

Subbing in a Pit Orchestra - Part 1: Preparing A Sub

by Rich Trelease

When the topic of subbing in a pit orchestra for a musical is raised, the first considerations could involve who might be best suited to cover a particular book or chair, their availability and willingness to do whatever is necessary to be properly prepared for their first performance. While these are all worthy considerations, the primary one for the regular chair player is doing whatever is necessary to thoroughly prepare their sub for a positive, professional, and successful musical experience. This entails a number of vital elements and steps which include: upfront discussions with the potential sub regarding what will be involved and required; preparation, marking, and copying of the book; preparation of audio and/or video recordings for study; and pre-show discussions to clarify any questions or concerns of either the regular or sub. Let's look at each of these to see what is involved.

Upfront Discussions

The first discussion must involve the conductor, musical director, and/or contractor to ensure that they agree with, and are comfortable with, your choice of potential subs. While musical considerations are obvious, there are many other factors that go into selecting the most appropriate musician. Among them is the attitude and demeanor of potential subs. This can play a big part in how they will fit into the musical situation. Soliciting the feedback and input of these three people will help ensure that you make the best choice for the situation. It also breeds goodwill and trust at the beginning of the process.

Upfront discussions with potential subs serve the purpose of communicating what kind of commitment will be necessary based on the nature and level of difficulty of the music and of the specific skills required. For instance, a woodwind player may be required to double on various classes of woodwinds including exotic flutes, or a trumpeter might be required to play high lead parts or double on flugel horn or piccolo trumpet. A drum or percussion book may require a myriad of skills and proficiency on various instruments beyond drum set. A bassist may need to play acoustic bass along with fretted and fretless electric basses. The guitar chair may include many types of stringed instruments including banjo or mandolin. A keyboardist may be required to learn and understand the basic operations of one or more MIDI instruments. All of this assumes ownership of, or at least facility on these instruments, if not mastery of them.

Versatility of musical styles is often required within one show and certainly from one show to another. It is therefore important to inform the perspective sub of what styles and techniques may be encompassed by the show.

If sequenced or prerecorded music, with or without click tracks, are to be incorporated via the use of a monitoring or headphone system, it is important to discuss the players' experience, comfort, and confidence using these types of technology.

There may be unique working conditions in the playing environment such as the use of

fog machines or other special effects like pyrotechnics. Pit volume may be a concern worth mentioning along with the size and space of the pit.

It is important to communicate about required clothing, usually pit black, and whether the musician will be on stage for any or all of the show or in a special costume.

Lastly, pay considerations should be discussed including: the audit fee, whether the sub will be paid by the regular or will be put on the theater's payroll with a pension contribution, whether the sub is enrolled in and eligible for a health & welfare contribution if the sub is covering an entire week, and parking benefits or discounts that may be available to the sub.

While this is not an exhaustive list, and all of these items may not pertain to every situation, many of these will be helpful to consider at the outset of the sub preparation process.

Book Preparation

Preparing the book for a sub is obviously one of the key elements in the process. It must first be marked thoroughly and accurately reflecting the current state of the show with all cuts, additions, and changes clearly indicated. Remember, your sub has not had the benefit of hours of preproduction rehearsals or notes from the conductor or musical director. They are relying on you to translate the necessary information into a clear and easily understandable copy of the book.

Speaking of copying the book, they come in many sizes and shapes. Great care and attention to detail must be taken to ensure that each and every page of the book is reproduced completely without omissions. It is easy to miss the edges of pages accidentally omitting crucial information such as page numbers, clefs, key and time signatures, tempi, segues, etc. Although each musician has their own preference when it comes to book format such as loose leaf page, individual songs taped together on card stock, or notebook size book in a binder, it is important to produce a copy of the book that is identical in form to the one you are using. This will alleviate any confusion when conferring with your sub about the music. Depending on the chair being covered the book should clearly indicate information such as instrument, patch, mute, stick, and mallets changes; bowings; and amplifier or special effects settings. These are the finer details and minutia that help transform an adequate performance into a complete one and which will help the sub to be confident in rendering the music under potentially stressful circumstances. One last thing to consider is that, when possible, providing the sub a copy of the book in advance of their audit may help them be better prepared to learn what is needed from the audit experience and be more focused on watching the conducting cues rather than the notes.

Recording Preparation

Believe it or not there was a time when subs would sight read a show without ever having seen or heard the show. In the recent past a sub would come to watch a show and pick up his copy of the book that night and play the show with only home practice of

the book. With the advent of more musically complex shows and higher expectations of the producers, those days are gone. The minimum standard today is to provide a good quality recording of a recent performance. This would rule out the use of a boom box or other low grade recording equipment. It should reflect the true quality of the orchestra's sound and prominently feature the subs' part without sacrificing audible recognition of other key instruments and voices. If there is a click track or sequencing, it should be included in the mix. If it possible, and with the permission of the theater company and cooperation of the mixing engineer, a mix from the sound board may be able to provide all of these elements.

In some situations, providing a video recording of the conductor can enhance the study and learning process, particularly on shows in which there are many conducting cues, colla voce passages, or tempo shifts. This type of resource replicates the experience of following the conductor and "playing with the orchestra" which is invaluable for the subs' ability to blend into the orchestra seamlessly. Another benefit of providing this resource is that the musician may not need to come and audit the show as many times as could be required without it, or in the case of scheduling conflicts.

In some cases, it is helpful to provide a video of the regular musician playing their book to reflect the "choreography" of a particular chair such as percussion books with fast mallet changes. Doubling books may have complicated instrument changes and difficult page turns or mute switches which can be more easily learned visually rather through written or verbal instructions only.

Providing these kinds of recordings will enhance the learning process and ensure a greater level of comfort for the sub that will carry over into their performance.

Pre-Show Discussions

The conductor or musical director may have some expectations from a specific instrument that it would be helpful to communicate to your sub. It may concern the way a particular passage needs to be interpreted or played to help the orchestra execute it. They may want more eye contact from the sub to establish a solid musical rapport.

There may be particular or idiosyncratic ways in which the conductor or musical director conducts, gives cues, or interprets the tempi, which will be helpful to discuss with your sub. This too will increase your sub's ability to adjust these parameters.

There may be logistical or technological aspects of your set up that may need to be discussed such as how the personal monitoring system is used or what kind of settings an electronic instrument or amplifier utilizes.

One of the last things that MUST be clarified and double confirmed is the dates of engagement. Amidst the busy schedule of freelance musicians it can be easy to miscommunicate or misunderstand a date, day, or time when typing e-mails or talking on the phone. You may have had an experience when you thought you knew when, where, and at what time to be somewhere only to find out that you were acting on

misinformation. This is simply not acceptable and we must do whatever it takes to ensure that not only our subs, but ourselves are clear on things. I've gotten into the habit of confirming by phone at least once in the weeks leading up to a sub date and then again the day before. It will also be important to determine upfront whether one audit date will be sufficient for the sub to feel confident at the first performance. Doing these things provides peace of mind for both you and your sub.

Conclusion

The position you've been hired for is ultimately your responsibility as is the process of preparing a sub. How thoroughly we prepare our subs is a direct reflection of our level of professionalism. This process can be mutually rewarding for both parties and sew seeds for lasting partnerships and more work. Enjoy the process!

Coming next issue...Subbing in a Pit Orchestra - Part 2: Being A Sub