

# Clinic: Auditions and Competitions: The Separation is in the Preparation

presented by Nancy Lokken

For the topic “How to prepare students for any kind of audition or competition...,” I have three answers:

- Carefully
- Gradually
- Regularly—making preparation simply normal

There are many types of competitions and auditions. There are competitions outside of our programs and auditions that are done within the schools. There is another kind of preparation for master classes, and an additional set of guidelines for college auditions. Though all types of competitions have similarities, each type can carry additional preparations. I’d like to focus on general competitions and then auditions in schools.

## Strategies for preparing students for competitions....

After listening and observing over the years to literally hundreds of lessons, master classes, rehearsals for solo recitals, orchestras and ensembles, I have learned so much! One of the first things I’d like to say is that competitions are not for everyone! For those who are interested and want to do it, there are some important factors to discuss.

*The only thing you are in control of is your preparation.*

After that, the outcome is out of your control. If the student truly understands this, and also the parents in some cases, I might go ahead and say yes. Even after saying this, I rarely see a student who doesn’t feel some rejection or feeling of failure if they don’t win or come out favorably.

*I don’t recommend a student enter a competition just for the sake of experience.*

Unless they are very disciplined in preparation, they have already set themselves up to simply do it, because they are just doing it for the experience. If you are going to do an audition of any kind, one needs to be serious about it. Remember we are talking about young students here, not a professional adult who might be seeking a higher position in an orchestra, and who is doing several competitions for the experience of playing their repertoire many times in this environment. That is a totally differ-

ent mindset and one most students do not have yet.

*How do we choose students for competitions? Why do we choose students for competitions?*

A student can have all the technique needed to enter a competition and the ability to do extremely well. However, each student is different psychologically, emotionally. What may work for one, maybe be detrimental to another. It is important to look at each student holistically, because what is most important is the care of the person, not the competition.

## Particulars concerning Repertoire

Choosing repertoire that is appropriate and that displays what the student can do best is not only important, but crucial for success. Choosing a high-level piece or concerto because it looks good on paper or because everyone else who has won usually does this type of piece is not a good reason. Does the piece demonstrate good technique that the student has mastered? For example, for a student who has trouble playing fast and clean, you wouldn’t want to give them the *Allegro* by Fiocco or a fast movement of sonata or concerto. For a student who has trouble playing double stops, you wouldn’t want to do the Bruch *Violin Concerto* or the Wieniawski *Legend*.

We as teachers need to ask ourselves:

- What is their level of playing, and what piece would reflect this?
- Secondly, does this piece show their strengths?
- Thirdly, can the student demonstrate musicianship and ease of playing with this piece?
- Am I choosing a piece that is in a key that brings out the best intonation. I would avoid E Major, e.g. the *Preludio* by Bach. That is such an intonation challenge for the best of players!
- Is the piece a good audition piece in general?

Ideally, an audition piece should be chosen well in advance of the competition. A piece has to live with a person for a while for it to be internalized. Specific challenges within the piece should be drilled until they can be played with ease. Playing a piece through all the time is not an efficient way

to set the foundation.

Once a piece has been thoroughly learned and you are closer to the competition, I suggest a student play the piece at least three times a day.

If we choose to do something in the music that could be criticized in a competition, I prepare the student for this in advance. Ex. Ornamentation and the reason we are choosing to do it a certain way. That way, if it is questioned, the student knows why he/she is doing it that way.

*Within the Repertoire there is Technical Preparation ...*

Assuming the repertoire includes technique that the student has the ability to play, let’s analyze what technique includes. Here we are talking about the basics we all enjoy, and expect in any performance:

- Playing correct notes.
- Intonation is accurate. The instrument has points of resonance; understanding what they are helps a student play in tune.
- Tempo is appropriate for the student and the piece.
- Can the student keep a steady beat, and can the student stay in control and not rush.
- Rhythm is accurate.

*Musical Preparation*

- Developing a concept of tone that is pleasing and confident.
- Contour of phrasing and variety in dynamics as appropriate to the piece.
- Sense of style and understanding of the composer.

*Stage Presence Preparation*

This one is often left out, and not considered part of the performance.

- Practice walking into a room and how to carry the instrument.
- Where and how tuning is addressed.
- Actually taking time to get set up. Practice: “Think, then Play.”

## Psychological Preparation ....

- How to keep going if something should happen...any number of things can happen. There are many scenarios. The collaborative pianist’s

music could fall off the piano; the accompanist could start the wrong piece.

- Training in how to focus or concentrate in front of others and with distractions: Ex. Gingold would often have a student stand on a chair and then as the student was playing, would ask questions the student would have to answer while playing just to practice concentration and focus.
- Training in how to keep going after a mishap without showing it on one's face.

### Live Auditions vs. Taped Auditions?

#### *Strategies for live auditions ...*

- Presence: practice walking, looking pleasant, comfortable, confident.
- Look enthused, like you are happy to be there.
- Be respectful by being on time.
- If you are greeted when you enter the room, be able to look someone in the eye and greet them in turn.
- Bring a copy of the music (original, not photocopied) in case it is asked for—(unmarked, preferably not in a collection of pieces) Ex. *Concerto in G Major* by Haydn—Mvt. 1 is in the Barber Collection, but only the first movement; buy the entire concerto. Ex. *Concerto in G Minor* by Vivaldi is in the Suzuki literature but not all adjudicators value the Suzuki Method; present a sheet copy.

#### *Strategies for taped auditions ....*

There is a difference between audio and video. I will speak to the video audition.

- What a student wears should be discussed.
- Camera view of the performer is important. For example, I just viewed one where the camera was recording at a side angle.
- Location of the performance. (I have seen some videos made in a music store at malls where you can see the public walking around in the background.)
- Student should never look at camera or accompanist, but there should be a planned signal when to begin.
- The beginning and the end of pieces should be practiced many times.
- Stage presence at the end is just as important to the music as what is done in the beginning.
- Some videos are made at a recital. Sometimes this puts more pressure on the performance. If a bowing happens to be incorrect in the performance, probably it isn't a good idea to send it in.

#### *What about the taped auditions that are done at school?*

How do we prepare for those? Time for preparation is crucial. Since I don't go to school with them, I can only rely on what is communicated with me. It has happened more than once or twice, where it was announced by the student that there would be a school orchestra audition the following week, and sometimes at the end of the week of the lesson! As a studio teacher, I would really appreciate more communication with school teachers. Students don't always let us know about these things until they are at the deadline.

If the scale portion of the audition asks for a certain tempo and bowing, but isn't appropriate for the student, I try to make the best decision. If a student is in a study sequence of scales, and what the audition is asking for is not the best way to play at this time, what do I do? If we play at the required tempo, it will be a mess. But if we play it under the designated tempo, the sound will be clear, there will be more time to think and stay in control and play with tone. I would rather have a student play slower and give a stronger performance with better intonation, clarity and tone.

In summary, I'd like to quote Dr. Robert Duke, a highly recognized and distinguished teaching professor in music education at the University of Texas in Austin and author of *Intelligent Music Teaching*.

“Effective teachers know how to identify a polished piece at each student's level and how to continue refining students' technical and musical development, not just with new repertoire but with intelligent, carefully monitored, continual review of already learned repertoire.”

Again, it comes down to preparation and our vision as teachers on how our students should look and sound before performing.

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