

A Player's Guide for Keeping Conductors in Line

by *Donn Laurence Mills*

If there were a basic training manual for orchestra players, it might include ways to practice not only music, but one-upmanship. It seems as if many young players take pride in getting the conductor's goat. The following rules are intended as a guide to the development of habits that will irritate the conductor. (Variations and additional methods depend upon the imagination and skill of the player.)

1. Never be satisfied with the tuning note. Fussing about the pitch takes attention away from the podium and puts it on you, where it belongs.
2. When raising the music stand, be sure the top comes off and spills the music on the floor.
3. Complain about the temperature of the rehearsal room, the lighting, crowded space, or a draft. It's best to do this when the conductor is under pressure.
4. Look the other way just before cues.
5. Never have the proper mute, a spare set of strings, or extra reeds. Percussion players must *never* have all their equipment.
6. Ask for a re-audition or seating change. Ask often. Give the impression you're about to quit. Let the conductor know you're there as a personal favor.
7. Pluck the strings as if you are checking tuning at every opportunity, especially when the conductor is giving instructions. Brass players: drop mutes. Percussionists have a wide variety of dropable items, but cymbals are unquestionably the best because they roll around for several seconds.
8. Loudly blow water from the keys during pauses (Horn, oboe and clarinet players are trained to do this from birth).
9. Long after a passage has gone by, ask the conductor if your C# was in tune. This is especially effective if you had no C# or were not playing at the time. (If he catches you, pretend to be correcting a note in your part.)
10. At dramatic moments in the music (while the conductor is emoting) be busy marking your music so that the climaxes will sound empty and disappointing.
11. Wait until well into a rehearsal before letting the conductor know you don't have the music.
12. Look at your watch frequently. Shake it in disbelief occasionally.
13. Tell the conductor, "I can't find the beat." Conductors are always sensitive about their "stick technique", so challenge it frequently.
14. Ask the conductor if he has listened to the Bernstein recording of the piece. Imply that he could learn a thing or two from it. Also good: ask "Is this the first time you've conducted this piece?"
15. When rehearsing a difficult passage, screw up your face and shake your head indicating that you'll never be able to play it. Don't say anything: make him wonder.
16. If your articulation differs from that of others playing the same phrase, stick to your guns. Do not ask the conductor which is correct until backstage just before the concert.
17. Find an excuse to leave rehearsal about 15 minutes early so that others will become restless and start to pack up and fidget.
18. During applause, smile weakly or show no expression at all. Better yet, nonchalantly put away your instrument. Make the conductor feel he is keeping you from doing something really important.

It is time that players reminded their conductors of the facts of life: just who do conductors think they are, anyway?

Donn Laurence Mills is the NSOA contributing editor. He holds music degrees from Northwestern University and Eastman School of Music. A conductor and music educator, he is also the American educational director for the Yamaha Foundation of Tokyo.