

Ten Rules for Ensemble Performance by Kenneth Bell

1. **Do Something at the Right Time**; preferably the right pitch, at the right volume, right articulation, (right word), etc. Rhythm is the basic element in music. If the performer articulates an **incorrect** pitch at the **correct** rhythmic moment, it indicates the **correct** intent, rhythmically; then the pitch can be corrected. *A right note at the wrong time is a wrong note.*
2. **Invest energy** into each pulse and subdivision of each note and rest.
3. **Listen Loudly!** When not sure of an entrance or note, don't play or sing louder. Perform with intent and energy, but *don't confuse volume with intensity.*
4. **Look Ahead.** Make it a habit to scan ahead, when possible, for changes of key, tempo, rhythm, volume, etc. Accidental alterations (sharps, flats and naturals) are valid through the whole measure, but **may not** be applied to other octaves. Check with conductor.
5. **Be constantly aware of musical contexts** in ensemble, *such as style and balance.* "At what level should I be performing? Is this a solo line, contrapuntal line, harmony or rhythmic accompaniment?" Be aware of expression and nuances in other parts. "Am I foreground, middle ground, or background?"
6. **Dynamics and Expression Marks.** Increments of gradations of volume are represented by abbreviations for usually Italian words for volume; from "pp" (pianissimo, softest) to "ff" (fortissimo, loudest). Of course, these increments of volume are self-determined by the performer, guided by the conductor, and are meant to indicate relative volume, determined by musical context in ensemble in performance (see #5). Expression marks, whether in symbols or text, indicating change of volume or tempo are also determined by musical context, and are not absolutes. In directed groups these are determined by the conductor/director. In the case of tempo and dynamic markings in Italian, adverbs ending in "endo", "ando" etc., are meant to indicate events that are to happen gradually, not suddenly ("subito"). So "ritardando" and "crescendo" are performed as "slowING" and "becomING louder".
7. **Avoid concept of "holding" notes.** This implies static tension and cessation of flow of energy. Think instead of "sustaining". *Keep active energy flowing, even in fermatas.* The image of "spinning" is good.
8. The beat of preparation given by the conductor for a musical entrance contains musical information about tempo, kind of attack, dynamics and style. The conductor will **breathe** and **prepare** with pace and attitude in mind.
9. Common-named notes must be re-tuned with each change of harmonic structure. The note played or sung in one chord or polyphonic moment always requires re-tuning as musical contexts change, no matter how "well-tuned" the instrument is. For example, the note "C" in a "C" major chord would need to be re-tuned as the fifth in an "F" major chord, as would the other notes in the chord to be tuned to the "F". Keyboards and other "tempered" instruments are tuned in a compromise tuning system, to accommodate playing in a variety of keys, and **cannot** play perfectly "in tune", while singers and instrumentalists **can**.
10. When practicing and preparing a technically difficult composition, isolate challenging passages into small groups of notes, starting at end of passage, then expand the group by adding previous notes and playing through to the end of the passage. Begin the process by playing the rhythms slowly and accurately, including the rests. Speaking the rhythms is often helpful to start.