

Orchestral Experience By Leslie Craven: Principal Clarinettist - Orchestra of Welsh National Opera

My first major orchestral experience



The question “how do I get into the profession?” is one the student and many aspiring professional clarinettists will ask. I asked it myself of my teacher Sidney Fell and his reply was: “Leslie, water finds its own level”. Not a great deal of help but I knew what he meant.

I was fortunate enough to have several chances to play in orchestras from a very young age.

A little talent can go a long way if accompanied by sheer hard work. I began playing clarinet at the age of seven. I think I must have driven my brothers and sister mad, practising all hours of night and day until my parents asked me kindly to “give it a rest”.

The hard work did pay off and I soon began to achieve success - gaining a place (aged ten) to attend the Royal Academy of Music Junior Exhibitioner’s course on Saturday mornings. This was swiftly followed by the chance to take part in Master Classes with the renowned teacher and pedagogue Nadia Boulanger who inspired me and with whom I had several subsequent master classes during my studies.

I had been studying at the Royal Academy for about a year when I was invited by the London Philharmonic to play with them during a rehearsal conducted by Sir Adrian Boult. I had made a comment when interviewed by a local newspaper that I wanted to play in a professional orchestra like the London Philharmonic when I grew up. Somehow the L.P.O. press office must have reported this comment to the head of their publicity department and he sent a reporter from the Evening Standard to collect me and take me to Conway Hall London where the L.P.O. were rehearsing Walton’s first Symphony with Sir Adrian Boult.

Sadly at that time Sir Adrian was unwell but luckily a new young conductor, Colin Davis stood in for him to conduct the Walton.

For an eleven year old, playing in such a fantastic orchestra was very exciting and I actually got to play part of the Mozart concerto to Colin Davis and John (Jack) McCaw the Principal Clarinettist.

The second clarinettist at the time was Alan Hacker - destined to become famous for his work in contemporary music. Alan was very helpful in the rehearsal and very kind to me. I must have made lots of mistakes in the section during the rehearsal but he and John McCaw never criticised or berated me once.

Experience

of this kind is so inspiring and I returned home full of enthusiasm to become an orchestral musician. Up to this point my ambition was to be a soloist and I thought that playing in orchestras was second best and that it would be easy to find a job in an orchestra. I now know that orchestral playing is a very complex art and to master all the facets of the orchestral experience is a lifelong task. Far from being easy - getting a job in an orchestra is one of the most difficult things to accomplish.

How to begin the process of finding and applying for a position.

The application

Firstly one needs to find the job to apply for. Looking in the journals such as Das Orkester (Germany), Classical Music, Saturday Telegraph and websites such as www.musicalchairs.info/ will help in the search. Once found, great care needs to be taken in the application for the job. The formal application will be scrutinised and only if your C.V. is interesting will you be granted an audition - there is no obligation for an orchestral audition panel to audition everyone that applies unless the organisation they represent has an equal opportunities policy.

Be Concise.

One good tip for applying to orchestras - try to put all your experience on one A4 sheet.

The players that scrutinise applications and ultimately decide which candidates will be heard can become impatient when confronted by lots of irrelevant material in an applicant’s C.V.

Audition panels usually have to sift through over one hundred C.V.’s for one vacant position so another piece of advice is to include only the most relevant professional information and start at the top of the sheet with the most recent orchestral experience. Whilst it is interesting to note how many solo and concerto performances candidates have done it is of little relevance to an audition panel. In my experience it is best not to include details of one’s Academic career unless college orchestral experience is all you have or if it includes some kind of “side by side scheme”. (These are schemes run by establishments such as the Royal Welsh College of Music to give students the opportunity to win an audition, gain the chance to sit in with and play in a professional orchestra and to learn from the professional orchestra’s principal players.)

Pictures : courtesy of Evening standard Circa 1964 : Leslie (age 11) with the LPO and below: playing to Colin Davis and John McCaw



Be prepared

Most panels will consider college students or graduates for auditions but if they have some professional experience this usually gives them a better chance of being included among those to be auditioned. The Boy Scouts motto: "Be prepared" is the best advice I can give aspiring clarinetists wishing to take part in auditions. Practise as many orchestral excerpts as you can find, even when there are no vacancies advertised. One never knows when the next vacancy may arise and being "match fit" and ready to audition at a moment's notice is good general practice. Once selected for audition the candidate will need to present a set piece and usually an own choice work. One of the set pieces will usually be the Concerto by Mozart. Prepared sight reading will be sent to candidates before the audition and these excerpts should be learnt thoroughly. At the discretion of the audition panel the candidate may be asked to play some unprepared sight reading.



Picture : Leslie with Colin Davis and John McCaw



left: Alan Hacker, Leslie, John McCaw and Leslie's late father (standing)

The Audition Procedure

The audition itself will be a formal experience but the members of the panel will usually be welcoming and friendly. They will have been through the same procedure when they were candidates and will understand the nervous stress you the candidate will undoubtedly be experiencing. You will have been allocated a time to play and taken to a warm up room. Be ready to play at a moment's notice as frequently during audition days there will be people that pull out of the audition at short notice. If you do have to play before your allocated time make sure that you do not go into the room unprepared and flustered. Take time to compose yourself and tell the audition panel when you will be ready to play, some deep breathing exercises will help you to relax.

Do not be intimidated by pyrotechnical wizards

Audition panels are used to hearing players with brilliant techniques and it is often the player who shows a deep musical understanding that wins, despite all the pyrotechnical "whizz-kids". Sometimes the candidate who is to audition directly before you may be warming up nearby and perhaps other candidates will be flashing through their own-choice works or the orchestral excerpts in other rooms within earshot and this can be intimidating. Try not to focus on them but on your own calm, calculated, precise preparation.

Dress and manner

During the audition try to be natural, friendly but not over effusive and firstly make sure you look at each member of the panel when they are introduced to you. Dress and behave in a business like fashion and make sure shoes are clean and polished if necessary. Dress is important, making a good first impression is crucial. Audition panels prefer candidates to show respect to them by dressing for the occasion in a smart casual way.

Show your strengths

Never choose pieces that show your technical weaknesses, these will be found soon enough if there are any, in the sight reading of orchestral excerpts. Keep to a definite plan of execution; perform what you practised at home. A good preparation is to get colleagues and friends to give you a "mock audition". In the real audition be clinically precise with rhythm and make sure you tune accurately, first time. If presented with unprepared sight reading, take a careful look at it and note any awkward passages and finger them through. Make a note of accidentals key and tempo changes. The golden rule is: keep going and keep the eyes moving ahead of the bar you are in. If you make an obvious mistake and falter ask to try the excerpt again but do not repeat the same mistake. It is better to play excerpts too slowly than too fast. The most impressive players are those who play all excerpts flawlessly, first time at the correct tempo. This sight reading ability can be perfected so try to ensure accuracy in practise. A really good tool for training sight reading is the inexpensive but brilliant music@site computer programme by clarinettist Alistair Logan. (free trial version available from www.music-at-site.fsnet.co.uk)

After the audition

If you are successful a letter will usually be sent to you once all the auditions have been completed, informing you that you have been offered a "trial" and this will comprise of a number of engagements. If rejected - do not go into terminal decline, ask the audition panel for feedback and perhaps go and have a lesson with the principal player of the section to ascertain why you were unsuccessful. Sometimes good players who audition simply have a "bad day at the office" but if there was a technical reason for rejection it would be useful to find this out and remedy it. Recently one unsuccessful candidate who did not get a trial with W.N.O. came to me for feedback. That person then followed up my feedback with two or three lessons and a change of mouthpiece. I showed them that a different approach was required in the set audition pieces. A month or so later using a considerably different approach the player auditioned for another major orchestra that had set the same pieces as W.N.O. and was delighted to have been selected for a "trial" – and emailed me to thank me for the assistance - a typical example of someone using intelligence and acting on constructive criticism.

Trials

If you are successful and win a trial, several other people, also on trial, will be competing against you and this process is one of elimination and can take years to complete.

Usually an orchestra takes a considerable time to select not only a good player but also a personality that is compatible with the other personnel in the orchestra. Many aspects of personality are considered and even one's personal hygiene is important here.

No one likes to sit next to people with poor personal hygiene or those that have the smell of cigarette smoke on their clothes or people that have eaten very spicy food and who breathe the fumes over colleagues.

One has to be "squeaky clean" in both playing and etiquette as a professional and along with that an air of confidence and self assurance is desired (but not arrogance).

Orchestral players do not want over - confident trialists around them. Excessive ebullience should be guarded against as much as timidity. When on "trial" players should always arrive to the rehearsals early and warm up and show they are taking the experience seriously.

Tea breaks

If the trial is for a position such as sub - principal or section player make sure that you are the first to offer to buy tea or coffee at break time in the rehearsal. Try to be quick to the queue as orchestral breaks are short, (usually fifteen minutes only) and the Principal clarinetist will undoubtedly be fussing with reeds or mouthpieces. (I usually am!)

Caution on the platform or in the pit

Trialists should never walk in front of (between the player and the music stand) other seated players to get to their position - this is a simple etiquette but one if disregarded will earn you some frowns and comments if the practice is sustained. Sometimes in cramped positions in orchestral pits it is impossible to avoid walking in front of fellow players - but do so with care not to knock over instruments and always be apologetic for causing them to have to move out of your way to let you past. Someone once knocked my clarinets off their stand during a hurried return to their seat - pushing past me.

The person was distraught at having damaged my instruments and was berated silently with withering looks from colleagues for being in such a rush and being clumsy. My instruments were unplayable and I had to leave the rehearsal to try to bend the keys back into shape and get the instrument working again.

Leading from the 2nd chair

It may not be common knowledge but one of the worst things a second player (particularly one on trial) can do is to pick up their instrument and catch the Principal's eye (in his peripheral vision) before he or she (the Principal) has to play. This can lead to the Principal actually playing in the wrong place, especially if the second player has a habit of picking up the instrument and being ready to play more than a bar before required. The movement may distract the Principal and could even cause a counting error because the second player has disturbed the Principal's concentration or caused doubt to enter his/her mind as to which bar he/she should play in.

I find second players who are really helpful wait until the Principal is ready to pick up the instrument and lead the entry - unless the second player has an obvious solo passage. If the Principal is clearly mistaken and does not appear to have counted bars correctly (of course this never happens to me☺) a really supportive second player will "jump in" and play the entry until the Principal is "back on track" with his concentration. There is nothing worse than a deadly silence when an entry is missed. If the second player is someone who needs a lot of preparation time forming the embouchure and settling before an entry - they should be very discreet when they make their preparation to play and should not hold the instrument too far out in front - rather keep it pulled into the body, away from the peripheral vision of the Principal. This is particularly good advice to those on "trial". If trialling for a Principal position make sure you lead the section and take a dominant role but with a relaxed approach, try never to be overbearing or too forceful but make sure your instructions to the section are followed. (If they are not I find a blow to the head with a big stick helps)

If you as a trialist you are unfortunate enough to make a mistake or two try not to let it phase you and cause you to make more mistakes. An experienced Principal will forgive the odd mistake; after all we are all human.

Be attentive at all times

During rehearsals (and performances) it is important to pay close attention to the Principal's and conductor's instructions and if necessary mark them in the part with a soft pencil.

Temperance is expected during rehearsals and performances but alcohol will often be consumed with other members of the orchestra in a nearby hostelry after the day of rehearsal or after a performance. If one does not drink alcohol it is advisable to join in the trip to the hostelry and drink a soft drink to show one is a normal, gregarious musician.

The "trial" process is to the best of my knowledge unique to Great Britain. In other countries the job is decided at the audition and auditions are often performed behind a screen and candidates are anonymous until selection is made. I think our formula is better than the screened version as it does take into account the personalities of those applying for the post. An orchestra is a big family and needs to be a friendly place to work to get the best from the performers.

To gain orchestral experience is of paramount importance to the prospective orchestral player.

To this end accept any offers to play (with or without a fee) in orchestral ensembles and buy as many excerpt books as possible to equip yourself with knowledge of the repertoire.

Youth orchestras are a good source of experience but in my view need to address more repertoire and not just rehearse (usually to death!) the pieces for the next concert.

There are some amateur orchestras that provide rehearsal experience and in which players read through new repertoire each week, these are very useful. A serious aspiring orchestral player will not only buy repertoire books but many recordings and scores of works in all genres: Classical, Romantic Modern and also Opera. Opera is a much specialised study and needs even more stylistic knowledge than Symphonic playing.

Opera experience.

It is very difficult to learn all facets of playing in orchestras and one of the most difficult is the Opera repertoire. Most Operas last longer in duration than a full symphony concert and require enormous experience and concentration, an ability to cope with a heavy work schedule and up to five or more performances per week plus rehearsals of several different and often technically and physically demanding works. Many Operas have solos for the clarinet and in general there is much more exposed solo work of substance in the operatic repertoire than in the Symphonic repertoire. I demonstrated this at a recent Master Class at the Royal College of Music where I demonstrated some of the extended Solos for the clarinet. Most of the great Italian solos were written for a specific player – the great Ernesto Cavallini, indeed, Verdi, Puccini and Rossini wrote operatic solos with this player in mind.

Touring

Touring Opera is even more stressful as there is the travelling to consider and preparation time plus the variety of venues - some of which have primitive backstage facilities for musicians and less than spacious accommodation in the pit accompanied by depressingly dry acoustics. Working conditions are often below that expected in the 21st century.

A typical week in the player's schedule

Rehearsal and performance patterns have changed considerably in recent years with the advent of Sunday trading and the need to be more competitive in the market place.

Orchestral salaries are not high and there is a necessity to teach or have other forms of employment to bolster low wages. It is practically impossible to be a single breadwinner family these days in any job and the music profession is no different. Most musicians diversify in some way or other and the pattern shown below is a typical working week but does not include the hours of private practice and reed selection involved or travel hours. Travel to and from performances for me usually means on average approximately five hundred miles per week, every week of the year.

This equates to about fourteen hours per week driving for me. Most musicians do more or less the same amount, especially free lance musicians. When I was free lance I would often exceed thirty five thousand miles per year.

There is often no rigid pattern to rehearsals but in the company in which I work a typical week of rehearsals/performances could look like this:

Monday: reh. Wozzeck 10 30a.m. evening performance La Traviata: 7 15p.m. - 10 15pm

Tuesday: reh. Wozzeck 10 30a.m. - 1 30p.m. - lunch - then: reh. Wozzeck 2 30p.m. - 5 30p.m.

Wednesday: reh. Wozzeck 10 30a.m. - 1 30p.m. lunch then dress rehearsal Madama Butterfly
2 30p.m. - 6 30p.m.

Thursday 11 - 5p.m. teach at college then 7 15p.m. performance Madama Butterfly

Friday: reh. Wozzeck 10 30 a.m. evening: 7 15p.m. performance La Traviata

Saturday: most players teach until about 3p.m. then eve performance: Madama Butterfly

Sunday: a.m. some consultation lessons at home then 4p.m. performance Wozzeck (but not every Sunday, usually Sunday's at the opera are free days)

Monday: technically free but Royal Welsh College students from 11a.m - 8p.m.

The financial rewards may not be great and playing for a living is mentally and physically exhausting but ask any professional player if they would rather do anything else and I guarantee most would almost always answer - "no".