

The Role Of The Section Player

By Paul Baron

Playing a section part comes with a responsibility equal to that of the lead player. Good section players, it should go without saying, can make the difference between a mediocre section and a great section. Not everyone has the ability or desire to play lead, and that's just fine. A good section is made up of a lead player and section players, and the whole section is integral to a good musical performance. The section parts are as important and should be treated with the same amount of respect and conscientiousness as the lead part. All too often, and particularly but not exclusively in high school and college level bands, section players have aspirations of playing the lead chair and turn the section into a competition ground. Playing in a good band and section is not about competition within the band to see who can play higher, louder, or faster, but an ensemble of musicians all working for the same common goal, a great musical performance. With that in mind, this article will discuss the role a section player must play, and the etiquette necessary to becoming the best section player he or she can be. First of all the rule is, FOLLOW THE LEAD PLAYER. If there are any questions as to anything in the section, refer to the above rule. Now, that's not to say that the lead player will always make the right decision in regards to musical taste and style, or have impeccable intonation, but if everyone follows the lead player, the whole section will be together, right or wrong. Then at that point it is the musical director, band leader, or a well worded comment from somewhere else that addresses the choices the lead player made. If the section isn't playing together it's hard to hear where the problem is.

As a section player you need to make sure you are playing a supportive role and helping the lead player sound good. One of the hardest parts of playing lead is when the section players don't follow the intonation of the lead player. It doesn't matter if the lead player's tendency is to play sharp or flat, as a section player you have to follow. Playing a lower part either sharp or flat to the lead player can wreak havoc on a lead player's chops making them sound way out of tune. Especially when you have an open interval or octave, match the lead player no matter what.

As well as intonation, always follow cutoffs and never hang over longer than the lead player. It may be stylistically appropriate for the lead player to fatten some high notes, or to hang on slightly longer than the band for effect. It's very frustrating to be playing the big high note on the end only to have a section part below hang over.

For volume issues, make sure that you can always hear the lead player and don't push the volume up too much. If you are having a hard time hearing the lead, that's a very good indication that you're playing too loud. It doesn't matter what the dynamic on the page says, but that you are being supportive and staying just under the lead. Different lead players play at different volume levels, and you have to make sure to adjust according to the lead player's volumes.

Along with other blending topics, it's worth mentioning blending your sound as well. It may be necessary to adjust your sound to be brighter or darker depending on the lead player's sound and how you are matching. If the lead player has a dark sound, you want to make sure you aren't playing equipment that's too bright. Conversely, if you are playing dark sounding equipment and the lead player is much brighter, you want to make the necessary adjustments to play brighter. This might mean a different horn, a different mouthpiece, or simply making the physical adjustments to play brighter or darker as needed. When I go to a recording session or show and am not familiar with the music or the lead player, I always bring a couple horns and a collection of mouthpieces that will help blend with whatever I'm hearing.

As well as your open horn sounds blending, you want to make sure you have mutes that blend with the section and lead player. The standard Humes and Berg red and white cup mute is something everyone should have in their bag. The straight and harmon mutes seem to differ more so be prepared with a couple choices for each. In my mute bag I usually carry two metal straight mutes, a Humes and Berg straight, sometimes as many as three harmon mutes, a plunger mute, bucket mute, and a Solo-tone or Clear-tone mute. Once you know the music requirements or are familiar with what the lead player will bring to the gig, it's not necessary to carry all those mutes, but if you're unsure, bring them all. On recording sessions I never know what the producer may want, so I bring the full assortment. Be prepared. I once had a session where the producer said he wanted more of a duck sound and I ended up using a Solo-tone with plunger.

Here's a little side anecdote here. It's always good to be prepared with different mouthpieces to get the sound needed. I did a recording session one time where the clients were also in the booth. That's usually a good sign that things will take much longer. The exec's want to justify their time and come up with something to say. Anyway, I did a "take" and after some conversation in the control booth I wasn't privy to, the producer came on the talk back mic and said I needed to do something different with my sound. He went on to say that what I played was good but that it sounded a little too "chardonnay" and they were after more of a "cabernet" sound. Didn't make sense to me but was probably something the young ad exec thought was clever. So, knowing the game I said, "I know just what you mean and think I have a mouthpiece that'll do just what you want". So I pulled out the mouthpiece, walked over to my gig bag, put the mouthpiece in the pouch and rooted around my bag and pulled out the same mouthpiece. I did one more take and they said it was just what they wanted. I couldn't hear what was said in the booth but suspect that the young exec thought he was so clever and saved the day. Now that doesn't support the idea of having different equipment and mouthpieces to alter your sound since I used the same mouthpiece anyway, but it does speak to the point of being prepared and the necessity of being able to change when needed.

If the lead player has to tell you something that you didn't catch while playing through something the first time that's cool, make sure to listen to that direction and make the changes asked of you. Most of the time, the lead player will ask you for a change once or twice. The first time is strictly a musical request, so don't take it

personally and make the change. If you are asked twice for the same change it starts to get a little frustrating for the lead player. If it goes beyond two requests, it starts becoming personal and will appear that the section player either doesn't care to follow or do a good job, or is showing disrespect by not making the adjustment and plays lead from the section part. The other possibility maybe that the player hasn't had the experience or a consistent lead player to follow and they simply don't hear that they aren't following well. When I play lead I try to make everything so obvious that I'm easy to follow. If there's something that I hear that needs to change in a section part, I assume it's because I wasn't clear enough in my playing. When I make the request of the section player it's not a personal slam but a musical request. Sometimes I hear excuses or reasons why something didn't happen with me. They might be valid but it's not necessary to explain or come up with an excuse, just make the adjustment. On occasion, after as many as six times addressing the same spot in the music without any change or seemingly any attempt to adjust, I've had section players that repeatedly give excuses or reasons why they haven't played the part correctly. That's extremely frustrating and no fun for anyone to play with. It's a sure fire way to get a reputation as a difficult person to play with and that sure won't help with your career. If you approach the music with respect and musicality, and show respect to the lead player by following and blending, you'll get a very good reputation and you will be asked back.

In regards to respect of the music, the lead player, and the other players in general, you need to respect the job and all that entails. Show up on time and with a positive attitude. Make sure your instruments are in good working order and that you look like a professional ready for work. Be sure to bring all the mutes, especially if you don't know what's going to be needed. It's better to have more than not enough. If you have the time to get a good night's sleep and be fresh to play make sure you look after yourself. Sometimes travel and playing schedules take precedence but make sure you get yourself together and focused for the job. Not many will be sympathetic if you come in after a heavy party night hung over and play poorly as a result. The priority is to the work so you need to make sure you are prepared on all levels, and this might mean leaving the party early. If you take the job then make sure you approach and give it everything you can. Nobody wants to hear you complaining about the music, the job, etc. If you really dislike the type of music or the players you're working with, it's much better to turn down the work than to come in and be miserable, which in turn makes the people around you miserable as well. A good positive attitude and approach to the music will result in more work down the road.

Concentration is a very important part of the job. You don't want to be the one loosing concentration and causing a recording session to go long, or stepping in holes in performance. Of course, sometimes this unavoidable, but you need to come to the job firing on all cylinders. Most jobs only require the intense concentration for short bursts but try to immerse yourself fully to the moment and job at hand. An average Broadway-type show only lasts about two and a half hours with an intermission likely with sections of dialogue where you can momentarily relax. So doing the math here you can see that the length of concentration is really not that long or taxing in most cases. A trick I use to keep my concentration up after I've been in a long run of a show is to pick a different

thing to really concentrate on. Sometimes I really pay attention the way the bell vibrates and try to make the bell vibrate with the least amount of effort. Sometimes I focus my attention on the way the air feels as it passes through my lips and imagine how it spins through the mouthpiece and horn out the end of the bell. These may seem weird but after fifty or more shows playing the same thing everyday, it really helps to keep your head in the game by bringing your intense focus to something a little different each show.

Respect of the music, the players around you and the lead player, as well as focus and attention to those things, will make you a pleasure to work with and will have a definite and positive affect on your career. Have fun and bring a good attitude to the gig and enjoy.

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