A blind musician in the band or orchestra? – some suggestions

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I would like to acknowledge Andrew Meyer, a blind trumpeter and Braille music reader, who initially wrote Ten ways to help a blind musician in band/orchestra for the Music Education Network For The Visually Impaired (MENVI) newsletter, Winter/Spring 1999, Issue Number 7. His points are written in italics.

Stand/desk partner

1. Count off quietly, or very lightly tap or snap fingers, at the beginning of a piece during performances or when necessary during rehearsals.
2. Help the blind musician find the beat in a difficult piece especially if they are not playing that particular passage and the beat or tempo changes. (Count quietly, or tap your feet while touching the blind person's feet.)
3. Count quietly one to two bars prior to the instruments coming up into playing position. This enables the blind musician to come up into playing position synchronized with the other musicians in the section.
4. Read a few notes or give a reference point to verify a place in the music during rehearsal. Sometimes it is difficult to find your place if you are reading Braille music. An example would be, "Look for the mf after 47," or, "Look for three crotchet note C's."
5. Remind the blind musician to play open or muted if necessary. Remember that the blind person is memorizing the music and does not have the advantage of visual cues that other section members have.
6. Cue the blind musician to stand up or sit down when the conductor signals the entire section, orchestra, or band. It is embarrassing to be left standing when everyone else sits down.
7. Tell the blind musician the amount of rest (number of bars) after playing a particular section. It is easy to forget the number of measures to rest when you are memorizing several pieces.
8. Pre-arrange unobtrusive, tactile signals in case, during a performance, the conductor suddenly changes the attack, cut-off, dynamics, or tempo, etc. For example a slight kick could signify a cut-off, press on foot for a decrescendo.
9. Pass on visual information that contributes to the collective memories of the band. For example tell when the conductor nods and winks indicating that the performance went well. Relate why everyone is laughing - the Principal just tripped over the hem of her skirt.
10. Discreetly assist the blind musician when entering or leaving the stage in an unfamiliar venue.
Blind Musician

1. Be organised! Try and keep all your ‘goodies’ in something like your instrument case. Keep mutes etc attached to either your instrument or chair, not under your feet.

2. Sometimes it is useful to organise to have a flat table or sturdy music stand, on which you are able to place the Braille music. This will enable you to quickly check your progress or refresh your memory.

3. Nothing helps you feel more confident than practising your part and knowing the music.

4. Be a full member of the band, assist, often, with the “setting up” before and “putting away” after rehearsal.

5. Take your music to every rehearsal. You, unfortunately, cannot rely on your stand partner. If possible have your music labelled in print.

6. If you are not sure about the layout of the performance space, location of dressing rooms etc ask someone.

7. Have someone check your appearance before you go on stage.

Conductor

1. Before giving the upbeat introduce the tempo by tapping a few bars with the baton on your stand or wristwatch. Work out what best suits you and your musicians.

2. *Allow the blind musician extra time to find his or her place in the music or to switch to another selection during rehearsal.* Braille music is bulky.

3. *Say out loud the bar number or rehearsal number when other sections enter during rehearsals. This enables the blind musician to keep track of where the band is currently playing.*

4. Remember that in rehearsal many indications from the conductor are verbal. In concert all indications become visual.

5. Encourage the blind child to become music literate. Encourage them to read the Braille music and not try and rely on ear and memory.

6. Arrange for the musician to have their Braille music copy in advance. Sight reading is a difficult skill for most instrumentalists.

7. Configure the binding of the book of music so that when it is open two pages of Braille music can be read before the page needs to be turned.

8. Teach all your students proper recital behaviour. If feasible, have the blind musician walk to and from their seat unaided.

9. Explain what type of dress is acceptable for each performance. Instruct all students how to act when the conductor arrives at the podium, when to smile and how to bow after a performance. This knowledge and experience is usually beneficial to all.