

Jim Doser
Music Department Chair
Penfield Central School District
jdoser@penfield.edu
(585) 249-6737

Suggestions for Preparing High School Students for Successful College Auditions
NYSSMA Conference
December 3, 2010

At Penfield High School, students have an option of selecting various lesson options as part of their ensemble participation. One of these options is called *Performance Class*. This lesson option is for students who have a very specific and articulated performance goal, for example, conference all-state acceptance, scholarship auditions, competitions and college auditions. Those students participating in the college audition option concentrate on four main concepts:

- 1. Comprehensive Musical Preparation**
- 2. Career Awareness**
- 3. Audition Preparation**
- 4. Process Preparation**

These topics are discussed in detail in the attached handouts.

1: Comprehensive Musical Preparation

College studio professors and audition committees are astute listeners. They hear dozens (if not hundreds) of students each year who are competing for acceptance and scholarship. Though students and teachers alike are tempted to choose literature that is exceptionally difficult and show-stopping material, these listeners often differentiate between students on evidence of comprehensive musicianship.

Of course, comprehensive musicianship is not learned in a few months of preparation for an audition, but over years of practice, and it is not achieved by the work of one teacher, but system-wide focus on these concepts. The first steps in preparing for successful auditions take place in the general music classrooms of our elementary schools and the very first lessons and rehearsals in our elementary and middle school programs. These include:

1. Development of aural skills
2. Development of internal pulse and subdivision
3. Development of music theory skills
4. Development of good intonation skills
5. Development of sight-reading skills
6. Development of good phrasing and musicality
7. Development of music history skills

Choosing literature for auditions, within the criteria established by the college, should allow for the student to demonstrate his current skills in these areas. Students should also be prepared to answer basic questions about the theory and history contexts of the pieces that they perform.

Our college colleagues *know* when students are performing music that is chosen significantly above their musicianship level. We need to develop comprehensive musicianship in our programs, and then help students choose repertoire that compliments their knowledge and skills.

2: Career Awareness

We – and our university counterparts – need to take an active role in helping our students and their parents to be informed about the opportunities and challenges in the music field *before* encouraging and preparing them to audition for music college programs. If we do, they will have a greater potential for success, both in their auditions and interviews, as well as in the profession.

At Penfield, we encourage students to take one of our music elective courses called *The Business of Music* that focuses on many aspects of the music profession. We also offer a parent and student meeting called, *So You Want To Be A Musician...*, offering information about music as a career and the college search process.

Additionally, these three books are exceptional resources for students and their parents:

Lessons From A Street-Wise Professor: What You Won't Learn At Most Music Schools

Dr. Ramon Ricker, Eastman School of Music
Available from Amazon.com in January 2011

Beyond Talent: Creating A Successful Career In Music

Angela Myles Beeching, New England Conservatory of Music
Oxford Press

The Savvy Musician: Building A Career, Earning A Living, & Making A Difference

David Cutler, Duquesne University
Helius Press

3: Audition Preparation

We encourage our auditioning students to consider their preparation to be in three stages:

1. Research

Activities in the research phase of audition preparation include:

- *Using all available resources to narrow your college choice to approximately 6 schools. Resources include recommendations from teachers, professionals, recent graduates, and college websites.*

- *Charting all requirements for auditions at each school and looking for commonalities to make preparation as efficient as possible.*
- *Requesting a lesson with the studio professor at the colleges that you intend to apply, most preferably in the winter or spring of the junior year. This is important for several reasons:*
 - *To see if the personality and teaching style of the professor seem to be a good fit for the student.*
 - *To make your audition the second time that you meet the professor, not the first.*
 - *To allow the professor to hear if you have applied the strategies and suggestions that she made to you earlier, in other words, to give an indication if you are receptive to her teaching.*

2. Musical Preparation

Most students auditioning for colleges are working with a private teacher, so coordination with this teacher is a must. The student must be sure that the private teacher is aware of the requirements of each audition. The role of the school music teacher in this case is not so much the specific preparation of repertoire, but instead, listening to audition material, checking requirements, and encouraging musical performance and 110% readiness.

3. Performance Preparation

Students – even those who are very well prepared – often play below their potential at auditions because of the intense environment that this situation places them in. Here are some ways to prepare them for this situation:

- *Schedule several mock auditions (and interviews). These may be for you, for peers, for other teachers, or for a guest college professor. Have peers offer feedback after the auditions, both for what are often perceptive comments, and also for students to get used to having several people listen critically to their performances.*
- *Expose students to different audition scenarios. Some audition situations are relaxed and friendly; others are silent and professional; still others may even seem hostile to the student. Allow them to experience each of these and give them suggestions on how to deal with these situations.*

#4: Audition Tips and Logistics

Help students to understand that preparing materials for performance is just one aspect of a successful music audition. Understanding the logistics of the audition, communicating effectively, and personal presentation are also very important. Here are my 'Audition Tips and Logistics' suggestions for my students.

1. Before the Audition

- **Plan to arrive at least a half day prior to your audition.**
Take time to find the music building, check-in, and be comfortable in your surroundings. Do not plan your audition to arrive just in time to perform, as any number of circumstances may cause anxiety, and in turn, not allow you to perform at your best.
- **Dress nicely;** do not under or over dress. Shirt, tie and jacket for men is very appropriate. Tuxes are over the top. A nice dress, dress slacks and blouse/sweater is appropriate for women. A full-length concert dress is over the top. No sneakers or flip-flops. Your audition is no place for fashion self-expression. Leave the personal statement clothing and jewelry (including body-piercing jewelry) at home.
- **Before warming up, locate the audition location** (often in the teacher's studio), so that you do not have to search at the last minute.
- **Warm up with your usual routine**, focusing on breathing, tone, and other fundamentals. Do not warm up more than usual. Stick to your routine. Do not spend time practicing – your preparation should have been completed at home. Warm up, relax, and save your best performance for the audition room.
- **Drink plenty of water** the day before and the day of your audition. Avoid an unusual amount of caffeine. Sometimes when we travel we eat or drink abnormally. Stay as close to your regular diet as possible.

2. Arriving at the Audition Room

- Do not bring your parents to the audition room. Ask them to wait in the lobby or waiting area. Professors – though they will welcome meeting your parents later – prefer to see how you interact with them on your own.
- Wait patiently for your turn, and do not crowd the door to listen to your competition.
- When invited in, greet your professor with a friendly “It is very nice to meet you”, or “It is very nice to see you again”, a warm smile, and a confident handshake.

- Take your cue for ‘small talk’ from the professor. If she wishes to start with a conversation and ask you how you are, how was your trip, etc., be prepared with a short and friendly answer. However, if she wishes to get right down to business (as is often the case, particularly with voice and piano auditions that may be done in front of a committee), be ready for that as well.

3. Playing the Audition

- You know most of what will be expected of you at the audition, including technique and repertoire. You should be 110% prepared and confident on this material before you arrive. However, there are often elements of an audition that are not ‘advertised’ and may be surprises to you. Be prepared to deal with the unexpected! Here are some things that you may experience:
 - **A mistake!**
Everyone makes mistakes at auditions, so expect it to happen! Your professors are not listening for perfection; they are listening for solid competency in the fundamentals of your performance and comprehensive musicianship. Additionally, they will learn more from how you *handle* a mistake than if you play perfectly. Continue as though nothing happened, even if you squeak, drop a mallet, or miss the loudest note in the phrase.
 - **Sight reading**
Almost all auditions include sight-reading. Remember to check key and time signatures, count carefully, look at dynamics and other musical indicators, and do not stop, even if you make a mistake.
 - **Questions**
Many professors want to see if you understand elements of theory and repertoire. Be prepared to answer questions like, “What key is this solo in?”; “What period of music did this composer write in?”; “Where is the modulation?”; “What do you know about the history of this piece?”.
 - **Silence**
Some professors are talkative; others are not. Some schools request that their auditioning faculty do not engage in extended conversation with prospective students to avoid giving a false impression of a decision. Do not take either silence or conversation as any kind of an indicator of your acceptance, or if you are liked or disliked.
 - **Demonstration of rhythmic and aural skills**
You may be asked to clap and count rhythms to demonstrate a sense of pulse and counting skills. You may be asked to play a folk tune by ear. You may be asked to

play a melody that the professor plays for you. You may be asked to sing pitches. None of these things are 'deal-breakers' at an audition. They allow a professor to peek into your past experience, general musicianship, and ability to respond. Relax and have fun with this.

- **Request for your Questions**

Many professors will ask you if you have any questions. Prepare a few ahead of time. Ask questions that you cannot get the answers to from the school's website. For example, you might ask how many people of your instrument are accepted each year and what the policy is for assigning students to ensembles. You might ask if there are opportunities to take classes in other parts of the college in subjects that interest you. Do not ask questions about your performance that day, what chance you have to be accepted, or anything about scholarship.

4. After your Audition

- Exit as gracefully as you entered. Thank the professor for this opportunity, smile, make eye contact, and remember that confident handshake!