

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

by David Kozamchak

A little background about me... Like most of you, I wear many hats—in addition to my full-time teaching position here at Northwestern which includes a studio of university string students and conducting the UNW Orchestra, I have an additional violin and viola studio where I teach students young and old of drastically varying degrees of ability levels, I work with area middle and high school orchestras, I adjudicate solo and ensemble contests, I adjudicate and clinic middle and high school orchestra festivals, and I guest conduct honor orchestras. By the time my university students get to me they might have studied with 1, 2, or even 3 different teachers.

Over time I've come to realize that being a private lesson teacher or orchestra conductor is like being a medical doctor—we have to be able to assess and evaluate each student and each ensemble and find creative ways to treat their individual symptoms and discover multiple cures. The more bad habits that have been formed the more cures that need to be discovered.

## First (and Last) Impressions

Adjudicators are human. Whether we like it or not or whether we realize it or not judgments are made in people's minds based on first impressions. Honestly, I can tell a lot about a person's playing after they've played for about 5-10 seconds. What are things that are able to be assessed within those 5-10 seconds? I would argue that the visual is oftentimes just as important as the aural.

- Encourage students to look nice for competitions and auditions, especially videoed auditions.
- The perception of how a student thinks they look isn't always reality—all students need lots of training before they really know what a straight bow looks like. Videotape private student lessons or ensemble rehearsals.
- Spend extra time on the beginning of the music (first impressions) and the end (last impressions).

## Psychological Preparation

Not all practice has to be done with the bow on the instrument. Psychological preparation can be just as beneficial as physical

preparation.

- Encourage students to take breaks from playing and use this time to mentally play through the music.
- Students can finger through the music without using the bow. Try fingering through the music at a slow tempo so that the fingers come down forcefully enough to make a sound to work on accurate intonation.
- Mental practice can be especially beneficial for memorizing.
- I encourage students to write down fingerings or note names to help aid in memorization of scales and arpeggios. Different students learn in different ways.
- Encourage students who are preparing concertos to study a full score (or piano accompaniment).

Are your students focusing more on what they're doing right or more on what they're doing wrong? Auditions and competitions (and even lessons, rehearsals, and concerts) can be stressful. Train your students to have a positive mindset. How do we do this? By asking them what they think they're doing well and by letting them know what you think they're doing well. For instance, an assignment might be to have them make a list of at least 10 things they're doing well. This can be done in orchestra rehearsals as well.

## What Adjudicators Listen For and What Makes Instant Impressions

- Appearance—clothing, music stand high enough, where to stand in relation to the piano and the adjudicator, physical set-up.
- Starting without counting out loud.
- Communicating with accompanist/knowledge of accompaniment.
- Confidence.
- As an orchestra adjudicator—communication—with conductor, with stand partner, with section, and with the rest of the ensemble. The students should be playing at such a high level that they would be able to play without a conductor (like chamber music).

## Music Scholarship Auditions

One of the number one questions that prospective students ask me is, "How do I know if I'm good enough to audition for a music scholarship?" My answer is always, "You'll never know if you don't try."

- Public school teachers—My number one piece of advice to prospective students is to invest in private lessons. Encourage students who are auditioning for music scholarships to get at least one lesson.
- Don't stop working on a piece after submitting an audition video. We want to see that progress continues to be made.

## What I Wish I Could Share with Studio Teachers When Listening to Their Students

- Practice tuning to a piano.
- Make sure students know where to place the music stand in relation to the piano and what the ideal stand height should be.
- Make sure students know how their solo part fits in with the accompaniment.
- If students need to announce the piece that they're playing before they start, make sure that they know what the title of the piece is and who the composer is and how to pronounce them.
- Encourage students to walk into the room with confidence. Remember, first impressions.
- Make sure that fingernails are cut short.

## Additional Ideas

If a student has the need to look at their phone while they're practicing at home, require that they use that phone time to research the music that they're playing.

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