
AUDITIONS: MAKING THE MOST OF AN OPPORTUNITY

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During the course of a normal academic year, I will usually hear many students audition and test for the various ensembles I conduct. While most students do just fine, many are quite nervous and often make mistakes they could easily avoid.

Students spend a significant amount of time and energy preparing for, and participating in, auditions. As an educator, part of my responsibility is to provide these students with as much information as possible to help them through this process. Most music educators have extensive personal experience in dealing with the audition process, however we often neglect to share this valuable information with our students. We all know of students who do well with the required work in their academic classes, but do poorly on exams. Conversely, many fine musicians in our ensembles are eliminated from participating in honor groups, or from even achieving the opportunities they seek within their own school music ensembles, because they do not audition well.

What am I looking for? For most auditions, I generally prefer to hear one or two short solo excerpts or etudes that have been prepared in advance by the student. Unless the audition music has been specified, selection of the proper music is certainly one of the most important aspects of any audition process. Most auditioners expect to hear both lyrical and technical playing from the student. While much of the solo literature available will include passages that demonstrate both of these styles of playing, it is perfectly acceptable to perform excerpts from two different solos, or use melodic etudes. Length is not usually the issue, as most auditioners can make a fairly accurate judgment in a very short time. I also usually recommend that students not change their repertoire selections immediately prior to an audition, as this will usually only cause them to be more nervous about the process.

My auditions usually include the performance of scales and sight-reading excerpts as well. Scale performance can be very helpful in determining a student's facility, range, basic intonation, and ability to articulate cleanly. If the student has taken the time and effort to prepare their scales thoroughly ahead of time, this part of the audition can provide an opportunity for them to relax during the performance of something that is routine. I also use the scale portion of an audition to allow the student to play without the distraction of the printed music. Many auditioners believe that this part of the audition often demonstrates a student's degree of preparation for the audition as well.

I typically will ask for students to perform a short sight-reading excerpt at an audition. While some music educators feel that this does not really show much with young performers, I disagree. If the student is proficient in sight-reading, they will typically learn music quickly and develop their skills at a faster rate. This also will allow

the conductor and ensemble to move towards the actual making of “music” in a rehearsal much quicker. I have also found that some students who play their prepared excerpt with wonderful tone and technique (often due to spending an inordinate amount of time on this one selection) will play with a completely different tone and technique when asked to sight-read. Students can learn to sight-read! All it takes is a little time and effort during practice sessions. Working on sight-reading during each daily practice session (and in ensemble rehearsals) can make all the difference. As music educators, we must help our students by teaching them how to sight-read. Encouraging the student to simply take a few seconds to carefully look through the excerpt before starting would help many young musicians as well.

A final thought concerning the scale and sight-reading portion of an audition: Many times I have had students walk into an audition and say “I don’t really know my scales very well” or “you know, sight-reading has never been a strong point of mine.” In addition to not providing the proper atmosphere for the an auditioner to listen in, the student is also stating a very simple fact that has a very simple solution. I usually always try to assure the student that they will be fine, but what I would rather say to them is: “OK, if you know you don’t know your scales, or you know you are not a good sight-reader, then do something about it! Take responsibility for the things you don’t know, as soon as you know you don’t know them!” Knowledge can be a very dangerous thing in the hands of a dedicated and motivated student!

A few helpful hints:

- Take control of the situation! Present a professional image. Dress comfortably to help you perform your best, however do not wear shorts, jeans, hats, etc. An audition is also not the appropriate time to try and make a fashion statement!
- Show confidence without being “cocky.” Introduce yourself and your musical selections, carefully preparing the correct pronunciations. Speak clearly and look the audition committee members in the eye. Do not make excuses, and try to maintain a positive appearance, even if you do not play as well as you had hoped. Sell yourself to the committee!
- On the day of the audition, plan everything out as much as possible in order to give yourself the best possible opportunity for success. Arrive early and allow plenty of time to warm-up properly. Avoid over-practicing your prepared materials during the warm-up time, as this may cause you to be more nervous. Have all of the proper equipment with you, as well as extra strings, rosin, reeds and supplies. Leave your instrument case, coat, purse, etc. outside of the audition room. If something happens beyond your sphere of control on the day of the audition, do not let it affect your performance.
- Remember that the auditioner wants nothing more than for you to do your best and succeed. Hearing an audition that has been carefully prepared and well performed is my goal as well!