

PREPARING FOR COLLEGE AUDITIONS

Advice for students, teachers and parents

by Barrick Stees

“How were your auditions this morning?”

“Great! We heard an oboist play the whole first movement of the Strauss Concerto from memory! She was terrific. How about you?”

“Not as good as the last audition day. You should have seen the clarinetist with the weird tattoo!”

Those of us who teach music at the college level may recognize this kind of conversation as that which often takes place during the lunch break on a college audition day. The professors get together to eat and discuss the talent they’ve just heard.

As a teacher at the Cleveland Institute and formerly a faculty member at Michigan State University and the Interlochen Arts Academy and as well as a private teacher of high school bassoonists, I’ve had a good opportunity to observe students when they undergo the process of auditioning for music schools. Along with providing topics for lunchtime conversations like the one above, the range in quality of the auditions I’ve heard has always astounded me.

My observations below are based on many years of experience, pride and frustration in preparing my high school students for auditions and listening to high school students audition for the colleges at which I have taught. I hope that my words will be helpful to those preparing for auditions this coming year.

Along with advice for students, I’ve included some words for teachers and parents, who, even with the best of intentions, sometimes get in the way of their young person’s effort to put the best foot forward in an audition.

Researching Prospective Music Schools

John Whitwell, the Director of Bands at Michigan State University, is fond of saying that students put more time into researching a car purchase than they do researching information about music schools. Researching information on schools begins with doing a little research on yourself.

Ask yourself questions like the following:

- What are my goals in pursuing a degree in music?

- What do I wish to do after graduating?
- Is a conservatory education or university education best for me?
- What other interests might I pursue instead of or in addition to music?

Answering these questions and others like them can help you narrow your focus. There is a wide spectrum of viable programs available for the young musician depending upon the answers to these questions. Many music schools are part of a university that offers a broad education with a focus on music. Conservatories usually specialize in a more narrow focus with little or no non-music academics. Some music schools fit somewhere in the middle. In addition, it should be noted that just because the school has the word “conservatory” attached to it does not insure a high-quality music education for your instrument. By the same token, some university music schools turn out graduates that compete favorably with conservatory-trained musicians in the job market.

It is very important not to stretch yourself too much by applying to and auditioning for too many schools. Four or five has always been a good number for my students. Through careful research and by asking good questions of school representatives it should be easy to narrow the choices.

Some intelligent ways of gathering information about schools are:

- Visit the school’s website. Much valuable information regarding curriculum, application procedures, scholarships and financial aid can be found. In addition, you can learn the names of important contact people in advance. Use links to the school’s college and/or university if it is part of a larger institution to find out information about other sources of financial and scholarship aid.
- Make a campus visit during the summer or fall of the senior year. Take a lesson with the professor, visit with advisors, go to ensemble rehearsals/concerts, attend a music class.
- Discuss the reputation of the school with your teacher, students in your youth orchestra, people you meet at summer camp. The names of the best ones will keep popping up. Speak to anyone you might know already enrolled at the school.

The 10 Questions

As you gather information, begin to make a list of questions you will ask the studio teacher at every school. For example you could ask questions regarding the:

- Studio size and load

- Number of openings for next fall
- Teacher's/school's job placement record
- Ensemble opportunities
- Teacher's expectations in an ideal lesson
- Teacher's teaching philosophy
- Scholarship opportunities

Application Procedure

This topic would not seem to need elaboration, but different schools have different application procedures so it makes sense to pay attention and spend extra time on this to do it right. Some schools require separate applications for the music school and the university. Make sure you obtain and fill out both.

Most applications can be filled out on-line. If an essay or personal statement is required, have it checked over by your English teacher or guidance counselor. Yes, your future bassoon teacher is interested in how well you express yourself in writing!

Please give at least three weeks notice to people writing letters of recommendation for you. Make sure the recommenders get any forms needed with the letters as well.

Musical Preparation

Start practicing now! When possible I like to begin work on the college audition during the student's junior year by stressing fundamentals during that year. Along with talent, most college music professors look for someone with good fundamentals. In fact, I would dare to say that many would prefer a student with solid fundamentals who is maybe not quite polished as a performer to one who performs well, but needs some major rebuilding in the approach to the instrument. Given the choice, I would much rather work on music with a student than have to fix a bad hand position, for instance. Focusing on fundamentals can be difficult given the demands placed on seniors, so I advise students to get as much work in during the junior year and the summer before the senior year as possible because you won't have as much time as a senior to fix a bad embouchure or poor breath support.

Have the college audition repertoire chosen by the end of the spring or in early summer prior to the audition year. Try to choose pieces and etudes that are listed on more than one of your colleges' repertoire lists so you won't be overwhelmed by learning too many pieces. Learn the tempos, notes, rhythms and interpretive markings for a few weeks and

then put the pieces away. While you work on other things during the summer the pieces often mature on their own and feel more familiar when gotten out again in the fall months.

Here are some further suggestions:

- Practice your scales!
- Purchase authoritative editions of the music you are playing.
- Study recordings of these pieces that are available.
- Have your instrument serviced prior to the auditions.
- Stock up on reeds or other equipment you may need.
- Spend a few practice sessions recording your audition repertoire and critique the recordings.
- Play a mock audition for your teacher, ensemble director, friends or family.

The Audition Day

Arrive early for all of your appointments. There will be cancellations and the schedule may change. Dress appropriately. When in doubt dress as though you are interviewing for a job at a bank or law firm. Most schools structure audition days to function as an open house for their programs. Therefore, this is a good time to look around and take in what is happening during that day if you have time.

Treat the audition like a professional performance, using proper etiquette (Mr. or Ms. or Professor, no first names, please!), and have a sense of stage presence even if the audition is in a small room. Play each piece from beginning to end without stopping. No grimaces after mistakes!

When finished, be ready to receive a critique of your performance and show flexibility when asked to play something in a different manner. Be appreciative of the time given and the comments offered you.

If you have some one-on-one time with the studio teacher you can ask him or her questions from your list (see above). This may not be possible during the audition. Most teachers can spend a little extra time with an interested student on the day before, during or after the audition.

Follow Up

After your auditions are completed, contact the instructors at schools that interest you, thanking them again for the comments made and time spent on your behalf.

Now you can fill in the answers to the questions on your list with a column for each school's answer to the questions. Maybe some new questions will have come up. Look over your answers and see how each school fares on your list of answers.

Next consider the overall impression made upon you by each school. What does your instinct tell you?

By looking at your list of questions in both a quantitative and qualitative way you should be able to narrow your choices. When acceptance notices and scholarship offers come, sit down with your parents and teacher and discuss it all.

Above all, be honest and swift in your communications with these schools and professors. Be communicative with the professors at schools that are your top choices. Arm them with knowledge about your interest so they can help with admission and scholarships. Even if you are not interested in attending a particular school it is helpful for you to let the institution know. They may be holding a place for you that could go to someone else. The way in which you wrap up this process is very important. You have made some contacts that may be helpful to you in the future. Always remember that the music world is a very small place. How you act now will be noticed and remembered for a long time to come.

For Teachers

I include a section for teachers here because I have learned that some students come ill-prepared for auditions through no fault of their own. Teachers of high school students who are interested in a career in music have a heavy responsibility. Since these students are interested in entering a job market that is overloaded with supply and very short on demand (especially in the performing area) the teacher must be especially good at assessing talent and discipline. Below are my suggestions for high school music teachers:

- Maintain awareness of the talent pool in the country by attending conferences and master classes with your students.
- Network with other high school teachers of your instrument and with the most prominent college teachers.
- When choosing repertoire, choose music that shows off the student's strengths. Do not program your student too aggressively. Most college teachers would rather hear a less advanced piece performed with polish and attention to detail than a very difficult one performed in a sloppy fashion. It is my opinion that most

high school bassoonists cannot do justice to the first movement of the Mozart Bassoon Concerto or almost all of the Milde Concert Studies. The bassoon repertoire is not so poor that something else can't be chosen. If possible, these pieces should wait until college!

- Urge your students to focus on fundamentals. Long tones, scales, arpeggios, articulation studies all contribute to your student's ability to control the instrument. The junior year is an especially good time for regaining this focus if it has been lost. There are often too many distractions and performing obligations during the senior year.
- Make sure your student has a good basic knowledge of reed making. Even if the style adopted in college might be very different from yours, it will be easier for the student to change styles than to learn from the beginning.
- Encourage participation in summer music festivals and events outside your area.

For Parents

- Being the parent of a talented young musician can bring much joy and pride. Sometimes that pride and joy can blind parents to the realities of competition in the music world, however. Here are my suggestions for parents:
- Do not view the bassoon as a "meal ticket" to college. While this may still be the case at some schools, generally you get what you pay for in a musical education. You are making an investment in your child's future by paying for music school.
- Some musicians graduating from music schools will find gainful employment in the music business, but many will not. For years the job market in music performance has been over-loaded with too many applicants for too few jobs. It takes talent, discipline, perseverance and luck to make a living as a performing musician.
- Many parents focus on the idea of a double major for their child in case music doesn't work out. There are pitfalls to be aware of in this scenario. In my experience, most double majors (music and engineering, for instance) are so challenged by both degrees that they end up being mediocre in both. Usually the student drops out of music and pursues the other degree. When exploring a double major at a particular college, make sure there is good cooperation between the advisors and instructors for both majors. Plan on a five or six year undergraduate term.
- When researching a particular school, be sure to look for sources of financial aid in unlikely places. Sometimes another part of the university will award scholarship or financial aid to a music major.

- Expose your child to concerts, master classes and conferences offered outside your area. Don't let him or her be a "big fish in a little pond".
- Schedule informal school visits for lessons with the instructors in the summer or early fall. Seeing the school on a non-audition day may be more revealing.

Conclusion

Preparing for college auditions requires good organizational skills, discipline and perseverance. Students need the support of teachers, parents and friends to be successful. Skills learned in the process can be applied to many of life's other challenges.

I hope that the advice and suggestions offered here will spur others to take up this subject with their students, add their advice and help bring a well-prepared, articulate class of prospective students to the doors of the nation's music schools.