

Clinic: Auditions – Why, How, and For Whom?

Preparing students and their parents for contests, competitions, and college auditions

by Ray Shows

Auditioning on a musical instrument is a rite of passage and a process that must be prepared thoughtfully by all the stakeholders, well in advance of the event, and with the help of an experienced teacher. Violinist and chamber musician Ray Shows shares insights for preparing students (and their parents) for a successful audition experience.

What is an Audition?

Auditions are universal. No matter what level, ability, or desire, everyone in music takes an audition. Auditions are a process. An action. An experiential event or events. And there is always an assessable outcome. Auditioning involves long-term preparation with a specific goal in a specific time frame that will demand courage, competence, and perseverance. It requires people, time, and lots of thoughtful practice.

Why auditions?

Music students are forever in need of Assessment, Placement, Merit Awards, and guidelines to developing Personal Excellence. They may be seeking a seat in an orchestra or placement in a chamber group, or auditioning for a college scholarship. If we look deeper, auditioning supports the notion that music is important for the whole child. The experience of an audition can prepare the student for collegiate and professional job interviews, public speaking, maybe even a presidential debate. Playing, speaking, performing alone is a unique and oftentimes rare experience. Opportunities to practice and develop acumen in this skill include taking a music lesson, playing in a masterclass, performing a recital, and playing chamber music.

What types of auditions are there?

- orchestra membership and seating
- solos with orchestra
- national, state, and local contests and competitions
- college entrance and scholarships
- chamber music programs

Who are the stakeholders?

Students, parents, teachers, institutions and music organizations. And if you broaden the lens, Society itself. Not surprisingly there may be different expectations from each type of stakeholder. Think for a

moment about the students we are preparing. What age and ability are they? How much audition experience do they actually have? What are the parental expectations and understanding in this process? Does the parent take the long view of this particular event, or are they expecting a win at every turn? What is the teacher's role in this? It is vital that a *baseline of outcomes is established* so that the student's progress is assessed with contextual accuracy by all. The student, the teacher, and the parents must always be cognizant of where the process began, where they are in the process, and aware of the end result.

How do we help prepare for the best outcome?

Start by defining precisely what outcome is sought. Then (a) clarify the actual goal with *all* stakeholders; (b) set a clear and reasonable timeline and reduce outside distractions—extended family events, extracurricular activities like sports teams, theatre productions, etc. can impinge mightily on performance outcomes; (c) select the best repertoire.

What is the goal of the audition?

Possible goals could be to win a prize, a seat in the orchestra, a solo opportunity with orchestra or in recital, a scholarship to college. *Auditions should never be "for experience only."* *Only audition to win!* Our friends in the theatre are auditioning all the time, and for specific roles. Be specific about what each stakeholder wants from this process. Set an appropriate goal for each student that is in line with their experience, ability, and personal desires. Create a win-win experience for all involved.

What is the actual timeline for the audition?

Begin by having a conversation with the student and their parents about the event. Make sure the student understands how much time and personal commitment is needed to prepare for the audition. Verify this with the parent in the room! Define a set amount of time needed to learn the notes well, develop the proper expression of the music in those notes, and when to peak perform the repertoire. Too little or too much time before an audition will

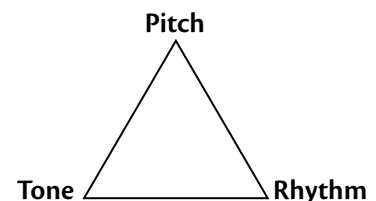
doom the project. Everyone needs to *be on the same page* about the amount and level of commitment needed for a reasonable outcome. Know Thy Calendar!

How is repertoire selected?

Always a tricky matter, repertoire choice is part science and part voodoo. At the outset, the audition repertoire must be at an appropriate technical level for the individual student *and* in the knowledge base of the teacher. The actual type of audition further refines the choices of repertoire. Experienced teachers know the "better" contest pieces to select. Ultimately, it is the student's performance that sells the product. However, wise repertoire selection can inspire the student and win over the audition committee.

What is the audition committee listening (and looking) for?

Consider this Musicians Triangle. Each element is equally important. The tone must be beautiful, the notes in tune, and the rhythm accurate (Tone – Pitch – Rhythm).



If any side of the triangle is lacking in quality the other sides will be affected.

Some subtle variations to consider include (a) the requisite need for *soloists* to project their sound above the orchestra with a strong individualistic sound approach that commands the stage and draws the listener's attention; (b) the need for consistent sonic power in an *orchestra* audition while showing a *containment* of one's individual sound that demonstrates to the committee that the player will blend well in their section (NB: bowing and fingering choices should to be clean and neat and not overly expressive); (c) the expressive intonation, harmonic awareness, creative bowings and fingerings, nuanced rhythmic control, and astute awareness of balance and ensemble that are the hallmarks of great *chamber playing*. *It should be noted that most professional orchestras and conservatories require chamber music in the audition process making chamber music*

skills more important than ever.

The committee is also acutely aware of stage deportment. The student should be dressed at business casual level and coached how to enter and leave a performing space as well as how to act towards and address the committee. Don't assume the student

and/or parents will know how or attend to this item.

What next?

Evaluate the outcome. Look over the calendar and plan the next audition event/s. Congratulate all stakeholders on their part

in the process.

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