

Thoughts on Auditioning

by

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General Thoughts:

*Ben Franklin on the democratic form of government: "It's the worst form of government, except for all the others". Somehow, this is also true about auditions.

*Auditions do not show your relative skill in playing in an orchestra, only your relative skill in auditioning. Unfortunately, the way you get a job in an orchestra is by auditioning, so learn how to audition.

*As you progress as a player, your style tends to develop in parallel to your own personality. You tend to play like you are. If you are dull and non-committal, you tend to play that way. If you are a flamboyant, outgoing type, you tend to play in a like manner. It's good to understand this when you are preparing your audition.

*There is NO substitute for talent. If the excerpts seem very difficult and only improve with extreme application, maybe you should consider another line of work.

*FOUR ESSENTIALS in winning the audition are:

1. Right place
2. Right time
3. Right stuff
4. Right people

*Take as many auditions as you can, even if you don't want the job. You can't duplicate the audition experience in any other way.

*Decide to be serious and give it 100%, or forget it. There will be many folks auditioning that will be giving 100%.

*Most people are not defeated by others at an audition, but defeat themselves.

*Prepare yourself as early in life as possible, don't put it off.

*Remember when you go to bed tonight, someone other player is up practicing...YOUR PART!

*You are putting yourself personally on the line. You must admit and understand that concept. However, the way you should look at it is...

*You are selling a commodity to the auditions committee and conductor. They want a sack of your stuff. They are not so interested in you as a person, as they are in the commodity you add to their orchestra. If you understand this, and can remove yourself from the

personal nature of auditions, it will help alleviate at least some of the anxiety come audition day.

PREPARATION (well ahead, even years ahead)

MENTAL, PHYSICAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL

*Thorough preparation is not an accident. If you are a trumpet player and Petrouchka is on the audition list, learn all the parts not just the first part. Don't just play the parts out of the excerpt books, but obtain copies of the actual orchestra parts. This way there will be no surprises with print that looks different or foreign.

*Play as many 'dry run' auditions as possible with important people listening. Give them the list and have them dictate an order for your dry run. Get used to playing everything straight through-no stops or excuses.

*Nothing beats audition jitters like being well prepared.

*Set up a flexible pattern for your audition pieces. Play them faster and slower, louder and softer, higher and lower. The excerpts should be so automatic as to be mindless. Try not to 'control' your playing so much: just let it go. Some of the best auditions I've ever heard were mindless. The players had their patterns down so well, they just kicked it off and let it go.

*To develop the big sound needed for orchestra playing, practice in the largest room you can find, with the best acoustics, or where conditions permit, OUTSIDE, away from people and structures.

* Your aim is to have your best stuff on the day of the audition. For brass players it's important to have good chops on audition day. This can include tapering your practicing during the last week or so, so you won't wind up with stiff and musclebound chops. You have to trust this and not fall into the natural trap of having the horn on your face day night a few days before the audition, practicing excerpts over and over until you're musclebound and everything sounds stiff and edgy.

*About every audition you are going to hear rumors about who is coming to the audition, how great he or she is, or that so-and-so has the job sewed up from the inside. Ignore all this. It just doesn't happen that way.

THE WEEK BEFORE:

*Especially brass players: taper your practicing the week before,

playing shorter and shorter sessions. Start you daily playing later in the day during the audition week with as much contiguous 'off-time' as you can do.

*Make your travel arrangements so that you are not physically exhausted when you arrive. On the other hand, don't arrive too early, like days early, because you will have too much anxiety time in a strange place.

THE DAY

*Wear comfortable clothes/shoes with no constriction anywhere. No ties, no tight belts, or tight shoes that look good but are painful to stand in for any length of time.

*Don't arrive too early to the audition site. It would be good if you could get on the stage and play a few notes at any time before the audition to test the acoustics. Just one less unknown to worry about.

*If possible, warm up before you get to the audition site, so as not to contract any contagious panic from other players or the environment. I remember my audition for the LA Phil on Halloween of 1969, when 25 contestants were crammed in a small room together. One of the players listened to me a moment warming up and said, "I've got a mouthpiece that will fix that right up"! (fix what up?)

*DO NOT hang around, talk to, warm up with, try mouthpieces, mutes, bows, instruments, generally BS, joke, or fraternize with ANY of the other contestants before you audition, even if you know them. Stay away from them. Don't listen to other people play, either audition or warm up, as they will all sound better than you think you do. It's just human nature. Also, don't let them hear you play. There is a certain energy communicated in a pre-audition warm up room that could take it's toll on the way you audition. You might try using a walkman or earplugs to close off the outside world. Play some soothing material on tape/CD to keep your mind focused on your audition.

*Take a brisk walk or run in the hours before your audition to help you relax and get some air moving.

*TELL the personnel manager where you can be found when it's time for you to play. Stay out of the 'cattle call' pre-audition warm up room altogether. Find and disappear into a storeroom, closet, toilet, shower room, chorus room, or outside in the alleyway, away from the crowd.

*Be sure you are completely warmed up and have your instrument in

the best condition you can. You won't need endurance to get through the prelims.

*warm up with a practice mute. Keep yourself at the ready by "pretend practicing", just fingering through a few things; not actually playing, just simulating playing, so as not to wear down your chops. Brass players, do a little soft mouthpiece/hose buzzing right up until the time you have to play on the stage. Also, any air exercises you do would be appropriate now, as the 1st thing to go during a brass audition is breath control.

WHO IS LISTENING, AND WHAT ARE THEY LISTENING FOR?]

The Auditions Committee hears:

1. After the first few auditioners, how a player plays after just a few notes. They are very focused and zero right in on what's good and what's not., listening for good basics with a great tone, articulation, bow control, dynamics, style.
2. immediately if you know the orchestra parts, or have played previously in an orchestra on those pieces, via your style, dynamics, and tempi. The committee/panel members, usually 7 to 11 players elected from the orchestra, with a certain quota of strings, woodwinds and brass/percussion, have heard the excerpts maybe hundreds of times in the orchestra setting and in the context with the other parts being played, so they know what they want to hear, even if they don't play in that particular section of the orchestra.
3. String players on the committee can hear if you are using the right fingering or bowing on a particular passage. Brass players know if your 5th harmonic is sharp from tension, or if you use 3rd valve on sharp 1 and 2 combinations, etc .
4. The committee hears with what intelligence and projecting musical integrity you play a passage.
5. The committee wants to hear performances with good basics: rhythm, pitch, tone, style.
6. The committee will sometimes seem gruff and uninterested in you. Ignore this and keep projecting your musical image. If they have you play a passage again, don't automatically assume you did it wrong.

WHAT THE CONDUCTOR WANTS TO HEAR:

1. Number one is a captivating tone. An interesting sound with character.
2. A more abstract projection of musical personality and energy than

the committee. He is typically less interested in the technique of your particular instrument.

3. He wants to know how flexible you are with tempi and style, so he can mold you in his own image.

4. He is interested in eye contact. If he conducts something on the audition, or you have a chance to play with the orchestra, watch him like a hawk.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS:

*if you tend to get dry mouth, take some water with you on stage.

*If you tend to get a little jittery, don't drink coffee and do some breathing or walking just prior.

*Start the first piece a notch or two louder to set your air.

*Don't play full blast unless they ask for it.

*In the final analysis, most players are defeated by themselves, not others at an audition, in the way they approach, prepare, and execute the audition.