The Orchestral Piccolo Player: Many Hats to Wear

During my 25-year journey as piccoloist of the Detroit Symphony I discovered that this job requires many different hats or attitudes. I have learned many aspects of my role in the orchestra. When I first joined the DSO, I had to learn how to blend in and match my colleagues as well as figure out when to step up and be a soloist. I was terrified of playing out of tune and of sticking out when I wasn't supposed to, so I tried to "play it safe" a lot of the time. It seemed though that our music director always wanted MORE and MORE from me, especially when I had a solo. Maestro Neeme Järvi would shake his hand like a violinist vibrating on the E string and shout, "espressivo, espressivo!!" I soon realized that taking the safe route might not get me tenure, so I had to reconsider my strategy of "fitting in" with the 92 other musicians. This is where the idea of different hats came into play!

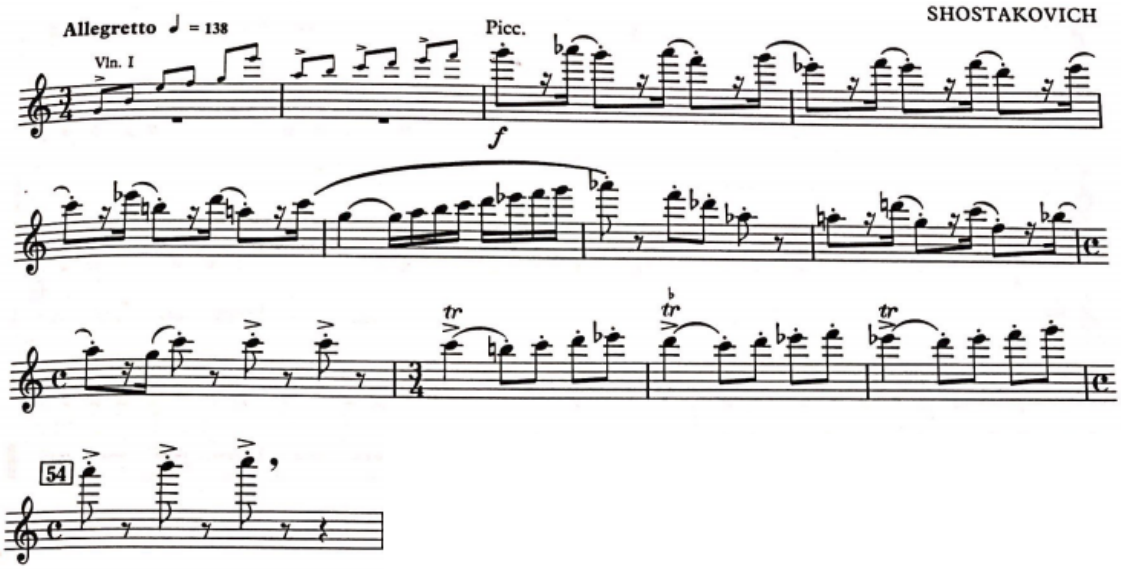
Here are four hats I need to have handy when I sit down in my chair. I am constantly redefining which one is important for each musical situation.

Be the best section player you can: listen left *(This is the most important one for me)*

Although often times the piccolo has the lead voice in the ensemble, we have to constantly bear in mind that the Principal flute sets the pitch, note length, style and nuance as they see fit with the other Principal winds at any given moment. I often can't hear what the oboe is doing, so I have to trust that the choices the Principal flute is making reflect what I can't hear from other winds; I need to be mindful at all times what is happening to my left!

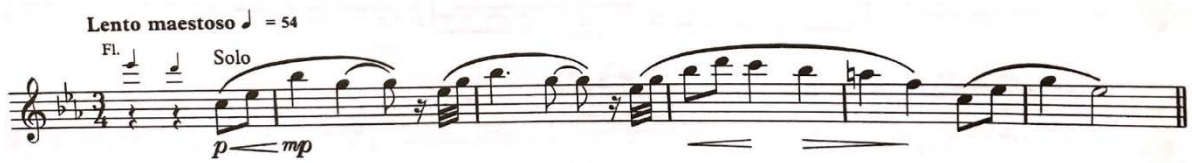
Know when to 'lead the pack'

That being said, there are certain times when the piccolo needs to lead the pack. It's an exhilarating feeling when I play this passage from the second movement of Shostakovich *Symphony Number 5*. I use a full, round and rich sound, well supported to create a forte sonority that complements the entire ensemble. If you "try to hide" in passages like this, your sound will get crushed by the sound of the ensemble, and the "uber blend", like a sound of a great organ with all the stops pulled out, will never be achieved.



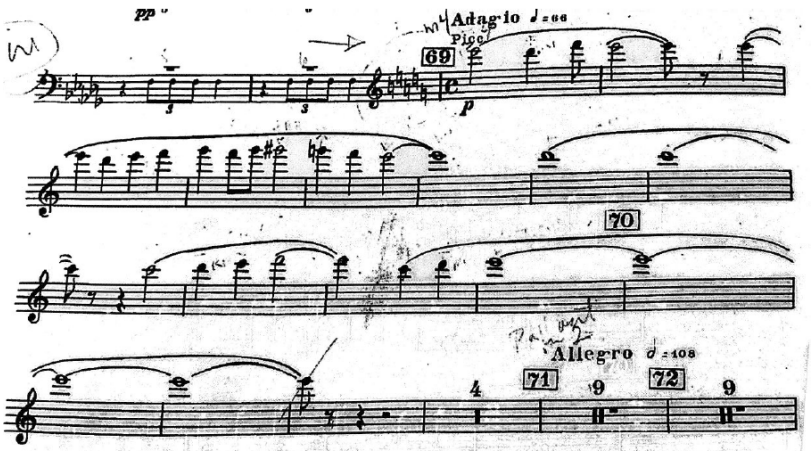
Know when to be 'part of the crowd'

Let's face it, the piccolo can really stick out, so part of the job of a piccolo player is recognizing when you need to get out of the way! This is when it's fun to experiment with different colors in my sound, to find different ways to blend with other instruments. Here, in the opening of Copland's *Billy the Kid,* I change the vowel shape of my mouth behind my embouchure and my blowing to create a darker sound to get *inside* the sound of the oboe:



I call this my "PICCOBOE" sound! When I get *inside* the oboe sound I can create the right timbre and blend.

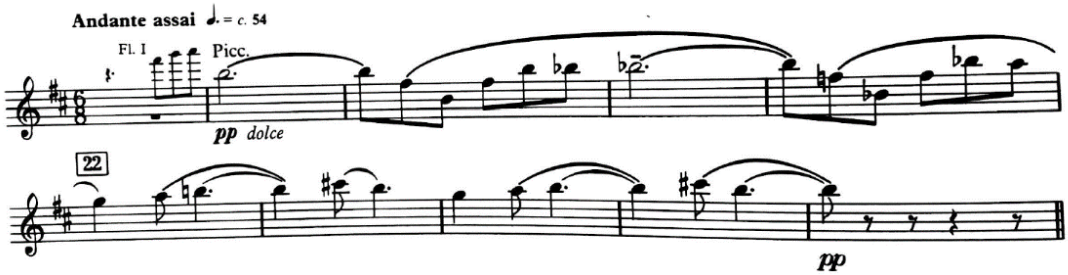
Here, in the third movement of Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 11*, this stark and solemn passage requires an ultra-soft and non-piercing sonority. I have to make sure the oral cavity remains large and open behind my lips so the air can travel quickly and freely despite the dynamic.



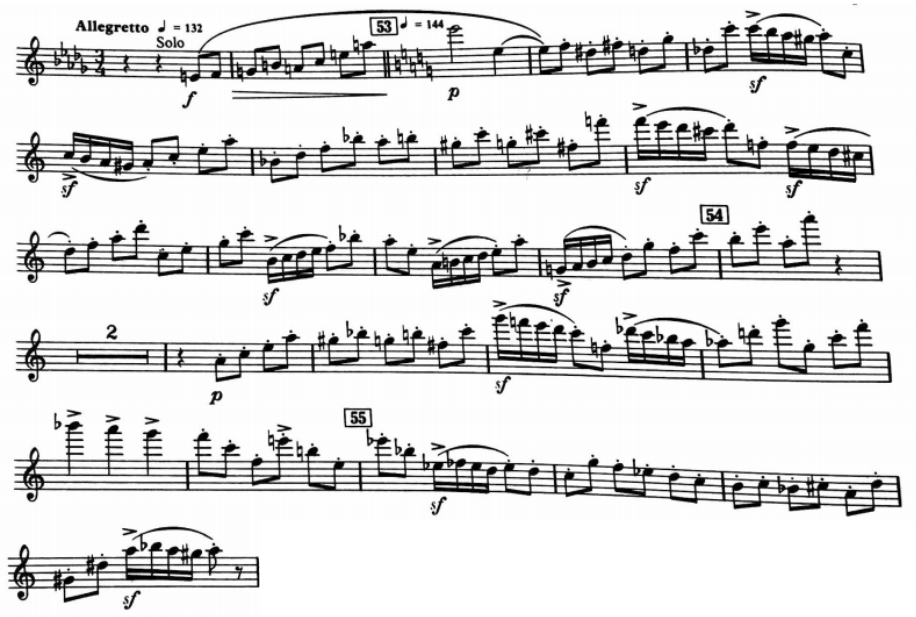
You are an extension of the Principal flute

Sitting in the "fourth chair" position in the orchestra, it's easy to take a backseat role at times, but the piccolo really is an extension of the sound of the Principal flute and we have to 'act' like one with our attitude and sound.

Here in Prokofiev's *Violin Concerto No. 1*, the piccolo literally takes over the principal flute line and emerges as a soloist all on its own.



There are many famous piccolo solos such as this one from Shostakovich *Symphony No. 8* where the piccolo simply has the solo line. Do the deal!



Again, if my mind set is that of just a section member, I won't have the right soloist quality and leading tone that the score calls for.

So, after a short time, I abandoned my concept of trying to stay out of the way and adopted an attitude more of a soloist who is willing to take a back seat in a supporting role when necessary. I found that by "taking charge" when necessary, I wasn't tiptoeing around the orchestra and my job became much more comfortable and successful. I challenge myself by seeking opportunities outside of my job to play recitals and concertos to keep the "soloist" aspect of my orchestra personality in its comfort zone.

Have fun trying on the many hats that the orchestral repertoire requires and not only will you be a better orchestral player, but your job will be that much more enjoyable!

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