

Professionalism

by Garrison Keillor

from *Prairie Home Companion*



My wife is a violinist, a freelancer, a foot soldier in God's floating Orchestra, who waits for the phone to ring, and then goes off and plays the Fauré Requiem at a Presbyterian church at 7 PM on the 21st, rehearsal at 5 PM, or six rehearsals and eight performances of *The Montagues and the Capulets*, or a concert of African-American composers for Black History Month, and comes back to tell me stories about the soprano with the big diva attitude and major pitch problems, and the timid clarinetist, and the blatty trombone player, and the French horn player who dropped his mute during the quiet passage.

For her work, which is highly skilled and requires years of exacting preparation, and is stressful, being so unforgiving of errors, she is paid a fraction of what a rookie waiter of modest charm could earn on any Friday night in an upscale restaurant. But she is glad for the work, and her complaints about the pay are always good natured. Of course it helps that she married well.

When she was 14, she left the little town that we both grew up in, and went off to music school, and to violinist boot-camp, and landed in New York City, where she worked for 20 years, bopping around from opera tour, to regional symphony, to pop shows, to Broadway pit orchestras, to church gigs, and off to Japan with a pick-up orchestra, to do Vivaldi and Bach. And then tour the South with *Madame Butterfly*.

My wife has played for Leonard Bernstein, and she has also played for the Lippezaner Stallions. She is a pro. I love to sit up and wait for her to come home after a performance, and hear how it went. Usually, it went just fine. Sometimes she is ecstatic about what they played, or about some singer who was especially fine.

Sometimes she grits her teeth. The trumpets were bad, or the baritone dropped a wine glass on the stage, and it rolled into the pit and almost creamed the harpist. Often she has something pithy to say about the conductor or the soloist. If she says, "I thought he was very unprofessional," it's a real slap. A famous soloist who is haughty towards the commoners backstage -- that's unprofessional -- it's just not done! A conductor who glares at someone who just played a bad note -- unprofessional! Worse than the bad note. Orchestra professionalism is a world apart from mine prizes attitude and a rakish hat, and star quality, and interesting underwear. And this concept of professional(alism), prizes ensemble playing, and precision, and a sort of selflessness -- and this concept of professionalism can be expressed in certain principles. You won't find this list posted backstage, but, my wife tells me, that's because everybody knows this stuff right out of music school.

- You are, of course, on time. Always! Don't come an hour early (amateurish) but never come late. Never! This is an Orchestra, and you are Violinist, you're not some paper-pusher at Amalgamated Bucket. (Orchestra musicians are experts at finessing public transportation, and if they do drive, at finding parking spaces no matter what, legal, or illegal. Everybody has a strategy for "Getting to the Gig," and a back-up strategy in case the area is cordoned off for a Presidential motorcade, and an emergency strategy, in case of earthquake or civil disorder, or an invasion of the body snatchers.)
- Don't show off warming up backstage. Don't do the Brahms Concerto. Don't whip through the Paganini you did for your last audition. Warm up and be cool about it.
- Backstage you hang out with other string players, not brass or percussion. You don't get into a big conversation with the tuba player, lest you be lulled into relaxation. He is not playing the Brandenburg No. 3 that opens the show -- you are. Stick with your own kind, so you can start to get nervous when you should.

Denver School of the Arts Orchestra Program

- You never chum around with the conductor, too much. Likewise the contractor who hired you; you can be nice but not fawning, subservient. If one of them is perched in the musicians' common backstage, don't gravitate there. Don't orbit.
- You never look askance at someone who has made a mistake. Never! If the clarinet player squeaks, if the oboe honks, if the second stand cello lumbers in two bars early, like lost livestock, you keep your eyes where your eyes should be. You are a musician, not a critic. String players never disparage their stand partners to others. Stand partnership is an intimate relationship, and there is a zone of safety here. Actually, you shouldn't disparage any musician in the orchestra to anybody, unless to your husband (or spouse), or very good friends. But you never say anything bad about your stand partner.
- If the conductor is a jerk, don't react to him whatsoever. Ignore the shows of temper. If he makes a sarcastic joke at the expense of a musician, do not laugh, not even a slight wheeze or twitter.
- Try to do the conductor's bidding, no matter how ridiculous. If he says, "Play this very dry, but with plenty of vibrato," go ahead and do it, though it's impossible. If he says, "This should be very quick but sustained," then go ahead and sustain the quick, or levitate, or walk across the ceiling, or whatever he wants. He's the boss.
- Don't bend and sway as you play. Stay in your space. You're not a soloist, don't move like one. No big sweeps of the bow. And absolutely never, never, never tap your foot to the music.
- Go through channels. If you, a fifth stand violin, are unsure if that note in bar 143 should be C natural as shown or B flat, don't raise your hand and ask the maestro, ask your section head, and let him/her ask Mr. Big.
- You do not accept violations of work rules passively. When it's time to go, it's time to go. If it's Bruno Walter and the Mahler Fourth, and you're in Seventh Heaven, then of course, you ignore the clock. But, if it's some ordinary jerk flapping around on the podium, you put your instrument in the case when the rehearsal is supposed to be end. It was his arrogant pedantry that chewed up the first hour of the rehearsal, and now time is up, and he's only half way through The Planets, and is in a panic. If he wants to pay overtime, fine. Otherwise, let him hang, it's his rope. At the performance, you can show him what terrific sight-readers you all are.

It's all about manners and maintaining a sense of integrity in a selfless situation, and surviving in a body of neurotic perfectionists. And it's about holding up your head, even as orchestras in America languish and die out, victims of their own rigidity and stuffiness and of a sea change in American culture.

Perhaps in a hundred years orchestra musicians will seem like some weird priestly order akin to the Rosicrucians or the worshipers of Athens. But in the rehearsal for the Last Performance, the players will arrive on time, and take their places and play dryly but with vibrato, and not tap their feet.

And one violinist will come home and have a glass of wine, and say to her husband, "Why can't they find a decent trombonist?"