without commenting until the end.
Week 2	Fix what the recording showed — usually balance and the joins. Practise starting from six different places in each movement.
Week 1	Play it to somebody. A parent, a teacher, another group; anyone in a chair changes how it feels. Then leave it alone.
The day	Warm up, tune in the hall, play one slow passage and one loud chord to hear the room, and stop. Do not rehearse the hard bit an hour before.

TWO THINGS TO SORT EARLY

TIMING THE PROGRAMME

Add up the movements, then add two minutes for tuning, entrances and applause between pieces. Most groups over-run because of the gaps, not the music.

WHO SPEAKS

If you are introducing the pieces, decide who, and write two sentences per piece. What it is, when it was written, and one thing to listen for.

On stage

An audience decides how good a group is in the first ten seconds, before a note is played. All of it can be rehearsed, and takes about five minutes to fix.

IN ORDER

MOMENT	WHAT TO DO
Walking on	In the order you sit, unhurried, instruments up. Agree who leads on before you go anywhere near the stage.
The bow	Together, on a look from whoever is on the outside. One bow for the group, not four separate ones.
Sitting and settling	Stands at the right height already; check you can see the others. A short silence here is worth a lot.
Tuning	Quiet and brief. If it is badly out, tune properly – the audience will forgive ten seconds, not a sour first chord.
Before the first note	Wait for the room to be still. Look round the group, breathe together, then start.
Between movements	Stay in character. Retune only if you must, and briefly. The audience follows your body language about whether it has ended.
The end	Hold the silence a moment before you move. Lower instruments together, then stand and bow together.
If it goes wrong	No faces, no apology, no glancing at the guilty party. Get back in at the next landmark and keep the tempo – nobody in the hall knows the piece as well as you do.

NERVES

Slow breathing out, not in. Practise the first four bars of each piece so often that they need no thought – nerves take the first minute and give it back after.

REHEARSE THE WALKING ON

Once, properly: door to chairs to bow to first note. It removes almost all of the shuffling that makes a group look unprepared.

WORDS YOU WILL MEET ON A PROGRAMME

Op. – opus: the composer's numbering of published works.

attacca – go straight into the next movement.

arr. – arranged for these instruments by someone else.

No. – the piece's place within one opus.

Movements listed with tempos – the running order and character of each.

K. / D. / B. – catalogue numbers for Mozart, Schubert, Dvořák.

Writing for your own group

You have the rarest thing a composer can have: players who will read what you write and tell you the truth. Plan a short piece here first — two or three minutes is plenty.

WHO IS PLAYING IT

Name each player and the lowest and highest note they are happy playing.

KEY, TIME SIGNATURE, TEMPO

Choose a key that suits the instruments — flat keys for wind, open-string keys for strings.

THE IDEA — FOUR TO EIGHT BARS YOU COULD SING

Describe it in words if you cannot write it here yet: rising or falling, smooth or jumpy, long notes or short.

PLAN THE TEXTURES — FILL IN WHAT HAPPENS WHERE

SECTION	WHO HAS THE TUNE	TEXTURE	BARS
Opening			
Answer / second idea			
Middle — new key			
Return			
Ending			

FIVE RULES FOR A FIRST CHAMBER PIECE

Give everyone the tune once. Leave rests — silence is easier to play than notes. Keep the bass line simple and moving. Do not write four busy parts at once. End where the harmony ends, not four bars later.

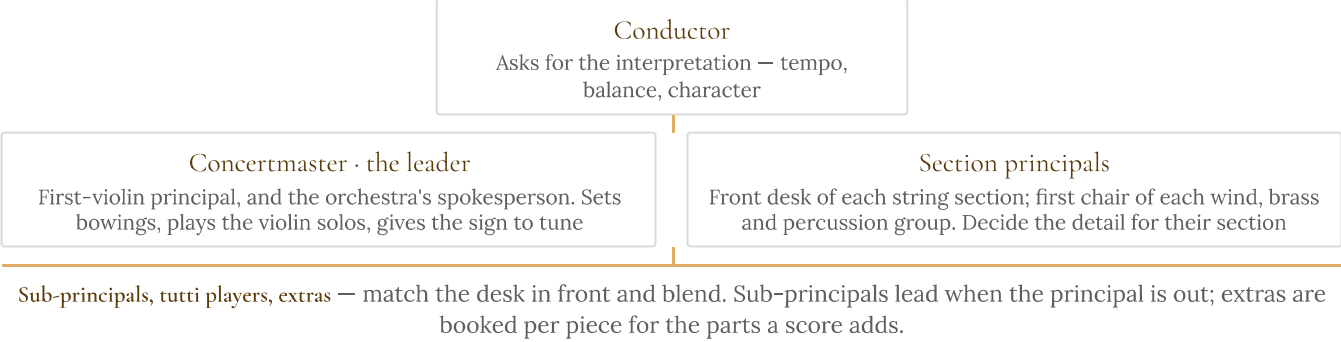
GETTING IT READ

Write out clean parts with bar numbers, bring a score for yourself, and set a tempo you can actually count. Ask for one thing after the read-through: “what is awkward to play?” Then rewrite that, and only that.

Who's who in an orchestra

An orchestra runs on a chain of responsibility. The conductor asks; the leader and principals turn it into bowings, breaths and lengths; the section makes it happen without discussion. Knowing where you sit in that chain is most of orchestral playing.

HOW A DECISION TRAVELS



ON THE PLATFORM

Concertmaster	Leads the first violins and the orchestra: marks every string bowing, plays the solos, speaks for the players.
Principal second violin	Runs a section whose job is rhythm and inner harmony, not tune. A different skill, not a lesser one.
String principals	Viola, cello and bass: set bowing and sound for their section, and take its solos.
Principal winds	One player per part, so every wind player is effectively a soloist. The oboe gives the tuning A.
Principal horn · trumpet · trombone	First chair of each brass group; sets articulation and volume for the rest to match.
Timpanist	A role of its own, not part of the percussion rota — tunes by ear, mid-piece, in public.
Section players	Two to a stand; the inside player turns the pages.

OFF THE PLATFORM

Music director	The chief conductor: plans seasons, shapes the sound over years. Guests take one programme.
Librarian	Sources parts, copies in the bowings, gets the right edition on every stand.
Orchestra manager	Schedules rehearsals, books extras, runs the day.
Stage manager	Chairs, stands, risers, percussion, lighting — the platform set for each piece.
Artistic planning	Chooses repertoire and soloists, years ahead.
Composer	Delivers a legible score <i>and</i> checked parts. Late or messy parts cost rehearsal time you will never get back.

GETTING IN

- 1 · Youth orchestra.** Where you learn to count, watch and blend. Nothing replaces the hours.
- 2 · Study.** Conservatorium or university, plus orchestral training programmes.
- 3 · Audition.** A set list of orchestral excerpts and a concerto movement, often played behind a screen so the panel cannot see who is playing.
- 4 · Trial, then a seat.** Weeks or months in the section before the job is confirmed. Most players start on the casual list, booked concert by concert — that is how you become known.

READING THE STAGE

The player nearest the conductor at the front of each group is the principal. Unsure who to follow? Follow the stand in front of you.

WHAT EARNS RESPECT

Arriving with the part learnt, pencil bowings copied, entries counted and the page turns planned. Not volume, not solos.

IN A SCHOOL ORCHESTRA

The same chain, fewer people: your leader sets bowings, your section leader sets the sound, and the librarian's job is probably yours.

What conductors actually do

Beating time is the smallest part of it. Most of the job happens before the concert; on the night it is breathing, listening and warning.

The right hand keeps time

Beat pattern, tempo, subdivision, the pulse everyone locks to. It stays clear and much the same size all evening.

The left hand shapes

Dynamics, cues, phrasing, holds, cut-offs. Palm down for quieter, palm up for more. It stays still when it has nothing to say.

The eyes do the rest

A cue is a look a bar early, then a nod on the beat — how a conductor asks for something without stopping.

TEMPO WORDS A CONDUCTOR WORKS IN

WORD	ROUGHLY	BEAT FEELS	WHAT THE CONDUCTOR CHANGES
Largo	40–60 bpm	Subdivided — halves shown	Beats each half so long notes stay together.
Andante	76–108	One beat per crotchet	A plain pattern; the hand travels, it does not jab.
Allegro	120–156	Crisp, small pattern	Shrinks the beat so the ictus stays sharp.
Presto	168–200	Two per bar, or one	Beats two in four-time, one-in-a-bar in fast triple time.
Rubato	flexible	Stretched, then repaid	Leads with the eyes and breathes; the pattern loosens.
Fermata	held	Suspended	Stops the hand still, then gives a clear cut-off or a fresh preparation.

HOW A REHEARSAL RUNS

- Tune.** Oboe gives A; woodwind, brass, then strings. Nothing starts until it is done.
- Play it through.** The whole movement without stopping, so everyone hears the shape and the conductor hears the problems.
- Work in sections.** "From letter C, strings only." Slow tempo, one problem at a time.
- Put it back together.** Run the passage in context — from a bar before the fix, so the join is rehearsed too.
- Finish with a run.** End on a play-through, never on a correction, so the last memory is the music.

BEFORE ANYONE PLAYS A NOTE

Study the score

Every part, not just the tune: who has the line, where the difficulties are, which bars need extra time.

Decide the interpretation

Tempos, balance, how long each fermata lasts, which repeat is taken. The orchestra needs one answer.

Plan the rehearsal minutes

Time is the scarcest thing. Eight hard bars get twenty minutes; the easy page is played once.

ALWAYS BE A BEAT AHEAD

Everything is shown before it happens. A cue or a hold arrives late if it lands on the beat rather than before it.

SAY LESS, SHOW MORE

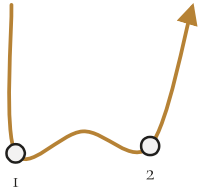
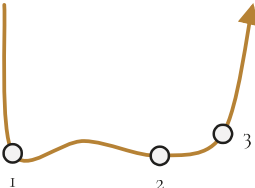
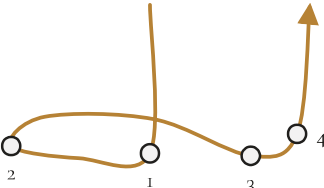
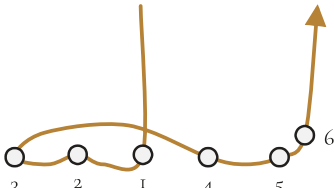
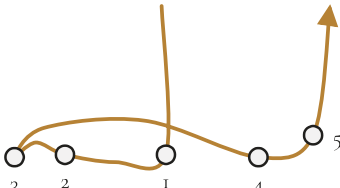
Talking stops the music. The best instruction is a clearer gesture next time, and a bar number rather than a speech.

THE PLAYERS ARE THE SOUND

A conductor makes no noise. The job is making eighty people agree on tempo, balance and character.

Conducting patterns

One shape for each way of counting a bar. Beat one always falls straight down; the last beat always travels up, ready to fall again. The numbered dots mark the *ictus* — the instant the beat lands. Drawn as the conductor sees them.

2 4 ALSO 2/2 · 2/8 6/8 quick  2 BEATS PER BAR	3 4 ALSO 3/8 · 3/2 9/8 quick  3 BEATS PER BAR	4 4 COMMON TIME 4/2 1 2/8 quick  4 BEATS PER BAR
6 8 ALSO 6/4 slow 3/4 broad  6 BEATS PER BAR	I in one FOR FAST TEMPOS 3/4 · 6/8 3/8  1 BEAT PER BAR	5 4 GROUPED 3 + 2 5/8 · 5/2 mirror for 2 + 3  5 BEATS PER BAR

Conduct *in one* when the tempo is too fast to show every beat — the whole bar becomes a single down-and-up. Odd metres are conducted in groups: five as 3 + 2 or 2 + 3, seven as 3 + 2 + 2.

ANATOMY OF A BEAT

PREPARATION

One beat in tempo before the sound, in the size and mood you want. Breathe with it.

ICTUS

Where the hand stops falling. Always on the same plane, about waist height.

REBOUND

The lift away. Its speed tells the players how fast the next beat is coming.

CUT-OFF

A small closed loop on the last beat, prepared as carefully as the first.

MAKING THE GESTURE SPEAK

SIZE IS DYNAMIC

Small and close for *piano*, wide and away from the body for *forte*. Grow the pattern through a crescendo.

SHAPE IS ARTICULATION

Rounded corners and unbroken motion for legato; sharp angles and a clear stop at each ictus for staccato and marcato.

THE LEFT HAND IS FREE

It is not a second metronome. Use it for cues, held notes, balance and shaping — and look up.

Practise in front of a mirror with a metronome: eight bars of each pattern, keeping every ictus on the same level, then the same eight bars twice as small and twice as large.

Tuning & intonation

Tuning is the minute before you play. Intonation is every minute after it. A group that tunes beautifully and then stops listening will still play out of tune — so the useful skill is not setting the A, it is hearing the chord you are inside and moving your note towards it.

TUNING AN ENSEMBLE, IN ORDER

- 1 **One source, and only one.** The oboe's A in an orchestra; the piano if there is one; a tuba or principal clarinet in a band. A tuner is a checking tool, not the source.
- 2 **Winds before strings.** Winds warm up sharp, so they need a minute of playing first; strings can be adjusted in seconds at the peg.
- 3 **Down from the top.** A first, then each player finds their other strings by pure fifths — or their other notes by long tones.
- 4 **Then tune to each other.** Two players hold an octave, then a fifth. Adjust until the sound stops wobbling.
- 5 **Hold a full chord.** The real test. Bass note first, then the fifth, then the third on top.
- 6 **Check again after ten minutes.** The room warms, the instruments move. One quiet A between movements is normal, not an admission of failure.

BEATS — THE SOUND OF BEING OUT



Two notes a little apart make the sound pulse. The further apart, the faster the pulse. Move your note either way and listen: if the pulsing slows you are going the right way, and when it disappears you are in tune. Never guess the direction — test it.

WHICH NOTE BENDS, AND HOW FAR

Octaves	Dead exact. Any wobble at all is audible.
Fifths	Pure and wide open. Tune these before anything else.
Major thirds	A shade low in a sustained chord — the ear wants it narrow.
Minor thirds	A shade high. The opposite instinct.
Leading notes	Lean upward when they are pulling to the tonic.
In a unison	Nobody wins by force. Both players move half the distance.

WHY IT DRIFTS

	Goes sharp	Goes flat
WINDS	Warm instrument, warm room, playing loud, blowing hard when tired	Cold start, playing very softly, low breath support
STRINGS	Squeezing the left hand, playing high up the string, hot lights	New strings settling, cold room, heavy bow pressure
EVERYONE	Excitement. Groups run sharp and fast under pressure	Long rests. Come back in listening, not confident

FIXING IT IN THE ROOM

Tune down to the bass. The lowest sounding part holds its note; the upper parts move to it. Harmony is built from the bottom.

Stop and hold. Freeze on the chord that went wrong and sustain it — you cannot fix intonation at speed.

Name the interval. Knowing you are the third of the chord tells you which way to move.

HOW CLOSE IS CLOSE ENOUGH

Concert pitch is A = 440 Hz, though many orchestras tune higher, to 442. A semitone divides into 100 cents: five out passes unnoticed, ten is heard on a held chord, twenty sounds wrong. Aim for a sound with no pulse, not a number on a screen.

PRACTISING IT ALONE

Play long tones against a drone on the tonic and hold each degree of the scale until the beating stops. Then sing the note before you play it. Tuners train your eyes; drones train your ears.

COMPOSERS, NOTE

Exposed slow unisons, high thirds and quiet held chords are the hardest things to play in tune. Ask for them because you want them, not by accident — and give young players octaves and fifths where you can.

Bowing, divisi & string section marks

A string section is sixteen people trying to sound like one instrument, and these marks are how that is arranged. Composers get two things wrong more than anything: chords a section cannot split, and colour changes with no time to make them.

BOW DIRECTION

	Down-bow	Frog to tip. Naturally heavy at the start — used for strong beats and firm attacks.
	Up-bow	Tip to frog. Lighter at the start — used for upbeats and gentle entries.
	Slur	All the notes under it in one bow. This is the composer's main bowing instruction.
	Hooked bowing	Slur with dots: several notes in one bow, each stopped. Keeps the section together in dotted rhythms.
	Retake · lift	A comma above the stave: lift the bow and start again in the same direction.
	Louré · portato	Slur with lines: one bow, notes gently separated but not stopped.

WHY THE SECTION BOWS ALIKE

Sixteen bows moving the same way look like one and sound like one. The concertmaster or principal decides the bowings, the librarian copies them into every part, and every player pencils in what is missing before the first rehearsal.

The old rule still holds: **down-bow on the strong beat, up-bow on the upbeat**. Where a passage will not come out that way, players hook two notes or take an extra bow to get back in step.

A composer writes slurs for phrasing; players may change them for practicality. That is normal, not a rejection of your phrasing.

DIVISI — SPLITTING THE SECTION

div.	Split the section between the notes. Two notes, two halves.
unis.	Back together on one line. Always write it — divisi runs on until cancelled.
div. a 3	Three ways. Fine in a big section, thin in a school one.
div. by desk	Stand 1 top, stand 2 bottom, alternating. Even sound across the stage.
div. at the desk	Outside player top, inside player bottom — the usual default.
non div.	Play it as a double stop — every player takes both notes.
solì · tutti	Only the named players — the front desks unless you say otherwise — then everyone again.

Say which you mean. Two notes on a stave with nothing written is ambiguous — double stop or divisi? Write *div.* or *non div.* every time.

COLOUR INSTRUCTIONS

pizz. · arco	Plucked, then bowed again. Allow at least a bar to change back.
con sord. · senza	Mute on, mute off. Needs two or three bars of rest, not a quaver.
sul pont.	Bow near the bridge — glassy, thin, metallic.
sul tasto	Bow over the fingerboard — soft, hollow, no edge.
col legno	With the wood of the bow. Dry and percussive; use sparingly.
trem.	Fast repeated bows. Measured if you want a rhythm, unmeasured for shimmer.
harmonics	Circle for natural, diamond note for artificial. Quiet and pure; leave room.
spicc. · martelé	Bounced off the string, or bitten and stopped. Both are short — say which.

SECTION SIZES

A full orchestra runs roughly 16 first violins, 14 seconds, 12 violas, 10 cellos, 8 basses. Each divisi halves the weight of the line, so a three-way split of the seconds leaves under five players on each note.

GIVE CHANGE SOME TIME

Mutes, pizzicato and a move to another string all take physical seconds. Write the change during a rest, or in a long note, and mark it early rather than exactly where it starts.

BEFORE YOU SEND THE PARTS

Check every divisi is cancelled, every pizz. has an arco, every mute comes off, and no chord asks for more notes than a player has fingers or strings.

Ensemble etiquette & rehearsal words

What happens in the room, and the words used to run it. None of this is written in the music, and all of it is expected from the first rehearsal.

Before you sit down

- Arrive early enough to be tuned and ready at the start time, not arriving at it.
- Bring your own pencil, and a rubber. Every rehearsal changes something.
- Have the part practised. Rehearsal is for playing together, not learning notes.
- Phone off and in the case, not face-down on the stand.

While the music runs

- Silence the moment the conductor stops — instrument down, pencil up.
- Never play alone in a pause. Not a scale, not the tricky bar.
- Lost? Stop, count, and come back in at the next rehearsal letter.
- Mark changes in pencil straight away; you will not remember them next week.

Playing in a section

- Match the leader — bowing, articulation, vibrato and volume all follow them.
- Listen down, not across: tune to the bass line, not to the person beside you.
- Outside player turns the page; keep playing while they do.
- Blend rather than lead. If you can hear yourself clearly, you are probably too loud.

WORDS YOU WILL HEAR IN THE ROOM

From letter B	Start at rehearsal letter B — the boxed letters through the part.	Give me an A	The oboe or leader sounds concert A for tuning.
Bar 41, please	Start on the first beat of that bar, not after it.	Watch the stick	Look up — you are following your part instead of the beat.
Take it from the top	From the very beginning of the piece.	Cut-off	The gesture that ends a held note. Everyone stops exactly together.
Tutti	Everyone plays. The opposite of a solo or a divisi line.	Subito	Suddenly — subito piano means drop at once, not fade.
Divisi (div.)	The section splits into two parts; unis. means back together.	Balance	Who should be heard. Being asked for balance means play under someone.
A due (a2)	Both players on that stave play the same line.	Mark it in	Write the change into your part, in pencil, now.
Pick-up / anacrusis	The beat or two before bar one. Count it in.	Once more, in time	The notes were right; the tempo or ensemble was not.
Sul ponticello	Strings: bow near the bridge for a glassy, brittle sound.	Bell up	Brass: raise the instrument so the sound projects over the band.

APPLAUSE AND PLATFORM

Walk on together, stand when the leader stands, sit when they sit. Tune quietly. Do not applaud yourself — acknowledge the conductor instead.

LOOKING AFTER THE PART

Borrowed music is returned unmarked in pen and unfolded. Rub out your pencil marks at the end of the run unless asked to leave them.

IF YOU ARE THE COMPOSER

Speak through the conductor, never to a player mid-rehearsal. Bring clean parts with bar numbers and rehearsal letters — and thank the section afterwards.

Chamber & orchestral listening list

Twenty-four works in three steps, with one thing to listen for in each. Tick them off and write what you heard in the Listening Log. Most of these have free scores online — follow with the score open and you will hear twice as much.

CHAMBER · START HERE

- ☐ Haydn — Quartet Op. 76 No. 3, ii A hymn tune passed to each player in turn.
- ☐ Mozart — Eine kleine Nachtmusik, i How little material a whole movement needs.
- ☐ Schubert — 'Trout' Quintet, iv One tune, six variations. Name what changes.
- ☐ Mozart — Clarinet Quintet, ii One wind instrument balanced against four strings.

CHAMBER · NEXT

- ☐ Beethoven — Quartet Op. 18 No. 1, i A six-note figure that never leaves the room.
- ☐ Mendelssohn — Octet, i Eight strings written like an orchestra, by a sixteen-year-old.
- ☐ Schubert — Quartettsatz in C minor Tremolo as tension, from the first bar.
- ☐ Dvořák — 'American' Quartet, i Pentatonic tunes; the viola opens.

CHAMBER · GOING DEEPER

- ☐ Beethoven — Quartet Op. 131 Seven movements without a break. Give it time.
- ☐ Schubert — String Quintet in C, ii Two cellos, and fifteen minutes that barely move.
- ☐ Ravel — String Quartet, ii Pizzicato and cross-rhythm used as structure.
- ☐ Bartók — Quartet No. 4 Arch form, and every string effect at once.

ORCHESTRAL · START HERE

- ☐ Haydn — Symphony No. 94, ii The classical orchestra at its clearest, plus one joke.
- ☐ Grieg — 'Morning' from Peer Gynt One tune handed round the woodwind.
- ☐ Dvořák — Symphony No. 9, ii A cor anglais solo over almost nothing.
- ☐ Tchaikovsky — Nutcracker Suite Celesta, bass clarinet and harp used as characters.

ORCHESTRAL · NEXT

- ☐ Beethoven — Symphony No. 5, i Four notes, an entire movement. Track them.
- ☐ Mendelssohn — The Hebrides Sea and weather made from string figures.
- ☐ Berlioz — Symphonie fantastique, iv The orchestra enlarged, and used theatrically.
- ☐ Rimsky-Korsakov — Scheherazade, i A textbook of orchestration; the violin solo is a character.

ORCHESTRAL · GOING DEEPER

- ☐ Brahms — Symphony No. 4, iv Thirty variations over an eight-bar bass. Count them.
- ☐ Mahler — Symphony No. 1, iii A double-bass solo of a nursery tune, in the minor.
- ☐ Debussy — La Mer Orchestration without melody in the usual sense.
- ☐ Stravinsky — The Rite of Spring A bassoon at the top of its range; rhythm as the subject.

LISTEN THREE TIMES

First for the shape — where it changes. Second for the texture — who has the tune and who is accompanying. Third for one detail you can name and steal.

FIND THE SCORE

Most of this was published long enough ago that the score is free online; IMSLP is the usual place. The twentieth-century works may not be. A recording carries its own separate copyright, so borrow those from a library or a streaming service.

WRITE IT DOWN

One line per work in the Listening Log: the ensemble, what you noticed, and one idea to try in your own writing. A list you never wrote about is a list you will not remember.