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### **Ensemble Skills: Cues, Signals, Page-turns**

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The definition of chamber music invariably notes the absence of a conductor, but in reality a quartet has four. Because the group's precision and flexibility depend upon visual as well as audible information, each member must become adept at both giving and responding to cues.

Many cues involve physical motion: a nod of the head, raising/lowering the scroll (VC excepted), bringing the bow to the instrument in a two-part, rhythmic motion, and even the use of the heel or toe (when visible) or raising/lowering an eyebrow - all of these can produce unanimity with sufficient practice.

Breath cues are particularly effective, since with them we can signal not only when to play but also with what character: a brisk sniff before a scherzo, or slow, generous inhalation before a slow movement. But every breath cue must have a clear beginning and ending in order to convey rhythm accurately. Since such cues are not often heard by the audience, they help to suggest that the group has an innate, magical precision. And the only potential drawback is that any respiratory blockage precludes their use.

Whatever the means, cues must be practiced by each player, with criticism and encouragement offered by the cues, who must also practice moving and/or breathing with the cuer, except for passages where the group seeks great calm, stillness, or mystery.

The following checklist will help:

- everyone should know what metric unit will be indicated by the cue.
- for loud or energetic openings (e.g. Beethoven Op. 95, Schubert D & M, Bartok Fifth), all players should move/breath equally, with the designated cuer leading microscopically ahead of the others. Not only does this reinforce visually what the audience will hear, it guarantees equal involvement of all players.
- in a mix of arco and pizzicato, the pizzicato player should lead.
- for a cue when not all four are playing, in general the cuer should be the one coming from rest.
- if, in a series of cues, the first attack is not together, the cuer should next give exactly the same cue, and the cues should know in advance and forever that the cue will not vary. If a batter knows that the 2nd pitch will be the same fastball as the 1st was, there will be a hit.



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- once a rhythmic pattern (accompaniment, often) has been established, the player may subtly guide longer note-value players with body language, left-hand activity, or bow changes; conversely, there will be occasions when the flexibility required of the accompanist should not be noticed.
- in a work where a repeat is sometimes taken and other times not, the group should have an ironclad signal agreed upon in advance. Trust me.

Indicating tempo or dynamic changes is a separate but related skill. The range within which a given accelerando or crescendo occurs will be established in rehearsal, but no group should seek or want identical performances night after night. We must leave room for the effects of acoustics, humidity, inspiration, and sometimes mishap.

Logic suggests that responsibility should pass to whichever part has the greatest rhythmic activity, thus providing more opportunities-per-second to adjust the tempo or dynamic. But there will be exceptions. In the end we rely on care in preparation and alertness in performance.

Page-turning is a vital skill which is rarely taught. But as with everything we do on stage, there are fundamentals to be learned and practicing to be done. It is important to make one's own parts. Whether purchased or checked out of the library, those high-end editions should be kept pristine, and because the editors of same don't give a damn about performers, you will want to photocopy your part, study it for the easiest and least disruptive page turns, and cut-and-tape your way to calm success.

Once your part is assembled, the following checklist will help:

- part of a successful turn is knowing the notes you will see after the turn. If the ensuing passage begins with notes in a high position, you will prefer to turn with the right hand; if it begins at the tip of the bow, you may want to turn left-handed, provided your instrument is secure.
- in advance of the turn, scoot forward to the edge of your chair, or, if you can do it silently, slide the chair towards the stand. The motion of the hand to the music should be fast - once you've grasped the page, slow down. If your part has been taped properly, you need only turn the page 90 degrees, and it will fall into place.
- if you are consistently missing a turn, consider taping a small tab to the corner of the page, or recopying the page on heavier paper or cardstock. Failing that, re-examine the original part and see if you overlooked a better place. If you add more than one tab in a part, make sure tabs don't overlap. They can be numbered.



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Depending on the kindness of your colleagues, you may be able to hand off a note or notes to another player, provided this doesn't adversely affect the music. In last place: use a flap or a three-page spread. These invite disaster but are sometimes the only answer.

- practice your page-turns, if necessary with a metronome, and aim to eliminate waste motion. Don't transfer the bow to your left hand to turn with your right - hold the bow with three fingers and grasp the page corner with thumb and first finger.

- if you learn by association, hang out with pianists, who are the Bruce Lees of page-turning (until they memorize the music).

If you find this checklist daunting, use a tablet. Some do.

### QUESTIONS

Click [HERE](#) to answer the questions and/or leave comments

- Why should the pizz. player cue the arco players?
- What is the advantage of the player coming from rest giving the cue?
- If you are leading a cresc., dim., accel., or ritard, is it useful to vary the rates of change in rehearsal? Why or why not?
- What do you do if you've missed a turn in performance? What *don't* you do?
- If a colleague takes your notes so you have time to turn, do you owe them something?
- Why is Ludwig Spohr not mentioned in this third essay?