



BASS

After You are Hired, What Next?

by Tom Pieper

In my last article, I addressed using etudes as you prepare for auditions. Etudes are great for developing skills and demonstrating your musicianship and have been required for school and post-education auditions. In earlier articles, I also wrote about using scales for developing the skill needed to play in a group. Now that you have successfully joined an ensemble, you may need to work on preparing your bass parts in a relatively short time. You may be fine with the pressure of learning new music quickly, or you may be wondering how to make the best of limited practice time. If you do not have standard repertoire under your fingers and in your head, you may find some strategies helpful to reach the best outcomes.

Today, learning new music can be a much easier process than it was in past years. When I find out that I will be playing an unfamiliar piece, which is often, I first arrange to have the music sent to me. If this is not possible, I offer to pick it up, or may ask about downloading PDF copies. I was surprised for a gig several years ago when a 70-page PDF of the music for the show showed up in my email box. On the first overview, I highlighted difficult parts, checked for solos, isolated difficult rhythms, and looked for unusual ranges and keys. At the rehearsal, the pianist asked if I had any questions about the music and I mentioned a few spots I had discovered. He replied that we were already ahead of the game plan since I looked at the documents he had sent. The show went off without any problems because I had prepared before. Often the show is the only time you will get to play all the music in the show.

On several other occasions, I received difficult music before the rehearsal and was able to spend the amount of energy needed to learn the part. This meant playing the music every time I could find a bass to pickup. While it is nice to have time rehearsing music for a performance with the other musicians, more often, you may not have that luxury, and need to prepare most of the music on your own.

This situation is not unique, but is

common for musicians throughout all genres of performance. One reason for this is the cost of rehearsing, and another is the difficulty of scheduling rehearsals for large groups. One former bass mentor studied with a “well-known” bassist in the L.A. Philharmonic. She would simultaneously prepare music that he was performing on the upcoming weekend as part of her training and preparations for the audition circuit. When she heard him first try the music on Monday she was somewhat unimpressed (“He did not sound any better than I would have”), but by Wednesday he had taken the music to an extraordinary level and was ready for his performances. This happens in jazz setting too, but on a moment’s notice when a group performs a song unknown by all the players in the group. I saw trumpeter Chet Baker perform in 1983 and the pianist did not know the tune he had called. He laid-out during the first chorus and by the second time through he was ready and was fully engaged for the remainder of the tune.

One of my teachers related watching while bassist Richard Davis learn a tune on stage. Again, he struggled the first time through the form but by the second and following times, he “knew it.” Blues pianist/singer legend Mose Allison told a friend when he asked about a rehearsal, “If we need to rehearse, it’s too late.” Great players can make this happen and for the rest we can try or pack up and go home. The failure rate seems to decrease proportionally to the increase of focus when you find yourself in these situations. You can increase your focus and reaction to make good quick decisions.

After you have been hired

You may find yourself in different scenarios when you have been hired to play. First, you may be called to play in a section with time to prepare and practice music. Sometimes your ability to play will be contingent on attending all rehearsals. Usually when you are called or hired, it is because you may have already demonstrated that you could do a good job or a peer who knows how you play and what the job requires has recommended you. Really, this is ideal because

you will have a time to grow and work on the music individually and as an ensemble.

Start with this

- Copy of music
- Recordings/videos of music
- Assessment—is this playable for you
- Getting to work on it soon
- Will I grow as a musician

Know what you are given

First, ask for copies of the music you will be performing. You may also volunteer to pick them up if this is more convenient for them. Often someone may be writing in bowings for the string section, although this is less common for bass. If you are the only bassist, this may be helpful but not as critical. Once you have obtained the copy, do a quick triage of the music and determine problem spots as mentioned before.

Do some research and dig in

Go to YouTube and search for an example of people performing this music. You may find it helpful to listen to more than one recording to familiarize yourself with the piece. With YouTube, you can hear the current stars, and if you dig deeper and listen to earlier recordings you may reach a greater understanding of the musical possibilities. Some tempos of older recordings will help you hear your how your part fits into the whole texture, and some modern recordings will have better production values that will let you hear your part more clearly. Chances are if you find several recordings, and listen multiple times, you will be in good shape when you start to rehearse the piece with your ensemble.

Recently I was preparing music for a Concerto and Aria concert at MacPhail. For the third movement of the Tchaikovsky *Piano Concerto No. 1*, I found it difficult to feel the tempo on the first recording due to the speed. I searched more and was able to hear the pulse better with a recording from 1985. After five or six times I could follow the piece pretty well with either recording. This broadened understanding placed me in the correct frame of mind to follow the con-

ductor at the rehearsal and anticipate any surprises that may come up with the soloist.

The next piece was marked *Andante Sostenuto* from Saint-Saens *Piano Concerto #2 Op 22 in g minor*. With the slow tempo, it is especially good to listen to several recordings and line up your part with the piano soloist and other sections. Be mindful to keep your concentration during the slow tempo. At first, listen away from your instrument as this will help get the big picture of the piece. An added benefit is watching the performers share the emotions and dynamics of the music through gestures and facial expressions. On the page all these dynamics are meticulously written, however until you hear and experience them aurally, you may lose a lot of the nuance and musical intent of the composer. All the listening is designed to help you in preparing for the rehearsal by putting you in the frame of mind to play your best.

Assessment—Can I play this?

How realistic is it to spend this much time listening? I think that the listening and score study better prepares you to perform than just playing through the piece out of context. When you approach the music through your ears you can help calibrate your practice to the end goal. Without a realistic goal, you may never be able to prepare a piece for time given. Do not get caught up in waiting to try the piece until

you “know it” and can “play it.” As with many things you need to jump in and invest yourself fully into the music with your ears and heart first. Follow this up with your head and fingers and much of the technical elements will work themselves out.

Who can give me more guidelines?

You can then check with the soloist and ask who they listened to and who their favorite recordings are. If the soloist or show is well-known they may even have a recording of their own that you could listen to. Do not ignore any information on the piece or soloist that comes your way from any source. Be as open to as many opinions that you come across.

Getting to work on it soon

After you have the piece in your ear, put it into your head and hands as you begin to identify spots that may require special attention. Make sure you understand the start and any tempo or time signature changes so you are not thrown off or tricked by what you may hear. Find a way that you can play along with several recordings and set it up so you can stop and restart easily. If you have passagework that is too fast to play, you can isolate the parts and work them up with a metronome keeping you honest. Write down everything that helps and practice everything that you are unsure about so that you will be flexible and able

to respond to any changes that come up during the performance.

Will this help me in other ways?

Other situations may come up where you are hired to play for traveling performers who may or not have time or music to give to you and expect you to be able to play the music on sight. Usually this will not happen unless someone recommends you or someone is ill at the last minute. For this you can be selective and agree to play only if you feel you are ready. Years ago someone called me to put a pep band together for a sporting event. I did not jump into this eagerly. I was called again about a week later and he clarified that he just wanted someone to play music in the stands to help support the team during the event. Since the price was right, I put together a group so I was happy and the buyer was happy. Remember that you often have to help people know what they want. If you approach each situation with trying to perform your best, and give the audience the best music for their event, you will work and grow as a musician and leader.

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