

An Empowered Approach to Auditions

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Auditions, for better or for worse, are a part of any professional musician's career. In this chapter, we will explore all aspects of the audition process—from preparation to completion.

Early in my career, auditions were a great mystery to me. In my junior year of college, I was one of the top horn players at my school. Yet when I first started taking professional auditions, I never got past preliminary rounds.

After a while, I realized that it wasn't enough to play the horn well. I found out that I had to learn my excerpts deeply enough so that they would work well "on the battlefield." I also discovered that I needed to learn how to pace myself, deal with unexpected circumstances, and keep the focus on me. With each audition, I learned more. I gradually started getting into final rounds, then becoming runner-up, and eventually winning. Ultimately, I served on many audition committees and learned even more from the other side of the screen.

To begin, let's identify the factors that are *beyond* our control at orchestral auditions:

- Where we play
- When we play
- What we play
- What they're looking for

We need to take steps to make ourselves feel as comfortable as possible in what can be an unpredictable situation. Therefore, it's important to identify the things we *can* try to control:

- Excellent preparation
- Pacing
- Being focused on the technical and expressive techniques
- Having a strong inner focus

Some of what you read here may make more sense after you've experienced one or two auditions. Let's start with the preparation phase.

Preparation

- As soon as a position is posted in the *International Musician* or other sources, send a request for the repertoire list. Usually auditions are announced two to four months ahead of time.
- Practice from actual orchestral parts whenever possible so that the page format will look familiar at the audition.

- Listen to recordings of the pieces on the list for tempi, style, and context. If possible, try to listen to recordings by the music director of the orchestra for which you are auditioning in order to learn his/her tempi and musical ideas. Conductors will think you're brilliant if you anticipate their musical wishes.
- Practice excerpts as you would practice an etude. Don't repeat them over and over even though they are usually short. Try to keep your mind working all the angles on an excerpt. (See "Working All the Angles" in Chapter 9.)
- Don Liuzzi, Principal Timpanist of the Philadelphia Orchestra, suggests asking yourself, "What do I love about each excerpt?" Convey what you love.
- Identify a few words that describe the mood of each excerpt you are working on and write them down. For example, for the opening of *Ein Heldenleben*, descriptive adjectives could be "bold, heroic, stately." For the opening of Mahler Symphony No. 1, "tender, caressing, comforting" seem fitting.
- Practice excerpts with your eyes open, then closed. With your eyes closed, listen to your playing carefully and see how deeply you have learned. Go back and correct what you need to learn more deeply.
- Memorize each excerpt. This ensures that you've learned each excerpt deeply and helps avoid too much dependence on the printed page. Each excerpt should feel like an "old friend" at any audition.
- Use a metronome 80 percent of the time in your preparation to develop an excellent inner pulse. (This is an increase in metronome usage from normal preparation.) Audition committees are looking for players with pristine rhythm and pulse, an important skill for orchestral musicians, the best of whom subdivide all the time.
- Rhythm, inner pulse, and subdivision give our mind structure. Excellent pulse adds sparkle to whatever we play.
- Break down the list into groups. Select three to five excerpts to practice each day. Hold off on playing through the whole list until closer to the audition day.
- Identify the excerpts that you may need to work on several days in a row (for example, the third horn part of Mendelssohn's Symphony No. 3). Keep coming back to those tough technical ones in order to deeply establish them in your muscular memory.
- Always start with a metronome; practice slowly at first, then faster, then up to tempo.
- If possible, get coaching from an experienced orchestral player whom you feel is challenging you and helping you to reach optimal performance.
- Record yourself. Richard Sebring, Associate Principal Horn of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, suggests this: Set aside one day in the week when you will record yourself for a short time playing an audition round. Simply play through a group of excerpts without stopping or repeating any of them. Then, do the same thing a week later. This will build your level of focus during each week leading up to the audition.

Pacing

Two Weeks Before the Audition

- All excerpts and the required concerto should be memorized.
- Continue to get coaching.
- Continue listening to recordings until the day before the audition to solidify tempi, style, etc.
- Continue practicing 80 percent of the time with a metronome.
- Continue practicing five to six excerpts per day.
- Practice an etude along with excerpts (even for just fifteen minutes per day). Etudes keep our playing honest.
- Play audition “run-throughs” in front of people you respect and who will be supportive. Tell the listeners that you will play through the concerto exposition and five to six excerpts, and ask them not to comment until you are finished. This will help you get used to this unusual, unresponsive situation. You can also ask them to try to distract you with cell-phone ringtones and rustling papers to help you develop mental toughness. Prepare to expect the unexpected.
- Schedule a recital during this time, if possible. It helps to play something fun in public like the Brahms Horn Trio, Op. 40. People who do this seem to be more fluid, focused, and confident about their approach to the horn at the audition. The short sound-byte excerpts will seem easier after playing long Brahmsian movements.
- Identify the two or three excerpts on the list that are the most challenging for you (for example, the opening of *Ein Heldenleben*). Practice these daily, starting slowly and getting faster, as before.
- Pick a few more excerpts at this stage, so that you will cover the *entire list* over the course of a few days. Continue this three- to four-day cycle. Remember to practice in a focused way.
- Exercise every day to keep toned and reduce stress.
- Be encouraging and supportive of yourself!

The Day Before the Audition

- Travel the day before, whenever possible. It’s not a good idea to travel on the day of the audition. Travel can be unreliable and physically and mentally stressful.
- Make plans to be as comfortable as you can. Decide whether you prefer staying in a hotel or with a friend.
- Exercise well, get fresh air, and relax.
- Practice for a shorter time than usual—just an hour or so. Limiting practice time prior to an audition promotes good lip responsiveness and flexibility on the next day. By this time we have done all the work that matters anyway.
- Don’t get into “panic practicing.” Don’t play through the whole list. Practice the warm-up routine you know so well; it’s comforting. Practice a little Koppasch, perhaps the exposition of the concerto and a couple of the more challenging excerpts. If you’ve prepared well, it’s all in your muscular memory.
- Sing through the remaining excerpts on the list, using the appropriate vowels. Remind yourself of the expressive adjectives you selected for each excerpt.

- Buy simple foods to sustain you for the next day, such as bagels, bananas, walnuts, etc. Remember to bring bottled water.
- Avoid caffeine, alcohol, vinegar, or spicy foods.
- Before you go to sleep, visualize yourself going through the audition in a very peaceful, detached state of mind. Close your eyes; take many deep relaxed breaths; relax every part of your body, and imagine yourself self-possessed, breathing deeply, supporting well, and singing every note musically, your body and mind working beautifully in synch.
- Tell yourself that all you need to do is the best you can, and the rest is out of your control.
- Get a good night's sleep.

Audition Day

- Eat a normal, well-balanced breakfast. Bananas and walnuts calm us down. Drink lots of water; stay hydrated all day. Avoid dairy, since dairy tends to curdle in the mouth and create mucus. Use soy or rice milk instead on your cereal.
- Give yourself plenty of time to travel to the venue.
- Upon arrival, ask the personnel manager or his/her assistant when you can expect to play. If it's soon, make sure you have sufficient time to warm up. Others may be more warmed up than you and can go a little sooner. You can always request to play slightly later.
- If you have a long time to wait, get out of the hall and go for a walk, read a book, or listen to a tape you like. Don't warm up if you have to wait a couple of hours.
- Try to find a private place to warm up and relax, away from your fellow auditioners.
- Pace your warm-up so that you finish within about twenty minutes of your scheduled time, or whatever timing feels most comfortable to you.
- Try to feel primed and ready to go, but not overpracticed and tired. Instead of using up your face, sing through the excerpts with vowels and expression. Rehearse your approach (breathe-support-set-play). Practice slowly one or two tricky muscular memory excerpts, such as the *Till Eulenspiegel* call.
- Avoid talking to others beyond saying "hello" and "I'll talk to you afterwards." People are usually feeling stressed and competitive; this increases their negativity. Stay away from loud, obnoxious people.
- I've heard people say things like, "You're using that mouthpiece??" and "You're still in school??"
- This is not a friendly horn convention. Often, the person who wins an audition has stayed detached from others and has been focusing on him/herself.
- Bring earplugs and/or an iPod. Avoid listening to others warm up, and do not listen to others' auditions. How people sound through a closed door or when warming up is not how most of them really sound in the audition.
- When you're told you will play in a few minutes, empty all your slides and talk to

yourself. Again: Don't listen to the person playing before you. Plug your ears with your fingers if you have to.

- Breathe deeply and talk to yourself. Remind yourself that 1) you cannot control the outcome; 2) you cannot make them like your playing; and 3) all you can do is play like you.
- Summon all of your strength and courage. Tell yourself, "I am self-possessed, strong, and powerful. I will play like me," or any similar list of positive self-talk that will have an empowering effect on you.
- You've worked hard and you love music! All you need to do is to focus on the task at hand.
- Since there is so little we can control in an audition, it's important to "get our power back." So sit in a chair and go through the following relaxation process:
 - Place your feet flat on the floor.
 - Close your eyes.
 - Breathe in deeply and breathe out long.
 - Relax all the muscle groups.
 - Leave all the distraction behind.

Onstage

- Set up each excerpt's tempo and mood. Remember the three adjectives you used to key into the mood.
- Remind yourself to breathe deeply and support well.
- Do a countdown in the tempo of the excerpt (4, 3, 2, 1). This helps build in structure for yourself.
- Remember to convey what you love about each excerpt.
- Sing every note, musically.
- Focus only on the excerpt in front of you. Try not to think about the next excerpt.
- Richard Sebring suggests, "Think about *what* you're doing, not *how* you're doing."
- When you walk out on stage, try to make eye contact with the committee if possible. This helps make a connection with them.
- Plan to play a few warm-up notes (practiced beforehand) to get an idea of the hall's acoustic.
- Make yourself comfortable and adjust the stand if necessary.
- Try not to feel rushed. Even though the proctor may want to move things along, remember that you've worked very hard and have gone to some expense to be there. The committee can wait a little longer to hear you.
- If it's noisy, wait for the noise to stop or ask the proctor to do something about it. You and the people who are listening deserve to be distraction-free.
- After each excerpt, encourage yourself. You can expect to hear no response from the committee. In fact, expect an eerie silence.
- It's your responsibility to provide emotional support for yourself. Tell yourself you are doing well. Stay focused on what you love about each excerpt.
- If you feel that you could have done a lot better on an excerpt, ask if you may play it again. Usually you will be allowed to do so. This shows that you bring

your own standard.

- Try to keep things moderately moving along. Don't empty all your slides in between each excerpt. Give yourself enough time to set up each new excerpt, then go for it!

The Next Round

- If you are selected to play in the next round, ask when that will begin and when you can expect to play.
- If it is hours away, try to get away and eat a light meal, go for a walk, rest, relax, and definitely do not practice. Remember, all the important practice work has already been done.
- Pacing is extremely important: You'll need all the strength, stamina, focus, and energy you have, later.
- Again, warm up with enough time before you have to play.
- If you've been selected for the next round, you already know the committee likes a lot of what they've heard. You ought to feel encouraged by that. However, it's very important to recognize that you still can't control the outcome. Try to stay completely focused inside; concentrate only on the task at hand, as you did so well in the first round. Keep it simple!

Remember, All You Can Do Is . . .

- become self-possessed; summon all your strength and courage.
- remember what you love about music.
- communicate what you love about each excerpt.
- play like you.
- breathe deeply.
- support.
- sing every note.

Final Thoughts

Some of my students have said that it helps them to bring this guide to auditions. They've said it calms them down, keeps them centered, and helps them focus on positive things.

Remember that the most you have to lose is a job you don't already have. And remember that the audition winner is not necessarily the best player, but the one who happens to fit in to what that particular committee or music director is looking for on that particular day in that particular hall.

Try not to be discouraged if at first you don't succeed. Most horn players in major orchestras today have taken numerous auditions. You might want to ask the committee members for comments on your playing and how you might do better next time. Their comments might make you aware of something you need to work on. Be courteous to the

committee members when asking for comments. Although you might be disappointed about not winning the job, be respectful about the feedback you receive. You'll go on to the next audition wiser and better prepared.

Auditioning is a challenging process, but one with which we can become familiar. I have learned from each audition how to prepare better for the next one, what I would do differently, what I would do the same. Although the audition process can be arduous and unpleasant and may sometimes even seem unfair, try to realize that by going through this process, you'll develop into a better, stronger, more focused, more disciplined, and more consistent horn player. This rigor will help sustain you throughout your career.