

## Auditions

People have often asked me to talk about how to be successful taking auditions. Unfortunately, there is no specific formula for audition preparation and success. As with most things several factors come into play, some predictable, some not so. A good place to start is by asking yourself some questions:

- A. Are you comfortable performing alone in front of people you don't know?
- B. Do you know how you would like each excerpt and your solo to sound?
- C. Do you have the general technique to be able to achieve this fairly consistently?

Your answers to the above questions should inform your preparation.

Comfort in performance (of any kind) is essential to have success in taking auditions. Skipping this step while still taking auditions may only sour your perception of the process (flawed though it can be).

Performing at a young age helped me substantially, and I likely grew comfortable doing it before I heard it was supposed to be difficult! This isn't to say I ALWAYS love performing and never get nervous. Generally though, I do enjoy performing. The more I do it, the easier it gets. I have seen the same result with all of my students.

Ideally, performance should be playing something the way you sing it in your head. The more complicated the music, the more technical ability you need to be able to express yourself consistently. Take Petrouchka's Ballerina's Dance: if you have trouble with the run up to the A above the staff, it will sound difficult (not good for a ballerina dancing). The best way to fix it is to analyze the technical issues and address them. It could be that more flexibility is needed over the groups of slurs. I had trouble with this for years. I needed more overall flexibility in my playing and it took time and perseverance to acquire. I could make it sound decent, but until maybe the last 5 or 6 years, it just wasn't consistent.

Going back to the original question – how to do well in auditions - the short answer is that the better player you are from a technical perspective, and the more comfortable you are performing under pressure, the higher your odds of doing well at an audition. That is about as black and white as it gets. (I am skipping musical phrasing because it requires a separate and lengthy discussion of its own.) After that, you hope that a good day from your perspective will be perceived the same way by the committee listening to your audition.

I started taking auditions for full-time professional orchestras in my first year of graduate school. At the time I had taken a few local orchestra auditions and had learned from excellent teachers what I might expect, as well as some strategies for approaching preparation and execution in auditions. Even that didn't prepare me for my first audition. Taking an audition requires a tremendous amount of forethought, planning, and expense (travel, lodging, logistics, time and pay off from work). Success at the audition means a lot more when you know you are vying for a job that could potentially support you for the rest of your career. This was unfortunately the way I thought of it, which put tremendous pressure on me to play well. It did not go well. As I took a breath before my first excerpt, I thought, "Oh, \$%^\*." Not an auspicious start. I played three excerpts and went home. Not everyone has the same experience, but that was mine.

Since then, I have taken over a dozen auditions for all positions in trumpet sections around the country. I have been lucky to be successful in many auditions. Lucky? Yes, there IS some luck involved. Thinking you can control everything (an early misconception on my part) leads to frustration. Over the last 14 years, I found that the less I tried to control the better it was for my

mental health and quality of performance. It helped tremendously to focus on the things that were good in my life and not think of winning an audition as being such a life-changing event. In the end, the only thing over which I had any measure of control was how I prepared and played. Not surprisingly, as I solved my technical deficiencies and solidified my ideas for how I want the excerpts (and music, in general) to be played, auditions got easier. Until my last audition I didn't feel like I really knew what I was doing and I had already won three at that point. You don't need to have it all figured out before you start – most of the “technique” of taking auditions is learned along the way.

In teaching college-age and older students, I have seen a wide range of emotional responses to the idea of taking auditions. Many ask me how to prepare for auditions as if it is this very odd, new way of performing. It IS an odd way to perform! In what other situation would you travel across the country to perform for an anonymous audience (who often sit behind a screen) for what could be fewer than 5 minutes, and either leave with “thank you very much”, or “congratulations we'd like to offer you the position”? However, thinking of it as a way of performing and preparing for the specific nature of what is expected helped me immensely. My goal was to show up prepared and just try to play the music I heard in my head. Everything else is in others' hands.

What follows is what I have been able to distill from lessons with fine teachers and from my experience. This is intended to be a guide to approaching auditions regardless of your age or level of playing. Obviously, if you are in high school, some of the information about professional auditions won't yet be applicable. While there are certain techniques in prepping for auditions that are unique to that process, the tips below have been very helpful in my experience for performances of all kinds.

## **I. Applying to audition**

### **A. Where to find auditions listed**

1. Trade magazines (AFM Union paper – either national or local)
2. Contacts/colleagues
3. Orchestra/Festival web-sites
4. Conservatory/school job bulletin

### **B. Sending information**

1. Clear, concise cover letter stating your interest in the audition and requesting all pertinent materials.
2. One-page resume (unless C.V. is requested). Be as concise as possible.

### **C. If your resume is refused and there is no recorded round**

1. Ask a teacher or professional who knows your playing well if they will call and recommend you for the audition. My resume was refused for my first job.
2. If you are still refused, some people will “crash” the audition. This is typically not well received at the audition, but some have been successful with this approach – something to consider only as a last resort.

### **D. If a prescreening recording is requested**

1. Assume that all will be fair with the process (that all tapes will be heard etc.) and make the best recording possible without editing within given excerpts. It needs to be a fair representation of your playing.
2. Follow directions for recording as closely as possible.

3. Try to schedule plenty of recording time, so you don't feel pressured as the deadline approaches.
4. Try to use the same room (preferably not your living room).

## II. Preparation

- A. Use the full, original parts. Often excerpts found in compilations omit crucial information, or, in some cases, have incorrect notes and/or dynamics.
- B. Listen to at least one recording of each piece with a score. (If you listen to only one your ideas of the tempos and/or interpretations may become inflexible.) This is crucial to understanding how your part fits in with the others.
- C. Record yourself occasionally
  1. Don't do it every day – you **can** be too picky and then it becomes harmful.
  2. Polish the excerpts to a certain level and then record four or five. Go back and listen and take some notes. Use those notes to determine your practice.
- D. Keep your practice balanced: **do not** practice only excerpts
  1. Find troublesome spots in the excerpts and find etudes that address the same issue.
  2. Balance loud playing with soft playing, hard articulations with soft, etc.
  3. Learning what you need for balanced practice can take time. Take notes and work through the subtleties.
- E. Get input from people you most trust.
  1. Sometimes playing for friends can backfire.
  2. Play for non-trumpet players – there will be many of them on the committee.
  3. Try to include people who have done well or won recent auditions – their recent experience is invaluable.
  4. Keep it to a minimum – pick two or three people (and/or small groups) and space the sessions out so you have time to process the information and make improvements.
  5. Have these sessions finished no less than a week before the audition. By this time, you should have clear ideas in your head of how you want things to sound. At this point, playing for other people can be more confusing than constructive.
- F. If the audition includes switching back and forth between different horns, practice doing that. Get used to the differences in response and intonation.

## III. Once you have an audition time

- A. If you know someone in the city where the audition is, think twice before staying with them. Will the situation allow you to get the rest you need for an event you've worked toward for months? You don't want to deal with not being able to sleep on someone's ratty futon or with strange noises from the upstairs neighbors!
- B. Allow plenty of time to get to audition and assume that it will **not** be running on time (i.e. get there early).
- C. Bring headphones and some music – they can be a great distraction (and hopefully keep you safe from shop-talkers) during the downtime.
- D. Dress comfortably but avoid being too casual. Even if there is a screen, it usually comes down in the finals and you don't want to look sloppy.

- E. Drawing numbers vs. specific time slots.
  1. Either way there is a good chance you won't play at your allotted time. If you are there early, you can gauge when you might play based on your time or number.
  
- F. Group warm-up rooms
  1. I avoid group warm-up rooms. People tend to be in there showing you just how loud and high they can play – for one of the auditions I won, I warmed up in the bathroom.
  2. If there are no places to warm-up or individual warm up rooms, pull up a chair facing the corner and do your thing.
  3. This is not the time to talk shop – although there are lots of people who want to. There were only a few players with whom I'd talk before or during an audition. It is too easy for someone to inadvertently play mind games.
  4. Don't run the list. If you've prepared well, there is no need. (If you don't know it by now, practicing now won't make it any better on stage.)
  5. Starting excerpts can be helpful, but save your best stuff for the actual event.
  6. I never worried about who else was at the audition. My approach is to make my standards the only thing with which I compete. How others play has no bearing.
  
- G. Consider recording your audition
  1. One thing heard often at auditions is “I played perfectly – why didn't I advance?” Rather than throwing your hands in the air out of frustration, it is much more constructive (though not always the easiest thing to do) to listen to a recording of your audition and be your own critic. You should record your auditions so that you can compare your playing in performance situations with what you have heard in the practice room.
  2. I have never seen anything prohibiting the recording of an audition, although its use should be strictly limited to a practice/performance aid for you alone. Make sure you have a bag (most gig bags can work just fine) in which you can discreetly carry the recorder.
  3. In listening to the recording after the audition, you may find that you have certain tendencies. For instance, in one audition I played, when I got tired in final round, I became more reserved, thinking it would help me physically to get through some of the more grueling excerpts. My approach may have helped me finish the excerpts, but the boring end result was less impressive than if I had really gone for it and come up a little short in terms of endurance. I wouldn't have spotted this tendency without the tape recorder.
  4. If you do record an audition, make sure you aren't worried about it at the audition. Know the equipment well enough before the audition to know what basic level to set. Make sure you have plenty of memory (and batteries) to just let it run. Press record when they come to get you to take you to the stage and forget about it.
  5. As with recording yourself before the audition, use discretion in your use of this tool. Consider how it may effect your mental state to in between rounds. Use the recording to make the process less of a mystery – not to beat yourself up over mistakes you may have made.

#### **IV. When your time comes...**

- A. Take your time!!!
  1. In general, people tend to rush through auditions. Take plenty of time between excerpts – it benefits you as well as the listener.

2. Bring water on stage. When the screen comes down, it is a good way to buy some time if you are feeling tense.
  3. Blow out your spit – whatever you need to do to take a little more time. This becomes more important if you are fatigued.
  4. The committee understands that it is a tough process and will give you leeway in terms of time between pieces.
  5. Most importantly, gather your thoughts and intentions before you start.
- B. Warm up on stage
1. If you do any at all, make it short and coherent. Nothing is worse than either playing a long warm-up on stage, or playing some indistinct series of notes – it starts with a bad impression you cannot afford.
  2. If you are playing with a piano, tune first – you never know where the piano’s pitch will be, plus it gives you a note to see what the room sounds like.
  3. Don’t ask. If you want to play some notes, just do it. If you ask and the proctor unintentionally gives you a funny look, you might feel like you are doing something wrong. If it sounds good, the committee won’t mind. Almost every audition that I have won, or observed other people win has involved players who played a few notes before their audition.
- C. Switching horns/mouthpieces
1. Do it as infrequently as possible and only in situations where it will still produce the best musical effect.
  2. Change instruments quickly and quietly, especially if you are playing something on a smaller horn that is usually played on a larger horn. Some will negatively judge your performance on the excerpt before you have played your first note if they know you are switching to a smaller horn.
  3. Again, take your time, once you have the new instrument in hand. Blow air to warm it up, etc.
- D. Do-over?
1. Try to limit yourself in terms of asking to do something over again.
    - a. If you just miss a note, but the rest is good, let it go.
    - b. If you have a serious clam, ask to do it again, but be aware that after doing it once, they might be less interested in letting you do it over on successive excerpts.
    - c. If they ask you to go on or possibly come back to it later, don’t assume that means anything. Just move on.
- E. Overall presentation
1. Try to remain composed whatever happens.
  2. Be calm and confident in your stage presence.
  3. You want to look like you are comfortable, even if you aren’t.
  4. If it goes poorly, try not to look disgusted. You never know what they heard that you didn’t. I once played the entire ending to Heldenleben’s 1<sup>st</sup> E-flat part in the wrong transposition. After a few seconds of silence, the committee suggested I check my transposition. I’d played a step too high. I calmly nodded even though I was laughing at myself, played it again, and still advanced to the next round. Apparently, there were enough things they liked that they wanted to hear more.
  5. Try to have fun. You’ve worked for a long time. Find the spots in the music you love and really go for it.

## V. After the committee makes their decision.

- A. If you advance
  - 1. As soon as possible, figure out when you'll be playing next and come up with a plan to stay warm, but don't overdo it. This is one of those things you only can learn from experience.
  - 2. Try to stay relaxed – if you make the next round, they like what you are doing – just try to do more of it.
  
- B. If you don't advance
  - 1. Always remember that you can only have one perspective at an audition.
    - a. Take notes that evening about how you think you did. What are the areas for improvement, strengths? Etc.
    - b. Lots of people try to figure out why they and/or others did/didn't get past a round. This can waste much time and energy. Focus on what you did and how it could be improved.
    - c. Call or email to get comments from the committee and see if you can apply them in the future. Do this quickly, as people often don't keep their notes around for very long, if they took them at all.
    - d. If you have recorded yourself, you can go back and hear how you played in the heat of the moment. Also, it is extremely helpful in understanding the comments and criticisms you may receive. If you are unsure, ask a teacher or colleague to listen and comment.
  
- C. Strive to remain positive
  - 1. Many people become depressed about what they feel is a lack of fairness in auditions. **It is a flawed process, to be sure**, and can be demoralizing. However, try to stay positive about it and use it as a self-improvement exercise. Are you doing everything possible to present the best possible product?
  - 2. Auditioning involves a system – get to know it well and accept it for what it is. It is the only way to get an orchestra job.
  - 3. The best recipe for winning an audition is to have high standards and strive for them. Winning an audition usually does involve luck, but don't count on it for success.
  - 4. If you repeatedly play up to your highest standards and it doesn't work out, it may be time to re-examine your standards. Of course, it could also just be bad luck, but it is always best to **look to yourself for the way to improvement first**.

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