



The Stage Crew Handbook

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PREFACE

This was written as support material during my tenure as Graduate Vice President of the University of North Texas Composers Forum, 2011-2012.

As a stage crew member you serve a vital role in every event you work. You are the visible invisible – the tasks you attend to ensure the smooth success of the concert and are noticeable by all but need to happen with maximal ease and minimal disruption. This is a useful skill as a musician and, also, a tremendous opportunity to network and contribute to the practical side of our artistic endeavors.

CREW DELEGATIONS

Though doable by fewer and sometimes more are needed, three individuals can generally balance the demands on a stage crew. Though assignments are flexible and subject to the needs of the event, a suggested delegation of responsibilities is as follows:

Crew leader:

- Backstage manager: remains backstage to coordinate people and be accessible in case of questions and emergencies
- Makes announcements
- Manages the pacing and timing (length of intermission, indicating to next performer(s) approximately how long the preceding piece is, etc.)
- Keeps pertinent notes
- Reminds performer(s) to acknowledge the composer during the applause following the piece's performance

Crew member:

- Green room duty: calls musician(s) backstage in advance of their performance
- Stage changes

Crew member:

- Stage duty: holds door as musicians enter and exit stage, watches until the performance starts in case of last-minute concerns
- Stage changes

DRESS REHEARSAL

It is imperative that the stage crew be present at the event's dress rehearsal to familiarize themselves with the space and set-ups and to take notes on a number of details. During the dress rehearsal:

- If you do not have it already, ask about and make note of the length of the piece.

- Help each group set the stage for their portion of the rehearsal – both to get a sense of where they want things and to ensure as much time as possible for them to play.
- As they rehearse, make a detailed diagram of the set-up, including (as needed):
 - o Piano placement and whether it is raised to short or long stick
 - o Whether a chair for a page-turner is needed
 - o Number and placement of chairs, stands, or other equipment (try to make note of how closely they are spaced)
 - o Any specific equipment needs
- Acquaint yourself with the room: notice walkways, doors, curtains, lights – make sure you know how to work everything and have a sense if there are things that need to be cleared from the stage before the concert. Sometimes doors catch in different ways or are noisier than you would expect – this is the time to find that out.

Performers will make final adjustments, but it is not only helpful to them but also more graceful if the set-up is close to their specifications. We have all seen a string quartet walk out on stage, bow, smile politely, and drag each chair a foot or more to have them positioned closer together. As a preface to the music we hear this loud event executed by musicians simultaneously balancing expensive instruments in their hands – and as stage crew, we can minimize this.

The dress rehearsal should be run as professionally as the concert. It is up to the stage crew to ensure that performers adhere to their scheduled times. Often this time must be used as a soundcheck rather than full dress rehearsal; there is no guarantee that they will be able to run the piece – this depends on promptness, length of the piece, and amount of time spent tuning and checking spots.

It also needs to be planned where extra chairs, stands, etc. will be placed when not in use. Ideally they will be out-of-sight of the audience. If it is absolutely necessary for them to remain on stage they should be arranged neatly in a pre-arranged location that is out of the way of the performers and preferably out of view for photos or videos.

SPECIAL REQUIREMENTS

Pianos:

- Piano movements should be determined at the dress rehearsal. Depending on space, staging, timing, and other practical concerns pianos may be taken offstage or moved to the side of the stage when not in use.
- Always lower the piano lid as well as the lid over the piano keys before moving the piano.
- Piano wheels have locks; be sure that you know how to work them in advance and remember to both unlock them before moving and relock them after placing the piano.

Extensive set-ups:

- Occasionally a set-up for a performance is quite extensive; in these cases it is important to prepare as much as possible backstage.
- For example, have the correct number of chairs and stands placed in a planned location so extraneous counting does not have to occur (especially onstage).
- If a number of stands are needed to be lined up, they can be placed to the correct height and angle by the performer(s) backstage.

Instrumental specifics:

- Be prepared and organized for occasional special requests – make note of these during dress rehearsals and be sure that the appropriate equipment is assembled beforehand.
- For example, cellists often prefer a certain type of chair or a piano bench.
- Percussionists will occasionally have extensive set-ups and will almost always handle their equipment themselves. Simply ask in what way(s) you can be of most assistance.

Technical requirements:

- All responsibility for the technical requirements of concerts will be deferred to the CEMI staff. The stage crew must perform their duties with respect to the equipment and following any requests and instructions of the CEMI staff.

Events staffed by the College of Music:

- Certain concerts held in Voertman Hall are staffed by UNT College of Music employees; for these events the stage crew will defer to the College of Music staff.

ATTIRE AND STAGE PRESENCE

Unless other attire is decided upon and agreed to for specific reasons, head-to-toe black is standard stage crew attire. Clothes must be dressy, though not formal, and practical for the physical requirements of the job. No tennis shoes, tee shirts, or black jeans. Faded black does not count as black. Women should not wear clothing that is low-cut, shows midriff, or shows too much leg (remember that in many cases the stage puts you slightly above the audience, so skirt length must be proportionately longer); pants are preferable. Men's clothing also should not be revealing. Button-down shirts are preferable and should be tucked in; ties are not necessary as they could easily get in the way.

Shoes should be black and practical – traction prevents embarrassing situations (i.e. slipping or fruitless piano-moving attempts).

Occasionally an audience claps for a stage crew member – either as a mistake because they were anticipating the performers or in an often-humorous recognition of the crew member's presence, especially if he or she was performing a particularly extensive task. You can choose to handle this in various ways depending on what you feel the situation

merits. In many cases the simplest and most appropriate response is to essentially ignore it, but smile politely. In extreme cases it may be in good humor to face the audience with a smile and a confident nod of recognition. Rarely would I encourage this, however, as you are to be the “visible invisible” as previously mentioned, but situations do arise when the attention is turned toward you and you can choose to handle it in a more overt way.

Walk with authority and some speed. In addition to being time-efficient, moving quickly aids in your appearance of confidence. Each stage adjustment should be discussed in advance between the crew members who will be handling it so that you know what you will be doing when you walk out on stage. Do not be self-conscious about taking a moment after arranging the set-up to look it over and make sure everything is done before walking off stage.

COME PREPARED

- Bring a timepiece.
- Mute your cell phone immediately upon arrival or leave it elsewhere.
- Before the concert begins, a stage crew member should bring a few programs backstage for the performers to reference.

PAGE-TURNING

As a stage crew member you should be prepared to turn pages – often page-turners will be asked in advance, but occasionally there is a last-minute need. Turning pages can be a scary responsibility, and if you feel completely uncomfortable it is better that someone else handles it. However, it is a skill to become more comfortable with.

A few things to think about when page-turning:

- Page-turning is most often done for a pianist, and you should sit next to the piano bench on a chair that is placed behind the pianist from the audience’s point of view. Because of the construction of a grand piano, this is almost always on the left-hand side of the pianist.
- When sitting, stay far enough back that you do not block the pianist’s reach of that end of the keyboard.
- Decide what part of the score is easiest for you to follow – perhaps the bassline, perhaps another instrument’s part – and stick to it.
- Stand up when a page-turn is coming, and stand up with plenty of time to spare. Reach over and grab the top corner of the page to be turned – this gives you an opportunity to get a good hold, make sure you only grasped one page, and wait until it is time to turn without blocking the pianist’s view of the music.
- Importantly, turn the page FAST! The pianist’s mind is on what comes next, not the gracefulness of the page.

- Draped clothing and neckties are in the way and a hassle when standing to turn a page.
- ASK IN ADVANCE: “Do you nod when you want the page turned?” Some pianists nod (most often before they have completely finished playing the music on the page), some do not, and some sometimes nod. No matter what, watch the music and know when the end of the page is coming while being prepared to see a nod with your peripheral vision. If the pianist is very consistent about nodding you will likely find it more secure to turn and watch him or her more directly after you have gripped your page.
- ASK IN ADVANCE: “Are there any repeats, and where they go back to?”
- REVIEW THE SCORE IN ADVANCE: determine where the piece (and, when necessary, where each movement within the piece) ends – this prevents you from standing and preparing for a page-turn when one is not needed, which is distracting to the audience and performers alike.

Walking on and off stage as a page-turner is an interesting situation. You are not a performer, but you are present in the action of the performance. Appropriate protocol in this situation dictates:

- Let the performers walk on stage and bow. As soon as they turn away from their bow and start to settle in you can walk quickly and quietly to your chair. Never walk in front of any ensemble members unless it is impossible to avoid; it is best to walk behind the piano.
- After the piece ends, remain sitting while the ensemble again bows. When they walk off stage, quickly follow behind them and step out of the way as soon as you get back stage in case they prepare to walk back on for a second bow.

DURING THE CONCERT

Miscellaneous responsibilities:

- Occasionally stage crews manage the lights as well. The changes between light settings indicate to the audience when the music is about to start or when it has ended. Before the concert, during intermission, and after the concert the house lights should be up and the stage lights should be on a non-performance setting; this is then reversed for the performance. The backstage lights must be turned off before the stage door is opened, otherwise the audience can see backstage.
- Stage crew members need to be prepared for small emergencies – the team member responsible for the door should watch to notice if assistance is needed on stage (i.e. with a faulty stand or chair, adjusting something, in case a member needs to come back offstage for some reason, etc.).

Coordination of performers:

- For a busy program with many ensembles and pieces it can be helpful to post a program in an accessible place backstage and cross off pieces that have finished. This allows upcoming performers to keep track of the program.

- Individuals or ensembles should be brought backstage during the piece before their performance.
- If you are missing someone, prepare another individual or ensemble to go onstage next in case the individual does not arrive in time. In this case the crew leader should be prepared to make an announcement about the change in program.

Backstage protocol:

- It is up to the stage crew to enforce quiet in any area that can be heard from onstage or the audience.
- It is also up to the stage crew to ensure that performers are sharing the common areas appropriately for warm-up or waiting. For example, an ensemble should not hijack the green room for last-minute rehearsal when others do not have a place to wait and warm-up pre-concert.

POST-CONCERT

After the concert stage crew members should return the performance space to its condition upon arrival:

- Clear the stage of excess chairs and stands.
- Gather programs from the front of the hall and scan seating to collect any that were left by audience members.
- Organize the equipment backstage.
- Turn off lights and see that the stage doors will be locked by the responsible party.

THANK YOU

The UNT Composers Forum board and composition faculty thank you for your time and professionalism – contributions such as this are an essential part of what makes the UNT Division of Composition Studies so successful!