

ORATORIO ETIQUETTE

Preparation and Rehearsal

- *Make sure you are using the proper edition and version of the score.*

Contact the organization or conductor to find out what score is being used. Make sure you confirm which arias you need to prepare, and in which keys. Communicate regarding tempo markings on arias, and also determine whether ornamentation is expected to be prepared. Find out whether any cuts are being made to the piece, and how they affect your part. Make sure you arrange a rehearsal on your material with the conductor in advance, especially if it is complex or if it is your first time singing the piece.
- *Number your measures and insert cues where necessary.*

Many editions do not have measure numbers, but in rehearsal the conductor may refer exclusively to the numbers when giving instruction. It's an excellent idea to number your measures in advance so that you are not scrambling to get them in during the rehearsal! If the conductor's score includes sectional cues (like letter A, B, etc) you can also insert them as they come up.
- *If you are preparing a quartet part, know the whole piece.*

Go through your score carefully and find every passage you will sing in the piece. Mark these passages with flags or clips so that you see them coming and are ready to sing. Make sure you have sung through each little bit before the first rehearsal, and that you have assured yourself of your cue both in pitch and rhythm.
- *Good quartet singing involves coordination among the singers.*

When rehearsing, make sure that you are attentive to balance and counterpoint, letting principal motives be heard in other voices even if your line is high in your range. Finding a blend and synergy among the voices creates a sound unit that exceeds the beauty of each individual voice.
- *If singing in Latin, prepare the diction.*

Find out before the first rehearsal what pronunciation system is being used. This is a tricky issue, as conductors have many different preferences ranging from "Church Latin" to various historical and regional pronunciations. The sooner you know, the more time you will have work the vowels and consonants into your voice. Even if you are singing in plain Church Latin (based on the Liber Usualis) there may still be questions about intervocalic 's' to determine.

Concert Attire

- *Keep your score in a black folder.*

Proper soloist etiquette requires that all scores are held in a black folder so that there is a unified appearance. The only exception to this rule is when you are singing in the ensemble and everyone is holding the same score without a folder; then if you step forward to sing an aria, you are not expected to be using one. Fortunately any type of black folder is acceptable, including covering the score with black paper.
- *Make sure you know the dress code and follow it.*

Men: the conductor will make a decision regarding dress – usually you will need either tux (black tie) or tails (white tie). In either situation you have the option of a vest, studs, suspenders, or other individual adornment. It is an excellent idea to invest in these clothes in advance of being hired for your first engagement! Occasionally concert dress will specify suit instead of formal wear; in this case you may want to check on acceptable colors for the suit, shirt, and tie.

Women: your options are more flexible, and less specified. However, it can be difficult to know some of the unwritten rules for acceptable attire for oratorio, as opposed to recital, performance. Sometimes your performance contract will specify ‘formal’; other times there will be no instruction.

It is almost always expected that attire should be floor-length dress, skirt, or gown. If the hemline is shorter than floor-length, ensure that the material falls at least to the top of the ankle. Colors and prints are acceptable, but it’s an excellent idea to coordinate with other female soloists (or the conductor) so that you are contributing to a pleasing stage picture. Almost any style of dress or gown can be worn, but consider carefully the amount of exposed flesh you choose to reveal. The look of the dress should feel consistent with the subject matter, season, and formality of the occasion and repertoire. If you choose a strapless or spaghetti-strap bodice, consider having an elegant wrap or light jacket to drape over your shoulders for comfort (it can be cold sitting out on stage!) or propriety. Think about how low-cut the front or back of your bodice is; some audience members and fellow musicians might be offended by an outfit that is too overtly about physical display.

- *Consider your shoes carefully.*

Men: shoes should be black, dress, and not rubber-soled. Make sure that laces are matching and subtle. Leather is not necessary, but avoid fashion detail.

Women: Wear shoes that complement your dress. You can wear any height heel from flat to stiletto; but consider how comfortable you will be standing and walking. You may show your toes, but make sure that your shoes are not casual wear. You might want to practice (sing the dress rehearsal) in your concert shoes, to see how they might affect your posture, breathing, and comfort.

Stage Deportment

- *Soloists should enter in the order that they will be positioned on stage.*

This is not only the most efficient procedure, it also signals the equality of each singer in the performance. Old-fashioned conventions such as letting the female singers precede the men perversely indicate a hierarchy among the singers, and can lead to ungainly repositioning in front of the audience.

- *Each singer should have their score arranged so as to quickly find each passage they sing.*

Flags, paper clips, or rubber bands should help to skip over pages not relevant. It is unattractive and distracting to the audience to see the soloists flipping through their scores while other musicians are playing behind them.

- *Scores should be open from the first note of the piece to the last.*

If a soloist sits on stage with their score closed, it implies that they are not participating in the piece until they stand to sing. It is particularly rude to close the score after the final passage sung, if the piece is ongoing.

- *Coordinate among the soloists for standing and sitting cues, esp. in quartet singing.*

Take time in rehearsal to confer with your fellow soloists about standing cues. Consider reasonable lead-time before your first entrance, or the entrance of the first singer in a quartet passage. Consider also musical events that might make good standing spots, or moments that would be awkward to interrupt with movement (pianissimo passages, fermatas, etc.).

Mark your score so that you are ready and can stand gracefully and in the spirit of the music (don’t jump up if the music is reflective or sorrowful; stand with assurance in allegro passages, etc). After sitting, flip your page immediately to your next solo entrance and sit quietly with your score in your lap.

- *If water is placed on stage, secure it.*
Make sure you locate it as soon as you sit down after bowing. Position the cup or bottle so that you can reach it easily and also so that it is unlikely to be jostled; under the chair and near a chair leg is usually best. Unless you are having an emergency, only reach for water during movement breaks or pauses in the continuity (like tuning).
- *In quartet singing, singers should endeavor to have a sightline to the conductor.*
Proper rhythmic coordination among the quartet is the principal responsibility of the conductor, and no amount of beautiful tone will make up for bad ensemble in these passages! Each singer should also endeavor to anticipate downbeats so that the natural tendency to broaden the line does not make them drag.

Bowing

- *ALWAYS bow when the conductor bows, unless specifically instructed not to.*
Expect to bow as an ensemble every time you come on stage, and make sure you can see the conductor to take your cue when to bow. After the piece has finished, you will stand only when the conductor invites you to – do not bow after standing, but wait until the conductor bows. Solo bows are rarely given in oratorio performances; all the soloists bow together no matter how large or small their part.
- *Watch the conductor for a signal to leave the stage.*
The soloist closest to the exit should leave (do not have the female soloists exit first) and should promptly turn and walk to the exit when receiving the signal from the conductor. The more efficiently exits and entrances are accomplished, the longer the applause can be enjoyed! Be ready to immediately return to the stage for a curtain call, in reverse order from the exit order.
- *If bouquets are presented, make sure to be ready to receive them.*
Do not place a bouquet on your chair, but continue to hold it as you take your bows. Sometimes singers leave their scores backstage after the first stage exit in order to make this easier.