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Preparing For College Auditions

One Year Ahead

- Research college music department websites: degree programs, faculty biographies, admissions information, performance opportunities, scholarships/financial aid, audition repertoire list, etc.
- Contact the college professor about opportunities to play for them or schedule a lesson.

Six Months Ahead

- Gather admissions materials.
- Narrow down college lists.
- Schedule a lesson (if possible) or private meeting with the university professor.

Three Months Ahead

- Complete applications. Mail them well in advance of the deadline.
- Request letters of recommendations. Be sure to give your referee at least two weeks advance notice of due date.
- Rehearse often with your pianist. Whether or not you will audition with an assisting pianist, you must know how the accompaniment part relates to the your own performance. This preparation comes from ample rehearsal sessions with the pianist and listening to many professional recordings of the music. If no pianist is present at the audition, your ensemble must still be well rehearsed. Even if you don't play with accompaniment, the audition committee can hear whether or not you know the other part(s) through your phrasing, colors, rhythm, etc. If you do audition with an accompanist, make sure the piano doesn't overbalance you.

Two Months Ahead

- Present mock auditions in front of as many people as possible. These are practice runs of your auditions with fake audition committees. If no one is available to listen to you, then record yourself and listen to the playback. You are the toughest audition committee you'll ever face!!!
- Confirm with referees that your recommendation letters have been sent.

One Month Ahead

- Confirm scheduling plans with the college admissions offices. Know what to expect on audition day (i.e. Is there an interview segment or theory exam? When is the campus tour? Will there be refreshments available? Where can I park my car?).
- Confirm audition travel plans: transportation, lodging, audition activity schedule.
- Continue to present mock auditions.
- Ask your mentors to review your resume, repertoire list, and any other supplemental documents.

Audition Day: How to Stand Out from the Crowd

First Impressions

1. Since the audition committee will see you, dress for success. What adjectives describe your audition wardrobe? Aim for “smart, serious, respectful, conservative, comfortable, and neat,” versus “fashionable, laid-back, sloppy, sexy, expensive, cheap, radical, and revealing.” This rule also applies to shoes. Please note: there is no such thing as “dressy” sneakers or flip-flops.
2. Be early for your audition time. As the saying goes, “Early is on time, on time is late, and late is unacceptable.” Most people will agree that “unacceptable” is not exactly a great way to get into college.
3. Be as informed as possible. Know the audition guidelines and activity schedule.
4. Have an organized warm-up. Be careful not to OVER warm-up before going into the audition room.

At the Audition

1. Your audition begins as soon as you enter the room. Be sure to greet the audition committee in a cheerful, confident manner.
2. It’s completely normal to be nervous for your audition. Have confidence in what you know and have prepared. Nerves will be decreased if you know you are prepared for the performance or audition. Even if you are still shaky on the inside, act like you are completely at ease on the outside. Judges like to see a performer’s confident attitude.
3. Before you begin, think through the performance. Once you begin is not the time to set the tempo. With your eyes, scan through a section with the “fast” notes. What is a comfortable tempo for that section? Apply this tempo to the beginning of the piece.
4. Enjoy your performance. Play with energy, purpose, and poise. Don’t be afraid to take risks. Stand tall and be proud of your work. Don’t hide behind the music stand.
5. Play more than notes. Music needs to become your own piece. Know why a phrase needs to be played a certain way. Don’t just imitate what you’ve always heard. Listen to multiple recordings of your repertoire and figure out what you like or dislike.
6. Every note should be played with your BEST TONE (especially the tricky areas!). When (not IF!) you make a mistake, recover. Everyone has performance “surprises.” Performance mistakes will be interpreted more favorably by the judges if you keep your tone production consistent and beautiful. Success is often achieved by smooth recoveries from performance mistakes. Follow your performance glitch with beautiful tone and phrasing. Recovery from a fall is one of the most impressive aspects of a live performance or audition.
7. Expect the unexpected. Audition committees may ask you to stop and start in odd places. Be prepared to sightread or perhaps offer other movements from your pieces.
8. Be friendly. If you are able to talk to the committee, be personable. If not, be personable to the other performers. Remember, you are all in this together!
9. Come prepared with at least 1 or 2 thoughtful questions for the audition committee or studio teacher.
10. Thank the audition committee when you are finished.

Other Notes

1. Believe it or not, the members of the audition committee are regular people too. They have a deep understanding about how challenging this process is for young musicians. They want you to succeed, and they are looking forward to hearing you present a good performance.
2. Audition committees love performers that have been informed of procedures.

Frequently Asked Questions

What should I play at my audition?

Investigate the school's audition repertoire guidelines. If you have a tough time deciding between different repertoire, I recommend choosing pieces that will showcase you at your best. Avoid choosing pieces that are too challenging. A polished performance of a moderate-level repertoire impresses an audition committee much more than an unrefined performance of very advanced repertoire. Don't forget to prepare your major, minor (all three forms), and chromatic scales. The committee may ask you to play them at your audition.

What does an audition committee look for in a student?

There are many things a committee looks for in their prospective students. Of course, the most important factor in determining admissions success is the audition. The committee is looking for performance at the highest level (technical skill, musicianship, musical maturity, tone quality, phrasing, etc.). Beyond the performance, however, there are other influential elements that factor into the decision. When it comes down to narrowing down a list of equally talented performers (as it often does!), the committee reviews their notes to find students possessing the following attributes:

- Confidence
- Positive attitude and sunny personality
- Good posture and performance poise
- Intelligence
- Independence and self-motivation
- Organization
- "No excuses" attitude
- Ambition (Career goals set high and specific)

Should I perform my music from memory?

Performing your audition repertoire without music can be an impressive way to stand out from the crowd. However, there are risks to consider. Your memory work should be solid. If you choose to perform without music, play beyond mere notes and rhythms. Show the audition committee beautiful phrasing, contrasting characters, and effortless recoveries from mistakes. Set your eyes just above the horizon level, instead of down and away. This small effort in body language goes a long way in aiding your overall visual presentation.

What should I bring to my audition?

You should be all set to go if you have your instrument, sheet music, and a positive attitude. Some students bring supplemental documents for their admissions application. These supporting documents may include: resume, repertoire list, recommendation letters, extra copies of music, audition repertoire program, etc. If you decide to bring additional materials, be sure they are neatly organized, professional, and triple-checked for typos.

Why should I consider scheduling a lesson with the college professor?

Your auditions slot will last 10-20 minutes. Scheduling a private lesson with the college professor before the audition will give you a chance to learn tips on how to improve your audition repertoire. Additionally, it helps the professor get to know you better while learning more about your depth of musicianship, readiness to apply new ideas, and career goals. Most importantly, this lesson time is an opportunity for you to "audition" the teacher as well. The teacher-student relationship is an important one, and it will last well beyond the graduation date and throughout your future career.

My GPA isn't so great. If I play a great audition, can I still get into the school?

Good grades are important! If your grades fall lower than their minimum standard, schools will not be able to admit you into the program even if you are the amazing musical prodigy they've been searching for. Your past GPA is one of many ways schools determine your potential for academic success at their institution. College academic courses, including theory, history, and English composition, are quite challenging. Another point to think about: many scholarships are conditionally based on maintenance of a strong GPA.