

Booking and Managing an Orchestra or Instrumental Ensemble

This seminar is aimed at those who wish to engage a professional/semi-professional orchestra or ensemble to accompany a choral performance on the basis of a single (3 hour) rehearsal on the day of the event.

Selecting players

If you are not in the position of having a circle of musical connections to draw upon, then you would be advised to find someone to help with the business of selecting players. If the group involves a string section, then the best option would be to find a suitable leader (first violin) since many of the players needed will be strings, and also your leader may be willing to help with the preparation of the scores.

It is important to find someone you can confidently work with, so spend some time searching among your musical friends, local instrumental teachers, heads of music in state and independent secondary schools, and local choral societies to locate those who are respected performers in your area. You are looking for someone who is an accomplished performer with a record as a leader of ensembles, and who has connections amongst the local performing community. The ISM website also has list of musicians grouped by area. As an alternative, many university music departments and conservatories run professional placement services which can provide a whole ensemble for you, saving you a lot of work!

Once you have found a leader, then he/she should be able to provide a list of names of suitable players to whom you can then send out your letter of invitation. Most of this business goes out by email these days, and a typical message will include the date, time and location of the event together with the rehearsal time, a list of music to be included and the fee offered. If you do not know the player it is also advisable to mention the person who has recommended them to you.

Fees

All players, with the exception perhaps of your leader, should be offered the same fee, regardless of how many notes they play! Fees at present range between £110 and £140 for a single rehearsal and concert. The MU negotiates fees for casual players (depts) with the major professional orchestras, and these can be seen on their website as a guide to help you decide rates. You may also offer portage fees to timpanists, percussionists and possibly double bassists. These are generally about £35.



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Now wait! Once you receive (hopefully positive) replies, acknowledge these with a brief return message indicating that further details and the music will follow in due course. Also request a mailing address for the music, and account details if you are intending to pay by bank transfer.

Preparation of the music

If you are hiring music, you are unlikely to receive it more than a month before the performance, since hire fees are prohibitive, so you will need to get working on the scores as soon as they arrive. They will almost certainly have a plethora of pencilled markings on them, despite a notice to the effect that all pencil marks should be removed before return to the hirer! You should ask your leader if he/she is willing to bow the string parts (first and second violins at least). He/she will generally be willing to do one of each, and you can transfer the marks over to the others. You should also add the following:

- Tempo marks i.e. metronome markings for each movement
- Cuts
- How many beats to a bar, where this is not clear e.g. where you might plan to beat 4/4 time in 8.
- Dynamics

You will probably find you spend as much time erasing as adding!

This is very time consuming, but saves a lot of time in the rehearsal, when you do not want string players spending precious minutes discussing how they will bow a certain passage.

Confirmation letter

Once the music is ready, and at least two weeks before the performance, mail this out with a covering letter giving final details. This letter should include a rehearsal schedule. It is important to plan the rehearsal so that players are not inactive whilst you rehearse parts that do not involve them. The strings are likely to be occupied constantly, but this will probably not apply to woodwind, brass or percussion, so try to group the parts that involve these players so that they can be released when their parts have been rehearsed. The following need consideration also:

- Concert dress
- Do they need to bring a music stand?
- Convenience of access to the venue (railway station/parking)



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Finally I have found it “oils the wheels” very considerably if a tea can be provided for players between the rehearsal and the performance. Alternatively choir members can be invited to take a player or two home for this. I generally follow this letter up with an email confirming that I have sent it and asking to be contacted if it does not arrive.

The rehearsal

Arrange the timing so that you are available to greet each player as he/she arrives and show them to their place. Be sure to welcome them formally at the commencement of the rehearsal, and aim to start on time!

You must allow a minimum ten minute break during the rehearsal, and I always ensure that a cup of tea is available! This is always appreciated and greatly helps the ambience of the occasion.

Never exceed the three hour rehearsal time. Apart from anything else your players will need a good break if they are to give of their best in the performance. If, despite all your efforts, you have to overrun, then, perhaps ten minutes before the three hours is up, announce that you regret that you will have to continue for a further few minutes, but that anyone who needs to leave should feel free to do so.

Be sure that your players know at what time you expect them to return for the performance, and where they should gather. You will need to provide changing rooms!

Performance

It is usual to invite players to take the stage at about 5 minutes before the performance begins. Allow time for them to settle and to tune before sending your leader on (who may also tune) and following yourself. A charming habit of some groups, especially if they have enjoyed working with you, is to stand when you enter! At the end of the performance, it is usual to gesture to the orchestra to stand to acknowledge applause, and at this point I generally shake the leader by the hand. If there are soloists or others to acknowledge, it may be a good idea to advise your leader of the protocol you intend to follow.

It has been standard practice to present an envelope containing the fee (usually a cheque) during the interval of the concert, although bank transfers immediately after the event may be increasingly common nowadays. Try to thank as many players as you can individually before the end of the evening.

Steve Gregson, July 2020



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