

Section Playing for Bassoonists

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While bassoonists often have ample instruction on audition preparation, it is more difficult to learn the skills required to play in orchestra. This document outlines my principles of how to be a great section player and is intended to help prepare bassoonists for freelance work, section rounds in auditions, and the tenure process.

Great section players are **easy to play with** and **easy to get along with**:

- *Timing*: Develop a strong sense of pulse through creative metronome practice AND watch and listen to those around you.
- *Pitch*: Practice long tones and repertoire with a tuner/drone to create a solid pitch foundation AND be flexible enough to adjust to your colleagues' pitch.
- *Preparation*: Listen to the repertoire with your part and a score several times. Write in cues, who you are playing with, and indications of when you are playing the third of a chord.
- *Attitude*: Be kind and professional, and respect the hierarchy of the section and orchestra.
- *Etiquette*: Know and apply the rules of orchestral etiquette even if those around you do not.

The above principles apply no matter what position you are playing. However, there are significant differences between playing Principal Bassoon and Second Bassoon:

	PRINCIPAL	SECOND
Timing	You are simultaneously a leader and a follower: you must respond to other principals to play with them but also confidently lead your section. Keep a close eye on Principal Flute and Oboe, as well as the Concertmaster. The conductor may or may not be helpful.	Follow the Principal whenever you are playing together. Be especially careful of early entrances; if you're unsure, it's usually better to err on the later side. If you have an independent bass line with strings, it can help to watch Principal Bass.
Pitch	Listen down to the lowest voice in the section. If it is necessary to tune something during the rehearsal break, start by tuning the root, then 5 th , then 3 rd , then 7 th . Play the tuning A quickly so the rest of section can tune.	In many cases, you are the foundation of the woodwind section; play loud enough that others can hear you. Try to use the same fingerings as the Principal when playing in unison (eg. short C# vs. claw). Wait until the Principal plays the tuning A before joining.
Balance	You should usually have the most prominent sound in the section, but lead in a way that invites blend. When playing with other wind principals, strongly support their sound without overpowering.	In unison with the Principal, you should be softer. In octaves or other harmony, you should be relatively equal, but remember that lower notes are louder on the bassoon, so you may feel like you have to play softer to match the Principal. For all the low quiet playing, mute fingerings are your friend.

	PRINCIPAL	SECOND
Vibrato	<p><i>Solos:</i> as much as you want</p> <p><i>Melodies with other woodwinds:</i> match them</p> <p><i>With clarinet or horn:</i> minimal/none</p> <p><i>With 2nd Bassoon in section playing:</i> yes on imperfect intervals (3rds, 6ths), no on perfect intervals (unisons, 4ths, 5ths, octaves)</p> <p><i>Tutti orchestra:</i> minimal/none</p>	<p><i>With 1st Bassoon:</i> yes on imperfect intervals, no on perfect intervals</p> <p><i>As bass voice:</i> minimal/none</p> <p><i>In general:</i> fewer opportunities for vibrato than Principal; default should be minimal/none</p>
Physical communication	<p>Movement helps your section know exactly when to play, but it is rarely necessary to make big gestures—you want to be clear to your section without being distracting to the Principal Clarinet or others. Remember that your bell is easily visible to your section, especially front-to-back motion. It also helps to stay still when you are not trying to communicate.</p>	<p>In general, movement is distracting. Even unintentional motion can read as a cue and make the Principal feel out of control. Be careful that breaths are quiet. Make sure your chair is even with or slightly behind the Principal chair so they can effectively communicate with you. The only time it is appropriate to cue is when you are leading 3rd bsn/contra in something that 1st Bassoon does not play.</p>
Verbal communication	<p>It's your job to talk about issues when they arise, but only talk when absolutely necessary: i.e., if something goes wrong more than once or if you know you won't rehearse it again. Don't point to something in anyone else's part.</p>	<p>If you have a question about your part, ask your Principal, who can then relay the question to the conductor. (If it is a note question, it is generally better to figure it out on your own by looking at the score, or wait until the break to get the conductor involved.)</p>

Disclaimer: These are the principles that have led to success in my own career. That said, there is no single path to success, and others may have different ideas about the guidelines discussed here.

To practice these concepts, you will need real-time feedback, mostly in an orchestral context:

- *Attend a school or festival where you know you will not be the strongest player.* The best way to improve is to surround yourself with people who are more experienced than you. Learn by carefully listening and watching, and ask for feedback from your peers.
- *Ask your teacher if you can read through orchestral parts together during lessons.* Trade off who plays Principal. Duet excerpts are a great place to start, but it's also worth reading through entire symphonies, especially those by Brahms and Beethoven.
- *When freelancing or subbing in a professional orchestra, carefully ask for feedback.* It's appropriate to ask for feedback from members of an orchestra you're subbing with, but remember that it's not their job to teach you anything. Don't ask too many questions or press if they don't have anything to tell you. You can say "Please let me know if you'd like me to change anything" or "Is everything feeling comfortable?"
- *Play chamber music.* Chamber music is a great opportunity to practice physical and verbal communication, as well as fundamentals of timing and pitch.