

Becoming a Team Player

By **Jeanne Baxtresser**

Extracts from an article in *Instrumentalist*—September 1988

Making music is one of the most social of all activities. As with any communal activity, behavior has evolved over many centuries to a point where we have established rules of etiquette. We observe these rules of behavior out of respect for ourselves, for our colleagues, and for the music itself.

In thinking about this article I realized that I had a tremendous resource surrounding me every day, namely, my colleagues in the New York Philharmonic. I spoke to many of them, and they graciously gave me personal comments on their feelings on learning to be a good ensemble player and a good colleague.

Being a good ensemble player is, in a way, an extension of good manners. One could even call good ensemble playing a combination of musical manners and musical intelligence. As we play we should always be questioning the relationship of our own individual part – be it a viola part, first clarinet, or second trombone – to the overall musical picture. A player must develop a sixth sense of being able to play the music in front of him as it relates to what the rest of the ensemble is playing. If we could somehow slip into the brain of a good ensemble player and slow it down to see the processes that occur, some of the most important thoughts might be as follows:

Am I carrying thematic material? If so, project the line so it can easily be heard.

Am I playing the accompaniment to thematic material? If so, beware of playing long notes too loudly, as they project much more easily than moving lines. Also, don't use an intrusive vibrato (a vibrato that is too wide, too fast, or generally too apparent) on accompanying notes.

Can I make it easier for a colleague by altering my volume or my pitch? Be aware of difficulties peculiar to each instrument, and of the dynamic limitations of a certain instrument. Don't overpower just because you can! Philip Smith, Co-Principal Trumpet of the Philharmonic, suggests, "Play duos with your colleagues in the section. Practice octaves and intervals so you can begin to have a real sense of pitch with each other. Also, in regards to intonation, be cooperative." Mindy Kaufman, piccolo player of the Philharmonic, says, "Be flexible. Even if you think you're right, be willing to assume an intonation problem is your fault."

Is this a place in the music where a blend is the sound I want to achieve? Stanley Drucker, Principal Clarinet of the Philharmonic, once sat to my right in a Mozart piano concerto (there was no second flute part). At the first rehearsal he said to me, "I'm going to be your second flute." He absolutely was. The clarinet sound blended so beautifully I marveled at the versatility of his tonal control.

In attacks and releases, follow the leading line. Don't be one of those players who has to be first in and last out, just so you can revel in the glory of your own gorgeous sound! Work hard to unify attacks and releases with the people around you. Generally speaking, harmony notes should not be heard first in an attack or last in a release. Also, carefully match lengths of notes with your colleagues to make sure that your staccato or legato notes match those around you.

Be prepared. Know your part from the beginning of the first rehearsal. Phil Smith again: "Keep your playing as consistent as you can. Do this out of respect for your colleagues, as it makes it easier for them to work with somebody whose playing doesn't change from day to day." Leonard Hindell, a member of the bassoon section, says, "There is a trust and expectation that the conductor has for orchestral members. Colleagues must be able to rely on each other in the same way."

Prepare the entire part, even the tutti passages where you think you may not be heard. Conductors of most orchestras today are under tremendous pressure to put complete programs together in very little time. There's no possible way they can address themselves to every detail of balance and intonation. Students must be taught early on to take these responsibilities upon themselves.

The other players in your section are some of your greatest resources. Students tend to look upon players of the same instrument as competition, but you can learn much from your peers. One way of beginning to break down these walls is to play duets. We all have strengths and weaknesses, so if you hear a player who does something better than you, gravitate toward him and ask, "How do you do that so well?" This is difficult for younger players to do, but the sooner they learn, the better.

Being a good colleague is really a simple question of good behavior and consideration for those around you. In many ways being in a full-time orchestra is like having an extended family. We all spend many hours a day together, day after day. Certain codes of behavior have evolved into traditions, and I strongly believe in maintaining these traditions, indeed, in improving upon them. Joseph Robinson, Principal Oboe of the Philharmonic, says, "An ideal colleague is one who both inspires by musical leadership and reassures with sensitive accompaniment."

Here are some further thoughts on being a good team player.

1. **Don't practice anyone else's solos where you can be heard by your colleagues** – for example, on stage, in the band room, or backstage. Competitive spirit is great, but do your competing at home or in an audition, not on the stage. Also, don't practice solo concertos of visiting soloists; they always manage to hear you and it is considered bad form.
2. **Never turn around to see who is playing a part, good or bad.** There is nothing that is more distracting or maddening than seeing a head swivel around and stare at you when you begin to play. Kerry Camden, an English oboist, tells the story of a friend of his who got so tired of people turning around and looking at him while he gave the tuning A that he started carrying

photographs of himself in his pocket, that he would pass out to the offending party, saying “There, this will save you the trouble of turning around.”

3. **Never react to unusual happenings on stage with facial expressions.** You are always being watched by someone in the audience. However, if you are enjoying something musically, and feel a smile coming on, it’s a lovely thing to see.
4. David Carroll, Associate Principal Bassoon in the Philharmonic, says, “**Don’t beat time physically or audibly while you are playing in an ensemble.** One conductor is enough! It can be distracting if someone in your field of vision is conducting with his violin, head, or whatever or if you can hear or see someone else’s foot tapping merrily away. People who have these habits often unfortunately wind up with slightly different tempos from those of the conductor, and are likely to confuse those around them. If you must tap your foot to stay in time or to subdivide a slow tempo, try to do it silently and almost invisibly by moving just the toes of one foot ever so slightly.”
5. In support of a colleague’s fine performance or a particular passage during a performance **be sure your expression of approval does not distract the continuing music being played by other colleagues.** Genuine expressions of approval are always appreciated when communicated verbally after the concert. Have respect for your colleagues when they are playing. Phil Smith recalls that when he played in the Chicago Symphony, “There was a high degree of regard for each player in the trumpet section. Nobody ever turned a page if a member in the section was playing a solo line. We’d write out our cues or copy pages, but we wouldn’t distract our colleagues by moving to turn a page.”
6. **Respect the physical space around your colleagues.** Don’t crowd a colleague or watch the part while he’s playing; it’s distracting to feel someone watching over your shoulder.
7. New York Philharmonic Principal Horn Philip Meyers says, “A musician should never lose sight of the fact that he is ultimately responsible for his own part. **You are much better off devoting your time, energy, and attention to improving your own part than to being critical of someone else.** You’ll also be much less likely to say something to someone else in the group that you would later regret. Try to be diplomatic and helpful always.”
8. **Conductors see everything.** They see gum chewers, leg crossers, book readers, letter writers, talkers, laughers, etc. As a player, you are being observed at all times by a conductor.
9. With regard to conductors, Phil Smith says, and I concur, “The conductor is the boss.” I can add no more to that except to say keep your eyes on the conductor. I remember when David Oistrakh, the wonderful violinist and conductor, would say to us, “**I need your eyes to make music.**” It was a nice way of putting it.

We all have lives and families and activities outside of our hours of playing together; and our appreciation of each other's unique qualities as people, not only as musicians, is very important in establishing a genuine professional and personal regard for each other. Associate Principal Horn Jerome Ashby has never forgotten what his high school music teacher wrote in his yearbook: "Love music; love musicians." In the words of Pablo Casals, "Music must serve a purpose; it must be part of something larger than itself, a part of humanity."