

Subbing in a Pit Orchestra - Part 2: Being a Sub

by Carey Deadman

Congratulations, you've been asked to sub in a pit orchestra! A lot of consideration has probably gone into the decision to select you to sub, and now it is time to prepare yourself to play the show.

The most successful subs are those who can "fit in" to the existing orchestra. All of the phrasing, dynamics, articulations and "feel" of the music have been rehearsed, and guided by the musical director... and the orchestra has been developed, pruned, and has grown into an "entity" of its own. Your goal is to emulate the player you are subbing for, and to "fit in".

Now is not the time to "improve" it or reinvent the wheel.

The most successful subs are the players that are the most "transparent", because they have cloned the "regular" player so well. Remember, the biggest compliment you could hear is: "I didn't even notice there was a sub tonight".

Materials:

It is very likely that you will be given 2 study aids: a photocopy of the music and an audio recording.

Hopefully, the materials you receive are very up to date - containing all of the cuts, dynamics, cues, and tempo markings that are currently being observed by the orchestra.

And, hopefully these materials have been given to you before your audit.

Auditing the show:

If you are so lucky as to get your materials before you audit, your job will be a lot easier. The audit allows you to observe how the show is being conducted and performed. It allows you to watch the conductor, and the cues that the conductor will (or won't) give you. It also allows you to understand how the pit orchestra sounds, and what is expected of you when you sub for the "regular" player.

When auditing a show, it is most ideal to sit as close as possible to the person you will be subbing for. This will give you a better understanding of how the visual and acoustic conditions will likely be when you play the show.

The main things to focus on during your audit are the conductor and the part you will be playing. Watch how the conductor gives count-offs and cues, as well as tempo changes. Notice how the conductor communicates dynamics and other musical ideas to the orchestra. Write important things into your copy of the music to assist you in your preparation.

Listen closely to the regular player who you will be subbing for. Pencil in any phrasing, dynamics or articulations that may be missing or poorly marked on your copy. During intermission, or after the show (or perhaps during a long dialogue break, if appropriate) you can ask the regular to point out any difficult passages, page turns, or other dangerous places to focus on during your practice.

Studying the Show:

There was a time (not too long ago) where musicians would sub in theaters by simply auditing once and coming in the next night to "sight read" the show with no further preparation. No copies of the music were given to you, and no recording of the show. *Those days are gone.*

It is now common practice to have a recording of the show, a copy of the music, and you are expected to practice and be prepared. Hopefully the recording will have been made recently, and through a microphone which was placed reasonably close to

where your ears will be when you play the show. This kind of microphone placement gives you a recording which more accurately replicates the acoustics you will experience when you perform.

Your music will probably be well-marked, with the count-offs, vocal cues, dynamics and articulations of the current rendition of the show.

In my many years as a theater trumpet player, I have developed a way to study the music which I believe to be the most efficient use of time and energy, and the most thorough way to learn a show. I'm sure that other musicians have found little ways and tricks to learn and study shows, and I invite all of you to share your tricks and thoughts in this forum. But, for now I offer you this, and I believe this method to be very thorough and efficient:

First time study and overview:

The first time you work with the audio recording of the show, it should be done at the dining room table (or at your desk), because it will not involve your instrument at all... just your ears and some office supplies.

Mark the location points in your music.

You need to coordinate the printed music with the recorded audio.

If you have a cassette tape, rewind all the way back to the "hub" of the tape (as far as possible to rewind). Set the counter to "zero" at the hub. Mark on your printed music "hub=zero".

As you listen to Act 1, make notes on your music of the locations of any difficult/challenging passages or other important moments (tempo changes etc.), as well as the location point of the start of each new song.

Mark all of these locations with a small "post-it" note, placed on the page in such a way as to extend a half-inch above the music sheet and act as a "flag".

You can also write measure numbers and other notes to yourself

If you have a CD recording, mark your music with each new ID number from the CD. Also, mark the "minutes and seconds" locations of any difficult/challenging passages or other important moments (tempo changes etc.).

Again, mark all of these locations with a small "post-it" note, placed on the page in such a way as to extend a half-inch above the music sheet and act as a "flag".

If you find that the CD has only one ID marking for all of Act 1, then you'll have to rely upon the "minutes and seconds" data to mark all location points for the entire act.

The goal here is to create an index which allows you to quickly go to a point in your audio material, which is close to your printed music.

This will save much time as you study.

Use the same method to annotate Act 2.

Practice time:

Now, time to practice! Its best to use a good stereo system, and get the volume to a healthy level, which is similar (if possible) to the level in the pit you will be playing in.

First run through: Play through the entire show (along with the recording) and stop the audio source to work out all difficult passages. Mark any extra (missed) location points of those passages on your music, flagging them with a post-it.

Now, you have listened through the show once, and practiced through the entire show, working out (and marking the locations of) difficult passages.

In the upcoming days, go through the music and practice ONLY the flagged areas, as well as the Overture (or first 5 pages or so).

On the day before you will perform, review the entire show again, diligently. Make sure that you understand the simple things as well as the difficult things.

First Performance:

On the day you will perform, after your regular warm-up, review the flagged areas again as well as the Overture (or first 5 pages).

Listen to the recording in your car as you drive to the theater, you get your head in the game.

Arrive early to the theater! Set up your equipment, and adjust your music stand to give you a clear peripheral sight-line to the conductor. Practice the Overture and the flagged passages from your practice book to hear the acoustics in the pit.

If you use the music that the regular plays (and not your own copy) then you should transfer your personal markings to the "regular" part.

Often, the music pages are 10.5 X 12.5 instead of 8.5 X 11. Your copy has been reduced to about 93%, so it is easier to use the music that the regular player uses. It is completely appropriate for you to transfer your markings (in pencil) to the regular player's part.

You are now prepared, and ready to play the show. Make sure you have done all "comfort" things before the downbeat:

Set up your area, adjust stand etc.

A proper warm-up

Water or coffee as necessary

Use the restroom before the show starts (if necessary).

Get the tuning note (if one is given).

Now, play with confidence and authority, because you have prepared well!