

**ACADEMY OF MUSIC AND DRAMA**



## **Practicing for Orchestra Projects**

How to adapt a practice routine for it to be the most efficient and effective

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## **ABSTRACT**

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In this work I try to understand how and why practicing for orchestra is different from solo practice, and how I can make it more efficient (less time-consuming), effective (resulting in better quality of playing), and relevant to me, with the challenges and difficulties that I have at this stage of my education. I do that by analysing my preparation and experience during several orchestra projects, finding the aspects that need improvement and trying new methods to make them evolve. One of the main results of this analysis is leading to a more thorough experiment of mental practice and organised preparation. Finally I propose a practicing guide that I hope could be applied to most orchestra projects, while being flexible enough to be made relevant for different musicians with their own challenges and experience, diverse pieces, styles, and type of projects.

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## Introduction and presentation

I play violin since I was 6, and since the beginning of my learning I have been part of all types of ensembles, chamber music and orchestras. I had my first “symphonic” orchestra experience when I was 9 years old in Guérande (France). A small group of kids my age and level got a very simplified version of the piece the orchestra was playing, and we sat among them and played at the concert. After this, I took part in many small orchestras, in the music school, in school, etc.

When I was 15, I moved and entered a bigger conservatory where I had my first “real” orchestra experience. Before, I had only played pedagogical material in orchestras composed with the available instruments. In this conservatory, the first project we did was Brahms “Tragische Ouverture” and Wagner “Prelude to Tristan und Isolde”. I played 2nd violin in the last desk, and it felt like the hardest thing I had ever played, or actually even impossible. The music was very dense with a lot happening in every instrument section, the harmony was very rich and unstable, and completely different from anything I had played and heard before. I was completely unable to follow the conductor or feel any pulse at all, and of course even less counting or read in advance. We practiced these pieces for several months, rehearsing once a week, doing only violin sectionals for weeks, and yet I did not feel more comfortable until the very last rehearsals. To be honest I don't remember having practiced my part very much, but it was not only by laziness. The few time I tried, I failed to see any connection between what I was playing by myself and what we were doing with the orchestra. I was playing through the music without pulse or harmonic consciousness, looking only for the parts that seemed fast or high. It was pointless and did not improve my knowledge of the music. On the other hand, playing the music in rehearsal over and over really helped me on the long term. The weeks before the concert, I could rely on my hears for most passages, and finally got a sense of pulse in the easiest passages. I had also learned how to fake play all the fast scales and difficult things etc. I was very dependent on the cues of the section leader, and was mostly trying to blend (or hide) my sound into the section sound. At this time I didn't really question my method and assumed that with my current violin level I couldn't do any better. I continued my orchestra experience in this same mindset for a very long time.

A few years later I was involved more and more in orchestra projects where we rehearsed one or two weeks intensively before the concert. By then I was actually practicing the music, only starting after the first sectional (usually 3-4 weeks before the concert), where the guidance of the leader/conductor would kind of prepare the work for me : showing me the parts worth practicing, playing in a steady tempo, letting me hear what it sounds like, etc.

I have now been studying in Gothenburg for one year and took part in almost all orchestra projects (one a month). I have tried my best to prepare every project seriously, but I still face some difficulties : sometimes all the work I put in the orchestra practicing is not enough, or not relevant, and I feel like I'm sight-reading for the first time during the first rehearsal. I also spend a lot of time practicing every project, which makes me unable to

focus both on orchestra and other projects, chamber music, other classes, or even my solo repertoire on the violin, at the same time. Needing this much time to become familiar with the music also makes it impossible for me to accept last-minute projects and gigs in orchestras etc., which for now is not the priority, but it will certainly penalize me in the future if I want to make a living out of orchestra playing.

This is why I have decided to put my focus on orchestra in my bachelor thesis. I'm hoping it will help me consider new aspects of the orchestra playing, find different practicing methods that are relevant to me, understand better the challenges I'm facing and especially have a more critical overview of the way I'm practicing and preparing for orchestra projects.

## 1. Orchestra as career

Most people learning a classical instrument have had or will have an experience of orchestra in their life. It can take different forms (string orchestra, wind orchestra, brass band, symphonic orchestra for example), be of different level and ambition, play many different types of repertoire (classical, jazz, popular songs, folk music, film music, pedagogical material). Some people experience it really young as part of their music education and discover there for the first time the possibility of playing in a group, be part of a social experience ; but some even learn music through ensemble playing. It is the case in many wind or brass bands, among folk musicians who sometimes learn and share through oral transmission of knowledge, but also in some specific types of pedagogy like *El Sistema*, a system created in 1975 in Venezuela by the Maestro José Antonio Abreu that allowed young people of a disadvantage district of Caracas to learn music, play together, but also live something strong together, being part of a functional and healthy social life. This *Sistema* grew a lot bigger since, establishing itself in many cities, first in Venezuela, then in many countries in South America and finally all over the world. It is said that over 1 million kids have learned music and got their life changed through *El Sistema*. A very notable person coming from *El Sistema* is Gustavo Dudamel, world renowned conductor and chief conductor of the Göteborgs Symfoniker between 2007 and 2012. This system inspired a lot of people who created similar programs, introduced orchestra as a subject in some schools, etc.

When it's not a way of learning music, orchestra playing can also be a way to keep contact with music, with an instrument that one might have learned during many years until choosing another career path. This is why there are many amateur orchestras, student orchestras in universities, which sometimes rehearse one evening a week, sometimes one weekend a month, etc.

Music students of course take part in numerous orchestra projects, in school or outside, during the academic year or during summer with all the youth orchestra that exist, which gives them opportunities to discover a lot of repertoire, to acquire some experience and to see some aspects of what an orchestra career is.

However, as much as all these different forms of orchestra experience have in common, they are still very different from what having an orchestra job is. Some educations exist to prepare one for an orchestra career, such as Bachelors in Classical Music or Masters with specialization in orchestra (in Gothenburg University for example). But in my opinion there are still things that one needs to figure out by oneself, such as practicing methods specific to orchestra, the right mindset that allows you to do your best in this job, or even simply figure out whether this job is something that one can imagine do all one's life, if it fits with one's desired lifestyle. I think these issues are not always addressed enough during musical education, and one could pursue an orchestra career for years without realizing they are not developing the right set of skills, or that this career is very different from what they imagined and comes with unanticipated challenges. Of course all of these things are very personal and could not be taught with a one-fit-all solution but these are questions that

could be addressed more, in order to support each student in their growth and learning journey.

This realization has made me call myself, my motivations and my practice methods in question, and that is why I wished to research into these questions in this independent project. I will first try to define shortly a clearer frame of what an orchestra career and job is like, what are their challenges and which skills should one develop to hope to succeed in this career path. Then I will then describe an experiment and process that I conducted during the first term of this year, in which I try and do a more introspective work by looking on my own skills, practice methods and challenges, and see what I can do to improve them.

As this work was done over a whole school year, it went through many steps and stages and therefore the project cannot be described as a linear process. This is why some topics will be discussed more extensively than some other ones that might be just as interesting, but that I'll keep for later, as a continuation of this work.

In order to learn more about the orchestra job, I met two professional musicians from the Göteborgs Symfoniker (GSO), Marja Inkinen (second violin leader) and Jan Alm (double bass co-leader), and asked them a series of questions about their jobs, the challenges, and their practicing methods. Here are some of the things I learned from these interviews, along with things I read, learned, and / or experienced :

### **1.1. What is an orchestra musician's job like ?**

Among all the orchestra experience I had, one thing that varied the most was the organisation of the rehearsals, and the quantity of it. When it was amateur orchestras or orchestra with young people and children, we often prepared their concerts in several months with one rehearsal a week, sometimes once a month. Then I did some orchestra academies and projects in university where there was around 2 weeks of rehearsal with a significant part of it being sectionals. Here in HSM<sup>1</sup>, the projects are almost always organised around 4 days of rehearsal and dress rehearsal and concert on the fifth, with one to three sectionals beforehand (strings, woodwinds and brass). The tendency we can notice in this experience is that the higher level the orchestra has, the fewer time it spends rehearsing. Now this rule cannot apply indefinitely, so I asked musicians from the GSO<sup>2</sup> about their usual rehearsal schedule, to get a clearer idea of how much a professional orchestra rehearses. Their answer was of course that not all professional orchestras have the same organisation, and even the GSO does not have the same schedule every week. Generally however, they rehearse from two to four days, and then one day more for dress rehearsal and concert. But some other orchestras in England for example, can have several concerts a week and sometimes rehearse only once or twice before the concert. That's why English musicians have the reputation to be (and to value) especially good sight-readers.

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<sup>1</sup> *Högskola för Scen och Musik* in Gothenburg, where I am currently studying.

<sup>2</sup> *Göteborg Symfoniker* or *Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra*



If we can see now that they indeed rehearse a bit less than student orchestras, my next question was about the time for preparation, and the frequency of orchestra programs. Do they play every week ? How long before each concert do they know if and what they are going to play ?... In the case of the GSO, they know several month in advance about the different programs and as soon as they are told if they play, they can borrow practice parts booklets and start to prepare if they wish. However, as the GSO is a full time orchestra, there is a new program every week, and the musicians might play up to 8 weeks in a row, before having a week off. It means that they don't have a lot of time in between each program to prepare the next one. I was wondering how they were organising their preparation, and if they prepare several programs at once ? But both Jan and Marja told me that unless they know about an especially technically difficult program coming up, they are more comfortable working on one program at a time, in order to be fully focused and involved.

Opera orchestra musicians on the other hand have a different experience, as they play the same program for longer and in many performances, but they also might have to play several programs on the same period of time.

## **1.2. The specific challenges of orchestra playing**

*Orchestra playing is very different from solo playing in many ways.* This is the observation that started my interest in this subject I'm writing about. The feeling is different, the stress and stage-fright, the responsibilities, the result, the good and the bad aspects, all of these are different. But most importantly the preparation for it is different from solo playing practice. We can't indeed prepare orchestra music in the same way we practice a solo concerto, first of all because there is too much music and less time, but most importantly because even if one did, it wouldn't necessarily be the best preparation, as orchestra playing has some very specific challenges. The ones that I noticed were mostly about playing in a group and having less freedom, which should not be confused with not taking initiatives and relying solely on the group, and about the lot of sound we hear which can be overwhelming and distracting if we do not use it actively and take advantage of it. However, when I asked Marja and Jan about what they thought about the challenges in orchestra playing, their answers were mostly about two aspects : the fast work rhythm, and the social aspect.

With a new program every week, and not so much rehearsal or preparation time, one needs to be as efficient as possible in their practice to be the most prepared for the first rehearsal. While they both confirmed their preparation got more efficient with experience (better skills and better knowledge of the most common repertoire), they still need to have a strict organization to get the most of their time. Marja, as a section leader, stressed the importance of knowing the piece in its globality, not only your own part. For this, reading the score and listening recordings can be really helpful, as well as learning about the composer, the style and the piece. She also mentioned that rhythm and character are the

most important elements to have ready on the first rehearsal. It is what makes the group playing possible and of better quality. Jan also talked about character, on a more technical level : his advice to me was to practice with the right dynamic, length of bow and speed of finger from the beginning, even in slow tempo, so I would not waste time by having to *unlearn* things. In the end, the biggest challenge is that one need to be absolutely dedicated in this work, and that you can never stop practicing. The good side of it though, is that one can take every week of work as an opportunity to improve.

Another aspect that was important in their answer was the social interactions and interferences. When you play as an orchestra musician and even more as a string player, you are part of a group. It has many positive aspects, and orchestra can be seen as a case of “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts”, but it can also be a challenge to not be erased by this mass. There is a balance to find between fitting in the group and keeping of your individuality, while accepting everyone else’s differences. You also need to be adaptable and react quickly to new inputs from new conductors, soloists, etc. And finally, you need to be both strong to not disturb the balance of the group, and stay and sensitive artist open to the music and ready to share with the other musicians and with the audience. This is of course not an exhaustive list, as challenges can be really personal and vary greatly with each person, their background, and the specificity of their job. We can for example imagine that for an opera musician, there is some challenge in finding passion in each new performance of the same piece, or in the length of the piece.

## 2. Trying to improve my practice and orchestra skills

With all these informations about the orchestra job and its challenges in mind, here is my personal journey towards a more efficient, effective and relevant practice.

### 2.1. Methodology of this research

In order to improve my preparation for orchestra, I decided to take notes on every aspect of each orchestra project during the first semester. I kept a journal in which I tried to describe precisely how each rehearsal went, how I felt, how well I played, etc. It helped me realizing which aspect of my preparation I needed to work on, and from the second program of the semester, I started to experiment new practicing techniques aimed towards the problems I had identified. I also listed all the experiments and exercises, and tried to see if they had any positive impact on my preparation.

In the middle of the semester I didn't see an obvious change, so I came back on all these notes. I couldn't immediately draw conclusions about the effectiveness of the exercises, nor could I make a clear diagnosis of what was hindering my progress. I decided to summarize and sort the types of "problems" I noticed into 3 categories : technical, acoustic and psychological difficulties. I color coded these, and went through all my notes to find everything that could be connected to these categories.

Here is an example of what it looked like :

*"Monday 12/11/18 : we played through the four first movements of Bartok. It felt much better than on the friday, I saw a big difference after the mental practice. It was easier to understand what was happening, to feel the pulse, and to focus on playing the notes. It also made it more comfortable to have at least a vague idea of what the piece was supposed to sound like before playing it. Henrik was also very helpful, he took things slow, breaking down each complicated passage so we could understand it better, etc.  
Strauss didn't work so well, everything was going very fast, I didn't have time to read the notes."<sup>3</sup>*

My color code is the following : red for technical, green for acoustic and everything that is caused by the difficulty of play in with others, blue for psychological.

With this code, it became easier to see which problems were the most important ones, if the exercises I've tried were relevant, etc. I noticed right away a quite big imbalance between the time I spent trying to fix technical problems and the actual number of times where the difficulty had its only source in technicality. The main reason for this is that

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<sup>3</sup> Excerpt of my practice journal. I'll be quoting it to illustrate my thoughts throughout this paper, but you'll find in its entirety in the appendix.

technical problems are faster and “easier” to fix, it’s only a question of hard work and practice time. Other problems such as sight-reading, confident inner ear, self-confidence and selective focus are a little bit more abstract, wide and complex, and take much more time, reflexion and energy to solve. As a result, this research will not discuss all of the problems in an exhaustive way. However, my goal is to become better at noticing what is actually causing the problem, so I can, as a process, become more and more efficient in my preparation, enjoy it more and be able to do my best for every orchestra project.

## 2.2. Challenges and difficulties I met

My next step was to gather all the descriptions of challenges and difficulties from my practice journal, synthesize and sort them in the 3 previously mentioned categories. Here is the result :

### ➤ Technical aspect :

- sight-reading (mentioned 4 times), and more specifically rhythm and inner ear problems
- difficulty in coming up with good fingerings (mentioned twice)
- bowings changes
- dynamics and characters
- understand the conductor’s gestures and cues
- difficulty of the piece in itself

Aside from the sight-reading problem, most of these technical difficulties are relatively simple to solve, they *only* require some time spent on the instrument. They are also the most obvious and easy to recognise, therefore that is what I was spending the most time on, already before I started this research. And it is a hard to fight habit, as technical difficulties were also what I worked on the most during the first half of my *test-semester*. However, it is not sufficient as many times I went to a rehearsal technically very prepared and still couldn’t play as much and as well as I would have liked.

*“When I don't prepare a piece seriously before the rehearsal week, I always start understanding it and getting some help from listening around the 3rd/4th day. It surprised me as it wasn't the case when we first read Schumann, even though I really knew the piece. If I had to imagine an explanation, I would say that **the first reading probably had a bit more stress and insecurities about my playing, and because of that I was listening in a more passive way, without really involving myself or anticipating things.** Now that we have practiced it a couple of time, I have a more precise idea of **what to focus on to be able to connect what I hear with what I read, what the conductor is doing** etc.”*

*Practice journal, Thursday 20/09/18*

➤ Acoustic and “group playing” :

- hearing myself, keep a stable and reliable inner ear
- not being distracted by the sound of others
- understand the pulse
- listen in an active way
- connect what I hear with what I read
- understand the construction of the music, who has the different roles, what I should listen to, etc.
- following someone’s lead
- blending my sound into a section

This category has two aspects : one acoustic, that is about how much sound you are suddenly exposed to and how it makes hearing yourself more difficult ; I experimented with this aspect by wearing hearing protection. That makes your own sound feel louder, which is both helpful and distracting, and it makes it more complicated to be attentive to the rest of the players. As much as it is an interesting experience and can definitely be used as an exercise, it takes away a big part of what is playing in an orchestra, and is not a solution in itself. The second aspect is composed of several skills that are very specific to the orchestra playing. I couldn’t imagine exercises for improving all of them but I do think we learn them with experience, when we are conscious about the challenges and actively trying to overcome them.

Attached to this document is a recording of a rehearsal where we play Strauss’ Don Juan in which we can hear how different the sound result is from inside the orchestra and from the audience. I was sitting next to the harp that we hear very clearly. We can also hear individual sounds of the violins which illustrates how challenging it is to blend your sound in a section sound while playing fast and technical music.

- Recording n°1 - *Richard Strauss, Don Juan - Beginning to bar 75 (file attached)*

➤ Psychological aspect :

- stress because of the people around me, having an “audience”
- comparison of myself with the others, feeling belittled by a colleague, a teacher, a conductor
- insecurities due to the quality of my preparation or the difficulty of the piece
- difficulties to focus (mentioned 5 times), more specifically on *what* to focus and how to ignore all the distracting thoughts, sounds, etc.
- channelling my energy even in stressful/tiring/disappointing situations
- being confident in what I can actually play and do (count, etc.)
- being able to relax and having fun

Finally the psychological aspect. This one is of course the hardest to improve as it doesn't feel immediately related to violin and to what we do in the practice room. Yet, it has a very big impact on my playing and is very often the cause of the aforementioned difficulties.

### 2.3. Insight on the psychological aspect, and presentation of "The Inner Game of Music" by Timothy Gallwey and Barry Green

As this research progressed, it became more and more clear that the psychological aspect had a much bigger role than I originally thought. The first sign of this was the notion of fun and pleasure (or more specifically the absence of pleasure) starting to appear as a recurring element in my practice journal.

*"The concert went ok, there was no catastrophe or major failure. There was still a lot of places that I practiced a lot that I still couldn't play very well, but also places where things were finally coming together and didn't feel so difficult anymore. [...] I didn't enjoyed this concert very much, [...] the concentration [it] required did not allow me to relax and have fun."*

*Practice journal, 16/11/18*

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*"The conductor (Karen Kamensek) is very efficient, honest and nice, I like her way of working. I can play most of the notes, it makes it more possible for me to take in the conductor's advice and instructions."*

*Practice journal, 18/09/18*

For many musicians including myself, music is a passion and something closely related to emotions and feelings. When I play music, I want to be able to share these emotions with the people I play with and with the audience, and I also like to be receptive to what the music expresses, feel part of something bigger than me. That is why I play music, but it is also what makes me so vulnerable to negative thoughts and stress, self-doubts and hindering behaviours.

Timothy Gallwey wrote a book called *The Inner Game of Tennis*, later adapted for several other sports and disciplines including music<sup>4</sup>, in which he describes how your thoughts and your mindset can either prevent you to do your best, or at the contrary help you reach your full potential. He also came up with a lot of exercises with which you practice your mind, in the same way that you would practice your instrument.

He differentiates "the outer game" - the result you're trying to get, the successful performance - from "the inner game", where all the helpful and less helpful thoughts take

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<sup>4</sup>Barry Green, *The Inner Game of Music* (Doubleday, 1986) , inspired by the author of *The Inner Game of Tennis* (1974), W. Timothy Gallwey

place. When these thoughts are negative like self-doubt, fear of failure, anxiety, they become “self-interferences”. Timothy Gallwey’s concept states that the games impact each other but the inner game is the one that determines the success or failure of the outer game.

Inside the inner game are two distinct “self” : the self 1 is the self-interference, it can be the little voice commenting everything and telling you that you are going to fail or that it does not sound good, or more generally the lack of confidence, the anxiety, etc. The self 2 is the potential in each person, what you need to use to succeed in the outer game. According to Gallwey’s theory, the key to success is to tune out the self one. Only then you are capable to reach your full potential by bringing up your *awareness*, *will* and *trust*. These 3 concepts are described in more details in the book, and they come with many exercises, both musical and purely mental.

These concepts and their application to music really make echo to my own struggles, and I’ve tried some of the exercises. However, even if I could sometimes use some things as “tricks” during the orchestra rehearsals and preparation, it is really a process, and changing life-long habits takes some time. Therefore I cannot give a final result and opinion about this method, but it still seems very relevant, so I will continue reflecting about it and start integrating it to my everyday practice as a continuation of this research.

## 2.4. Exercises and practice I tried

Let's now take a look at the exercises and practicing methods I did try, from the more specific and technical, to the widest and more general :

### Practice with metronome

During rehearsals, I noticed that I was often surprised by the tempi. It probably comes from the habit I have to play everything in a different tempo depending on the technical difficulty, which usually leads to no pulse feeling even when playing with the orchestra. The metronome can be a good tool to counter this fault.

The important aspects of this exercise are : trying to be really precise and accurate in terms of rhythm, practicing larger sections and linking them to the ones before and after (with a coherent pulse), for difficult passages, starting slow and going up in tempo (with the metronome).

Example : On Bartok, Concerto for Orchestra<sup>5</sup>. I started practicing the 5th movement very under tempo, bringing it up a little bit at a time, but trying to play larger section in a common tempo, in order to have a stronger and steadier tempo and pulse feeling. There is some mistakes, but I try to go on, as if I was playing with orchestra. I also count every empty beat.

- Recording n° 2- *Béla Bartók, concerto for orchestra - Movement 5, bar 16 to 148 (file attached)*

### Read in advance

This exercise is aiming at improving sight-reading skills : I play quite slowly and I am trying to look at the second bar while playing the first one, the third one while playing the second one, etc. Then a bit faster, I am playing every other bar. The point of these exercises is, first to be able to catch up after a mistake even when the music is going very fast ; second to not be depending on my memory only (auditive and physical, like fingerings), and be able to start from anywhere.

- Recording n°3 - *Béla Bartók, concerto for orchestra - Movement 5, bar 489 to 555 (file attached)*

### Practice with dynamics

During rehearsal, you can sometimes be overloaded with new informations : tempi changes, other instruments playing, new bowings, etc. Practicing seriously the dynamics beforehand helps having one less thing to think about then.

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<sup>5</sup> Béla Bartók, *Concerto for orchestra*, Boosey & Hawkes, 1946



It includes such things as trying to find the right colors, emphasizing the dynamics and phrasing, choosing bow techniques and plan carefully the use of the bow (playing on or off the string, at the tip or frog, how much bow etc.).

There is more exercises I have tried, and especially on the technical side, but I have decided not to include all of them here, as I feel like they are not so relevant. Indeed, this work on my practice methods showed me I was giving too much importance to technical difficulties during my orchestra preparation, and while I of course need to continue improving my violin technical skills, this is not something specific to orchestra and should not take so much time during my preparation. However here is one example of the type of exercises I did, where I took a technical difficulty out of its context to practice it :

- Recording n°4 - *Scale exercise on a rhythm from Rossini, William Tell Overture - figure H (file attached)*

On this recording, I am practicing a difficult “ricochet” bowing from Rossini’s William Tell Overture on a scale, and trying to pay attention to the regularity, sound quality, and different dynamics.

At the opposite of technical exercises, ***Mental practice*** was a really new aspect for me. I had been given the advice several times, but I never understood the point, how it should be done and what for. When I prepared this research, I asked several people (other students, professional orchestra musicians) about their practicing methods and mental practice came back very often. I asked more details about it and this is how I got to the exercises I tried and described above. It wasn’t easy from the beginning as it requires some specific skills (reading fast, on scores for example, or intonating without the help of an instrument, remembering the feeling of the fingerboard to imagine the fingerings, etc.), but mostly because it felt completely counterintuitive to put down my violin and work only from paper. I had the feeling of wasting my time, or at least not using it in the most efficient way.

*“The weekend after I did not have the courage to practice my orchestra parts, but I took the time for the first time to do a lot of “mental practice”. I listened to the pieces with the score/my part, practiced vocally (reading on note names, “ta” sounds or singing), counting bars and learning cues that could help me know when to start playing.*

*Monday 12/11/18 : we played through the four first movements of Bartok. It felt much better than on the friday, I saw a big difference after the mental practice. It was easier to understand what was happening, to feel the pulse, and to focus on playing the notes. It also made it more comfortable to have at least a vague idea of what the piece was supposed to sound like before playing it.”*

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*“From this rehearsal and until the concert I didn’t have much time to practice orchestra so I decided to prioritize mental practice in order to improve my awareness of what I was playing, instead of just aiming for the note accuracy.*

*Tuesday - Wednesday - Thursday 13-15/11/18 : The association of the mental practice with the days of rehearsals going progressively made the project more possible and *less stressful*. I was able to *enjoy playing sometimes*”*

The first time I used mental practice were due to lack of motivation, energy or time, but it always surprised me how much of a difference it made. I then tried it again during the next projects, and it was always useful : before I start practicing, so I have a clearer idea of what is important, what is difficult, and what the music sounds like. But also later in the process, even the day before the concert, when something is still unclear after all the rehearsals, or if I missed a tricky place. Even though I still have to remind myself how useful mental practice is instead of starting immediately reading through, I have definitely added it to my orchestra preparation methods, and I’m still working on perfecting it.

### **Listen the the music while reading my part on the score/on my own part**

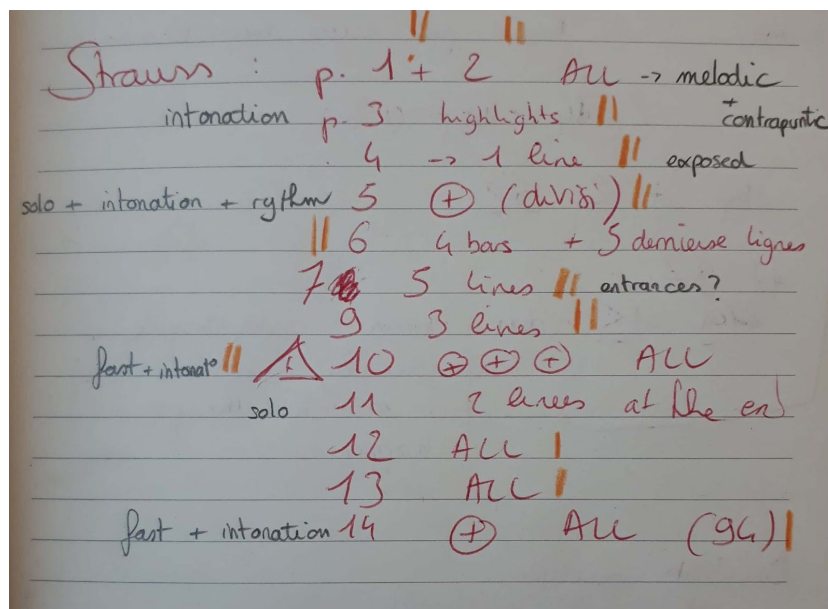
Listening with the score helps understanding what happens in the music when I am playing, and when I am not. I can learn some of the others parts to use as audible cue. Listening while following my part forces me to count and to be very attentive to tempi changes etc. While I listen to the recording, I try to sing or say along everything I have to play.

- If I can't sing the music along the recording, I pause it and practice it orally on note names (do re mi fa sol la si do) or sounds like “ta”, clapping the pulse. I realised that when I cannot sing a rhythm, I also cannot play it. Breaking it down and taking some of the challenges off (like pitch, high tempo, technical problems on the instrument like bowings, strings crossings, fingerings, etc.) even before taking the violin can make some passage go from feeling really complicated to being possible to sight-read.
- *Practice without violin*, actually taking the time to read the notes (first pitchless, with just the name). Sometimes when I practice, I can’t really hear what it should sound like, and I try to build it with the violin, interval by interval. I then forget to actually read the notes, and if I don’t exactly remember the way it sounds at the rehearsal (sometimes because of an unexpected harmony or because it’s not actually the melody, etc), it becomes impossible to play. Taking the time to read the notes, then singing it still without violin, trying to picture what fingering to use, where the strings crossings are and how to do the bowing, and then only trying and play it makes it easier and faster to recall when playing in the orchestra.

## Planning my practice

One of the aspects of mental practice that made the biggest difference was planning. By reading through the score, listening to the piece while following my part, I can note which parts are difficult and in which way: are they exposed, are they fast, are they difficult to intonate or is the rhythm complicated? I then get a more accurate overview on how much I need to practice, what and with which exercises.

Here is an example of a quick planning I made for practicing *Ein Heldenleben*<sup>6</sup> by Strauss:



For each page I have written how much needs to be practiced and what type of practice. From there, it is easier to plan my practice, for example I will start earlier in the process to work on the “fast + intonation” passages because they might be harder to learn and need some muscle memory, but I will be careful not to spend too much time on it and to also put focused on the “exposed” places, or do some mental practice to clarify the difficult entrances, or contrapuntal passages, etc.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Strauss, *Ein Heldenleben*, Dover Publications, 1979

### 3. Results of this research as a practicing guide proposition

Here is an attempt at a practice guide, based on the practice journal, the difficulties it brought to light as well as the exercises I experimented. The goal for it is to be a central thread for a practice routine that I hope could be applied to most orchestra projects, while being flexible enough to be made relevant for different musicians with their own challenges and experience, diversifies pieces, styles, and type of projects. The guide is meant to be followed in the order written, with the possibility to come back to an earlier exercise at any moment.

Exercise	Awareness and acoustic effect	Technical effect	Psychological effect
<i>Listening to the piece for the first time</i>			getting familiar with the piece and the style of the composer
<i>Listening with the part</i>	circle the parts that look difficult	imagining fingerings and bowings	be conscious of how much needs to be practiced actively (as opposed to the real amount of music)
<i>listening with the score</i>	notice the helpful cues, the other instruments playing the same thing as me, what role my part has notice if there is any places where my part is completely by itself, "uncovered"	practice the difficult rhythmic places on "ta", count and learn how and when to start	get to know the music without associating to it the technical difficulties and the stress that go with it
<i>read notes and intonate</i>	strengthen the inner ear	learn the music	
<i>start playing hard passages slowly with metronome</i>	implement a pulse feeling	be careful about the rhythm accuracy	
<i>emphasise the dynamics and phrasing</i>	helps in being more adaptable to new inputs during the rehearsal	experiment different types of bowings, techniques, colors etc.	it moves the focus away from the technical aspect, and closer to the music and the fun part of it
<i>play larger sections with a tempo coherence</i>	learn transitions	keep a steady tempo, progressively bring the tempo up	try to keep a relaxed mindset when arriving on the more technical passages
<i>practice passages that are not individually difficult, but will be challenging together with the other musicians</i>	helps in being more adaptable to new inputs during the rehearsal	sound colors, tempo changes and rubato, speed and width of vibrato, harmonic intonation	anticipate the feeling of playing in section, be already in the performance mindset
<i>during the rehearsal :</i>	listen actively, count, dare to take initiatives	read in advance, play loud enough	let go the mistakes, be confident in your preparation

#### 4. Conclusion

During this year, this work went through many steps and stages and I learned new things from each of them. The first part of it was centered around the difficulties I was facing and trying to recognise them. The ones that were the easiest to spot were the technical challenges, quickly followed by some core skills that needed to be strengthened, like sight-reading for example. At that point I was a bit discouraged, since the only solutions I could imagine were more detailed and long-term practicing, and it was going against my initial goal : creating a practice method that is more efficient (in time) and effective (in quality) for my orchestra preparation.

After trying this very heavily technic based, time consuming (I didn't have time to practice anything else than orchestra) and rather ineffective method for a little while, I identified new challenges that I grouped under the title "acoustic aspects" and "psychological aspects". Thinking about exercises to improve these aspects was more challenging, but they also had a bigger and more immediate impact. The biggest discovery for me in this work might be mental practice, and the way I can make it useful and relevant to me. I include in mental practice two aspects : the actual technical practice without instrument (rhythm, intonating and understanding the harmony) which is a preliminary work that makes the instrument practice faster and better (avoiding all "unlearning" steps). This has an impact on the challenges from the acoustic category. And also very importantly, I started organising my practice better by analysing what needs to be practiced and in which way. This aspect makes a very big change on the psychological category. It allows me to feel more in control, to have a better idea of the goal to attain, and to be more confident that I did all I could to prepare the best I can.

These new methods along with the things I learned from talking with professional orchestra musicians also helped me to realise that I could apprehend orchestra situations in a new mindset : the idea is to see each orchestra project as an opportunity to improve, and not seeing it as a test of my skills or of the quality of my preparation. As recently as one week ago, we had a sectional rehearsal with Anton Lasine, the concertmaster of the Jönköping Sinfonietta, and he told us about one of the big challenges of orchestra playing according to him : playing so much music and having so little time to prepare can make one loose a bit of focus on the quality of their playing, that's why he advised us to always pay attention to details like the quality of the sound, the attacks, the ends, some bow technical flaws that come back when we're not paying attention, etc. After having put aside all technical aspects in favour of mental practice, it was beneficial to hear about a way of caring about technical quality, in a way I didn't think before. It also connects with the idea of continuous improvement.

If my mindset and my preparation organisation changed a lot through this work, it is still an unfinished process, and there are some future steps I am thinking about. I want to read more thoroughly the book "The Inner Game of Music", because I think there is a lot more for me to learn from it. I understand now the concept and find it very interesting but I haven't done all the exercises and reflexions on myself proposed by this book, and I think

they demand some time. I will also put my *results* in perspective with the things I learned during the interviews with Jan and Marja, as I have not fully exploited all of their answers and advices yet. Hopefully, this will allow me to continue adapting my preparation and practicing methods in the best way, and maybe try and improve the practice guide I created to make it fit my needs better, as my experience increases and my capacities evolve.

## 5. Bibliography and sources

*The Inner Game of Music*, Barry Green and Timothy Gallwey

*Becoming an orchestra musician, a guide for aspiring professionals*, Richard Davis

*Aural skills Acquisition, the Development of Listening, Reading, and Performing skills in*

*College-Level Musicians*, Gary S. Karpinski

*Don Juan*, Richard Strauss, Dover Publications, 1979

*Concerto for orchestra*, Béla Bartók, Boosey & Hawkes, 1946

*William Tell and other Great Overtures in Full Score*, Dover Publications, 1994

*Ein Heldenleben*, Richard Strauss, Dover Publications, 1979

## 6. Appendix

### List of recordings

- Recording n°1 - *Richard Strauss, Don Juan - Beginning to bar 75*
- Recording n° 2- *Béla Bartók, concerto for orchestra - Movement 5, bar 16 to 148*
- Recording n°3 - *Béla Bartók, concerto for orchestra - Movement 5, bar 489 to 555*
- Recording n°4 - *Scale exercise on Rossini, William Tell Overture - figure H*

### Orchestra projects HT18 - Practice Journal

#### About the orchestra project 1 (w.37-38) :

Monday and Tuesday : first tutti practice of Shostakovich and Schumann. The conductor (Karen Kamensek) is **very efficient, honest and nice, I like her way of working. I can play most of the notes, it makes it more possible for me to take in the conductor's advice and instructions.** I change some fingerings to make them fit the speed or the musical character of the piece, or just because other people have found some that are easier or better.

#### Thursday 20/09/18 - Shostakovich, Schumann, Johannsson

It was more comfortable starting with Shostakovich and Schumann, we were **more energetic, more alert and reactive to advices, listening to each other.** You could also feel the difference during the Johannsson rehearsal. After few details work we did a run-through of the piece for the first time. We stopped twice briefly. It went quite good, it was easier than I expected. We practiced it in a lot of very short sections so I wasn't sure it would hold together, but actually reading through it made me realise that a lot of parts reuse the same musical material, and are more connected than I thought. I also felt like **knowing the piece a bit more helped me,** in the way that I could actually **listen to the others playing and understand what was happening (tempo and rhythms for example).** It's always the case when I don't prepare a piece seriously before the rehearsal week : I always start understanding it and getting some help from listening around the 3rd/4th day. It still surprises me, as it wasn't the case when we first read Schumann, even though I really knew the piece. If I had to imagine an explanation, I would say that **the first reading probably had a bit more stress and insecurities about my playing, and because of that I was listening in a more passive way,** without really involving myself or anticipating things. Now that we have practiced it a couple of time, I have a more precise idea of **what to focus on** to be able to **connect what I hear with what I read, what the conductor is doing** etc.

#### Friday 21/09/18 - Dress rehearsal and concert :

The dress rehearsal didn't feel great, I had a hard time focusing, I was very distracted by the fact that we were still **changing bowings** all the time. I could really see a difference in the technical level of my playing between **when I'm having fun** and feel carried by the music and when I am more stressed about **technical details.**

The concert on the other hand went really good. I think the result was good, everyone seemed really focused, listening to each other, etc. In the Shostakovich and Schumann, I had fun playing and felt more confident. In the Johannsson, I did my best and it went well, but I know I didn't prepare it as much as I should have if I wanted to do it really well. I felt like **it was so hard and challenging so many of my difficulties,** I consciously decided to put focus on the two other pieces. Considering this, I think I managed this project quite well, but there's of course room for improvement : preparing all pieces with the same exigency, starting from zero with all the pieces, etc.



### About the orchestra project number 3 (week 46) :

*Don Juan*, R. Strauss

*Concerto for Flute and Harp*, W.A. Mozart

*Concerto for Orchestra*, B. Bartok

Conductor : Henrik Schaeffer

Started practicing 2 weeks before the first rehearsal. Spent between 15 and 20 hours preparing.

Practicing methods I have tried and why :

- [practice with metronome](#). I started practicing the 5th movement of Bartok very under tempo, bringing it up a little bit at a time, but trying to play larger section in a common tempo. The idea was to counter the habit I have to play everything in a different tempo depending on the technical difficulty, which usually leads to no pulse feeling even when playing with the orchestra. **recordings of these exercises**
- [read in advance](#). While playing quite slowly, trying to look at the second bar while playing the first one, the third one while playing the second one, etc. Playing every other bar. The goal was : first, to be able to catch up after a mistake, even when the music is going very fast. Second, to not be depending on my memory only (auditive and physical, like fingerings), and be able to start from anywhere. **quote from *Aural skills Acquisition* on this topic p.173**
- [practice with dynamics](#). During rehearsal, [I can sometimes be overloaded with new informations](#) : tempi changes, other instruments playing, new bowings, etc. [Practicing the dynamics beforehand helps having one less thing to think about then.](#)
- [listen the the music while reading my part on the score/on my own part](#). Both are helpful. Listening with the score helps understanding what happens in the music when I am playing, and when I am not. I can learn some of the others parts to use as audible cue. Listening while following my part forces me to count and be very attentive to tempi changes etc. While I listen to the recording, I try to sing or say along everything I have to play.
- If I can't sing the music along the recording, I pause it and [practice it orally](#), on note names or sounds like "ta", clapping the pulse. I realised that if i can't sing a rhythm, I also can't play it. Breaking it down and taking some of the challenges off (like pitch, high tempo, technical problems on the instrument like bowings, strings crossings, fingerings, etc.) even before taking the violin can make some passage go from feeling really complicated to being possible to sight-read.
- [practice without violin](#). Actually taking the time to read the notes (first pitchless, with just the name). Sometimes when I practice, I can't really hear what it should sound like, and I try to build it with the violin, interval by interval. I then forget to actually read the notes, and if I don't exactly remember the way it sounds at the rehearsal (sometimes because of an unexpected harmony or because it's not actually the melody, etc), I can't play it. Taking the time to read the note, then sing it, still without violin, trying to picture what fingering to use, where the strings crossings are and how to do the bowing, and then only trying and play it, [makes it easier and faster to recall when playing in the orchestra](#).

How it felt :

Friday 9/11/18 : Rep Class on Bartok, strings only. [I couldn't play much](#). The parts that were supposed to be easier and that I did not practice, I was [unable to sight-read \(rhythmical and fingerings problems\)](#). The things more technically hard that I did practice a lot we did very slowly at the end, and since I felt already very [stressed and disappointed](#), I barely played anything.

I was really stressed by the teacher, their attitude made me feel like she was checking and judging our playing more than trying to help us understand what and how to practice. At the end of the rehearsal they told us it was more than time to start practicing, I felt really discouraged. **It was like all this work I did wasn't of any use.** The weekend after I did not have the courage to practice my orchestra parts, but I took the time for the first time to do a lot of "mental practice". I listened to the pieces with the score/my part, practiced vocally (reading on note names, "ta" sounds or singing), counting bars and learning cues that could help me know when to start playing.

Monday 12/11/18 : we played through the four first movements of Bartok. **It felt much better** than on the friday, **I saw a big difference after the mental practice.** It was easier to understand what was happening, to feel the pulse, and to focus on playing the notes. It also made it more comfortable to have at least a vague idea of what the piece was supposed to sound like before playing it. Henrik was also very helpful, he took things slow, breaking down each complicated passage so we could understand it better, etc.

Strauss didn't work so well, everything was going very fast, **I didn't have time to read the notes.** A lot of the places I practiced sounded completely different harmonically than what I was expecting, and that made it harder to play the notes. There was a lot of place where **I just gave up, feeling completely unable to even fake play.** It made me realize once again that the hard thing for me at this step was **mostly reading and knowing how it should sound,** and not only the technical aspect of playing.

From this rehearsal and until the concert I didn't have much time to practice orchestra so **I decided to prioritize mental practice in order to improve my awareness of what I was playing, instead of just aiming for the note accuracy.**

Tuesday - Wednesday - Thursday 13-15/11/18 : The association of the mental practice with the days of rehearsals going progressively made the project more possible and **less stressful.** I was able to **enjoy playing sometimes.** We also started rehearsing Mozart, which was much easier technically, **easier to play together and to understand, more familiar also.** It was really interesting (and pleasant) to play this piece and **go back to a more global way of listening, relying on a clear harmony and structure, a clear dialogue between the orchestra and the soloists, etc.**

Friday 16/11/18, Concert : The concert went ok, there was no catastrophe or major failure. There was still a lot of place that I practiced a lot that I still couldn't play very well, but also places where things were finally coming together and didn't feel so difficult anymore. I was **very focused** from the beginning to the end and tried to do my best. **I didn't enjoyed this concert very much,** and even though I wasn't very stressed or anxious before, **the concentration this concert required did not allow me to relax and have much fun.**

additional observation : Bartok / Strauss, **the difficulty also depends on how much I like the music**

### **About the string orchestra project (week 3) :**

*Piano concerto n°23, W.A. Mozart*

*Simple Symphony, B. Britten*

*Concerto for string orchestra - 2nd mvt, G. Bacewicz*

*Transylvanian dances, S. Veress*

Conductor and soloist : Simon Crawford-Phillips

Playing first violin, section leader.

Started practicing one week and a half before the project. Rehearsed with my desk neighbour for 1h30 + with the other sections leaders for 2h on monday.

This orchestra project was a very different experience from the other ones this year : playing in a very small chamber orchestra is a **completely different feeling**. People have more individuality, which is nice because it allows one to express themselves more and find maybe more “democratic” compromises, get inspired and influenced by other’s ideas, etc. But it also makes it **harder to have a homogeneous section sound, harder to find your place and know what your role is**. I especially felt it, being the “concertmaster” of an ensemble for the first time. It really changed the challenges of orchestra playing : for the first time **I wasn’t following someone else’s lead or trying to melt my sound into the mass** ; I had to be **more responsible for myself**, both in terms of **counting and playing at the right time confidently**, but also by having a clear idea of the musical phrasing (or even by **really exaggerating the dynamics written in the music**), and also **trusting myself** enough that I could show cues to others, or stick to my decisions when others made what I analysed as mistakes. **I also heard myself more**, “better” even, since this is an issue I have felt in orchestra before, and this probably because I was allowing myself to play more and take more initiatives. It was a rewarding experience, even if I found it sometimes tough and frustrating, but it was definitely interesting to see how it changed the way I prepared myself :

- **Listening to all the pieces a lot before starting practicing**
- Trying to be **really precise and accurate in terms of rhythm, tempo**, etc. Practicing **larger sections and looking them to the ones before and after (with a steady pulse) : starting slow and going up in tempo (metronome)**
- **Emphasizing dynamics and phrasing, choosing bow techniques (playing on or off the string, at the tip or frog, how much bow etc.)**. **More decisions and initiatives taken**.
- Preparing a sectional : scanning through the music to find difficult places. Taking in consideration both **technical difficulties** and “**playing together**” challenges (intonation, sound, phrasing, togetherness). Think not only “personal” challenges but more “section”.

What I can remember from this experience for next orchestra projects :

- Taking initiatives and decisions about bowing techniques, phrasing etc. even when you're not section leader isn't a waste of time. Even if you have to play it differently later, **it is easier to change something you already reflected on, than learning something completely new**.
- Sometimes the hardest thing isn't too play your own notes but to **play it together** : it can be helpful to notice beforehand the places where you'll need to be **particularly attentive to the leader/conductor's cues**, and therefore **know this place really well**, both note and phrasing-wise.

## Interview with Jan Alm and Marja Inkinen : Questions and elements of answers

1. What the job is like :
  - a. How many programs do you play per year ? (on average) Do you play every program ?
  - b. How long before do you know which concert you play in, and what you play (if you don't play in all the pieces, or upper or lower part depending on where you sit, etc.)
  - c. Typically, how much rehearsal time do you have for one program ?
  - d. On average, how long before the rehearsal week do you start practicing ? Do you sometime practice several programs at once ?
  - e. Do you have a different approach for a new piece and for a piece you've played before ?
2. About orchestra playing more generally :
  - a. What do you think are the specific challenges of orchestra playing ?
  - b. How much space has personal practice in your life/day, and how is practicing for orchestra different from practicing solo playing ?
  - c. Do you have any advice to give me on a routine/method for practicing orchestra parts ?
3. Psychological aspect
  - a. Do you notice a difference in your performance depending on your state on mind ? Do you have techniques to be able to have 100% of your attention on the orchestra playing ? On what specifically do you focus ? (listening, watching, feelings, reflexes that you have practiced before ?)
  - b. Does the fact whether or not you enjoy playing the piece have an influence on the quality of your playing ? Of your preparation ? How can we prepare well even when we don't understand/connect with the music.

### Jan Alm's answers :

1a : max 8 weeks in a row and then 1 week break

1b : beginning of the term they know all the rehearsal times and 1-2 months before they know which program they play in and they get practice parts booklets

1c : not every time the same, it depends on the conductor and soloist etc. around one week

1d : hard things very much in advance (as soon as you know you play the program) but otherwise you focus 100% on the current program

2a : social things, people that are annoying (personality or playing) and you might be annoying to someone. So the challenge is to stay yourself and keep your personality, but tone down the stronger aspects of it so you fit in the group better, accommodate.

+ continuous learning of music (opposite to opera orchestra)

2b : when you get a job in an orchestra, for the first 10 years, learn your parts furiously, know the music from the first encounter, so you remember it forever

+ practice slowly, with right amount of bow, right character, right speed of fingers, etc.

+ listen to it first so your inner ear has a correct memory of it instead of hearing it for the first time with your approximative sight-reading

+ check who plays with you in Strauss

+ last advice : read the music with your eyes, get an idea by looking at it, before you play. Think before you play ! phrasing, intonation, bowing. Don't take bad habits !

3a : you need to practice the focus, when you step on the stage for rehearsing you need to be 100% focused, it is "sacred time", it can even be relaxing that you are completely mindfully focused on orchestra

If you do a mistake, let go. Try to do your best on the moment.

3b : be professional, take pride in doing what you do, enjoy the pride, take it as a challenge, something that makes you get better + you get paid

"every week is a little journey from struggle to success"

### **Marja's answers :**

Method of practicing :

She is a leader so it has to be taken in consideration

- first take the score and check where her part is exposed, what is important, who plays with her, which cues can be useful, maybe right them in her part

- listen to it

- dynamics and **rhythm** are the most important for the first rehearsal

- morning practice, mental practice, small intense sessions

- some things takes a couple of day to remember, find these first

About experience : you learn to sight-read better, you get quicker reflexes in how to play (acc, melody but also fingerings etc.), listen better, you get better technique that get less affected by your mindset, better at recognizing fast what will be complicated - so she used to practice more but now she plays better

1c : 2 days and then concert

1d : not really in advance, sometimes 3 days before, later and later with the experience

Challenge : every week a new program, organizing your time to practice, put it first in your life, you can never stop practicing

You have to be strong to do your best and not spread the stress (but still sensitive musicians)

3b : do it for the music, try to find a reason to like it privilege to play with all this people, conductors, soloists, sometimes flow feeling

The best way to not be stressed is to be prepared