Guidelines for allocation of playing places
Merchant Sinfonia
September 2025

1. These guidelines will be implemented by the Committee of Merchant Sinfonia (MS) to ensure consistency and transparency when allocating playing places in oversubscribed sessions. The MS is committed to open access and giving orchestral playing opportunities to adult beginners, rusty returners and inexperienced players wishing to try orchestral playing in a supportive and non-pressured environment. Due to health and safety regulations in the rehearsal space, places are limited and if application numbers exceed playing places, not all applicants can be given a playing place.

2. These are guidelines, not hard and fast rules, because the nature of the MS recruitment policy leads to session-to-session fluctuations in the sectional proportions depending on applications, and flexibility is required.

3. The Committee will follow the spirit of the guidelines in good faith in allocating places as fairly as possible but will also have the authority to use common sense and good judgement where necessary to maintain orchestral balance. The Committee reserves the right to refuse a playing place to any applicant when applications exceed available places, and refusal in one session does not guarantee a successful application the following session.

4. The MS will open for recruitment twice yearly. All players, including returning players, must apply to play on a session-to-session basis. An application window, which will be advertised on the website, will be opened, during which time applicants will be received. At the end of the application window, the Committee will review the applications and allocate playing places according to current guidelines.

5. The Orchestra will not normally accept applications from new non-standard orchestral instrument players.

6. 75 playing places are available. If there are 75 applicants or fewer, all will be offered a place, irrespective of the ensuing composition of the orchestra.

7. If there are more than 75 applicants, initially the Committee will look at the distribution of instruments and fill the sections according to the following numbers:

Violins	24
Violas	8
Cellos	8
Double bass	3
Flutes	6
Clarinets	6
Oboes	3
Bassoons	3
Horns	4
Trumpets	4

Trombones	3
Percussion	3
Total	75

Standard orchestral instruments, e.g. harp, can be offered a place in undersubscribed sections. These figures represent the ideal protected/core section numbers and as far as possible the Committee will try to stick to them because they represent a reasonable balance.

8. If applicant numbers exceed 75, not all can be offered a place. Applicants in oversubscribed sections may be balloted for places. The following process will be observed in the initial allocation:

8.1. If there are new players in the applicants for an oversubscribed section, **one will be balloted in** (two players in the violins), even if this means some returning players are not offered places. This fulfils the Orchestra's commitment to open access.
8.2. If the remaining places can be filled with returners, these players will be given priority over new applicants.
8.3. If there are more returning playing applications than spaces, the places will be allocated by balloting all returning players, and names drawn out until the section number matches the desired number of players. Those drawn out first will be considered 'balloted out' and placed on a waiting list ranked in the order in which their names were drawn.
8.4. If there are insufficient returners to fill the remaining places, the unfilled places will be allocated to new players following a ballot, run along the lines outlined in 8.3.
8.5. New players who have not been allocated a place will be refused and invited to apply again, but with no promise of a place.
8.6. Wherever possible, a returning player who has been balloted out of a session will be guaranteed a place the following session should they apply.
8.7. Members fulfilling committee roles essential to successful week-to-week running of the orchestra, namely chair, treasurer, librarian and membership secretary, will be exempt from the ballots.

9. No 'waiting list' will be maintained from one session to another. A session's orchestra will be drawn from those who applied for that session. Unsuccessful applicants will be invited to apply again, but normally with no expectation of preferential treatment the following session (but see also section 8.6).

10. If an applicant who has been offered a place or who has accepted a place for a playing session fails to pay the playing fee on time, the offer of a place may be withdrawn and their playing place offered to one of that session's unsuccessful applicants. Returning players who refuse an offered place, or who drop out of the session for whatever reason, cannot be guaranteed a place in the next session if their section is oversubscribed: they would be included in whatever balloting process is required in that instance.

11. Between the allocation of playing places and the start of the playing session, it is common for players who had initially accepted to drop out, making their space

available. In that circumstance, their space will be offered to unsuccessful applicants on that section's waiting list in the order in which they were balloted out. Balloted out returning players will be offered the space first. If the space is not filled with a returning player, it will be offered to the first new player to have been balloted out, to the second if the first new player refuses and so on until the space is filled. If the space is not filled with a player from that section, it will be offered to an unsuccessful applicant from another section, with the aim of attempting to optimise orchestral balance, so will depend on the spread of applications across the sections for every individual session.

12. The Committee respectfully requests that within the restraints of work, family and other commitment, players should attend rehearsals as regularly as possible, and that apologies are submitted for missed rehearsals. If a player regularly fails to attend rehearsals without submitting apologies, the Committee reserves the right to take their poor attendance into account when considering applications for the subsequent session.