Advice on the audition process
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Every year hundreds of students from Ontario high schools apply to university or college music programmes. Playing ability and grades are the two main factors leading to an offer of acceptance; others include ear training skills, theory, music history and thoughtful articulation of career goals. Each year there are many students who come unprepared to auditions; I hope that this article will help deserving students be ready for what could be one of the most important days in their lives.

First, do all in your power to take private lessons. Musical knowledge and instrumental or vocal skills, not to mention artistry, take many years to develop, as we all know. It is very difficult in a high school programme to learn the requisite theory, solo and ensemble experience and music history background, as well as developing artistry on your instrument or voice. Different parts of the province have varying degrees of access to private instruction, and some students might have trouble affording lessons, but, if it is at all possible, study privately. A private teacher can be enormously influential in steering you towards appropriate repertoire, good practice habits and correct tone production and articulation. Even a tutor who does not play your instrument – a trumpet player teaching horn or tuba, say, or a clarinetist instructing saxophone or double reeds – can be a strong positive influence, if a specialist is not available. The extra help that classroom teachers might be able to give individual students is also important, so ask your music teacher for assistance if you have questions.

Another suggestion is to actively seek added responsibility in the classroom, rehearsal and after school hours. You will learn by teaching your peers or younger colleagues and gain valuable insights into the teaching and learning process. We always ask music education applicants about their teaching experiences and their answers can be important in the interview.

Selection of repertoire is a very important matter. I have heard students come to an audition with the trumpet or clarinet part of a band piece or a pop tune and believe it is appropriate, even though repertoire guidelines are posted on our website and published in the Undergraduate Admission Information Booklet. You must find solos that will help you develop, which show you at your best and which the university considers appropriate. A phone call or email to the Admissions Officer is usually a good starting point, after consultation with your music teacher. I often have students referred to me by our Admissions Officer in the matter of repertoire selection. Besides the prepared solos, etudes, scales and other technical exercices might be required; again, advice from the Admissions Officer can be very helpful. It is important to choose music that is within your technical grasp while letting you be musically expressive. It is also important to include repertoire that shows your technical capability. Include lyrical material, technical challenges, some 20th Century material and music by Canadian composers in a varied programme highlighting your musical versatility.

Once the repertoire is selected and prepared I would recommend that you organize mock auditions with the help of your music teacher, so you can get used to the tension and artificiality of a brief audition. We rarely hear a whole piece or movement so it is helpful to prepare yourself for the possibility of stopping and starting. And now a crucial point; I want to strongly encourage you to find a good accompanist. Often students will bring friends, relatives or other accompanists who cannot play well enough to be of any use, and it is counter productive. A serious candidate for admission should engage a professional accompanist or someone of professional quality, and rehearse in advance of the day if possible. I have heard some unfortunate auditions, marred by an inexperienced or incompetent accompanist. I have even asked the piano player to stop and to leave the room, which sounds very elitist but really isn’t at all; the poor applicant was being severely hampered by the person who is supposed to provide stability and musicality. The university faculty or department of music often has a list of excellent pianists. I strongly recommend choosing someone from such a list.

A brief word about presentation is in order. You should be as positive and confident in your demeanor as possible; the mock auditions mentioned above can help you feel prepared. Even if you are nervous, as most students are at an audition, thorough preparation can give you the confidence you need to be forthright and comfortable. Cheerful, direct, comfortably well-dressed students make a better impression than ill-prepared, evasive ones. By the way, an extra set of parts should be given to the adjudicators; most schools will accept photocopies for this one-time use.
After you have played parts of the prepared pieces, sight-reading generally follows. This aspect of musicianship is very telling of the person’s experience, aural acuity and flexibility so it is very important in assessing an applicant’s chances of future success. Ask your classroom teacher to give you regular sight-reading practice as part of the course of study, and spend extra time sight-reading. I suggest that you record your reading sessions, listening later while studying the part to ensure accuracy. Duets are a great tool for improving sight-reading and have the advantage of being fun.

Where I teach, we follow the sight-reading with an ear test. Students who have taken solo examinations are well prepared for this, but most wind, brass and percussion players, even if they have taken private lessons, lack this experience. Included are singing back, interval recognition and chord identification. The sing back, where a brief tune is played on the piano twice and the students are asked to sing back what they can remember, is a very good way to assess memory, pitch and rhythmic accuracy. You should practice this skill, asking your music teacher and your colleagues for help. Start with very brief fragments, in a comfortable range for your voice, and gradually extend the length and complexity of the tune. Any practice of singing back will help. Many applicants are rattled by this part of the audition but even a little practice will help you feel prepared. Interval, chord and cadence recognition usually follows. Of course these skills are very important for a musician, and a useful gauge of the applicant’s experience. Sometimes students with little background in formal ear training can demonstrate their aural acuity but usually there is no substitute for training in this area. Various online resources are available to help you practice. It is a matter of repetition and there is no short cut that I know of. Even a little work in this area will help, but regular practice is the only way to become adept at the important skill of using the ear to recognize and identify what we are hearing.

Music history is often a big hurdle for applicants who have had little exposure to the historical background of the music they play. Students often feel that the history and theory of music are irrelevant and unnecessary; no wonder they often have difficulty in these areas. Regard theory and history as part of the performance, as information vital to an understanding and appreciation of music, rather than irrelevant distractions from playing your instruments. If you do not have music history as part of your curriculum you must make the extra effort to acquire the knowledge of our musical tradition. There is a website for the text that is often used in music history courses. (The address is http://wwnorton.com/college/music/conchis5)

Finally, I want to mention the importance of the interview. Applicants are generally asked to talk a bit about their overall musical background, their preferences and their career goals: what concerts have they attended, what CDs have they enjoyed recently, what music they like to listen to, what teaching experiences they may have had. Again this is possibly elitist, but if a student only listens to heavy metal, or country, or smooth jazz, or Scottish bagpipe music and displays no interest in or knowledge of classical, jazz or world music, their ability to thrive in a university is questionable and the likelihood of their becoming future influences in our society as performers or teachers of music very slim.

The statement of purpose is very important. Realistic goals as well as idealistic dreams are valid, and should be expressed; what we are looking for is a person who loves music and feels strongly about a career as teacher, performer, composer or scholar. Students are often unsure of their ultimate goals, and there is nothing wrong with talking about that. I feel that a student entering university should be open to the various paths that post-secondary education might reveal to them, but they should also have as a very strong possibility, and one extremely important to them, a career in music, and it is helpful if they can verbalize their thoughts at the interview. Talk to your classroom teachers about your goals. It is helpful for you to have realistic aspirations, and talking to teachers can help you get a clear idea of the requirements and realities of your possible career.

I hope that these thoughts, based on many years of hearing entrance auditions, will help you for the application and audition process. I would encourage you to ask the Admissions Officer or indeed any faculty member for information that will assist you as you prepare for university. Knowledge and preparation are the keys to success as you move forward towards careers in music, and the more you are prepared for your audition/interview the better.

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