

Auditions: Looking Beyond the Notes

By Will James

In my experience preparing for auditions, I have often caught myself focusing too much on playing the right notes and not enough on everything else. This problem has afflicted many players I have met. For this reason I want to help people think beyond simply playing the notes. In my PASIC 2010 clinic, I will discuss the musical and practical elements of taking an audition.

Absolutely the notes are important! You aren't going to win a job if you can't play the notes. However, what is done with the notes is critically important and separates the exceptional musician from the average one. In addition to musical concerns, numerous practical and logistical concerns can have a huge impact on all aspects of your performance. My intent is not necessarily to "tell you how I do it," but rather to give you a new approach using a set of questions you can ask yourself for every work that will help you discover your own unique and personal solutions.

MUSICAL PREPARATION

Making music out of printed notes on a page is by far the hardest part of the process. When sitting down with a work for the first time, I try not to focus on the obvious things like tempo and dynamics just yet. My goal is to look at the big picture first and get a sense of the style and character of the piece. This is when I start asking myself several questions.

- Why do you think the panel put this work on the list? (Believe it or not, "because it is hard" isn't always the answer!)
- What am I trying to accomplish when playing this excerpt?
 - What is the panel going to be listening for?
 - Which musical markings are the most important in demonstrating my understanding of the piece to the panel?
 - What musical tools can I use to show the panel what else is going on in the orchestra?
 - When playing alone, how can I play this excerpt to represent the larger orchestral work without jeopardizing the quality of sound?

The answers to these questions are a starting point for preparing a convincing performance, but they are not the only questions. As you progress and gain experience, you will come up with many of your own.

"The Pines of Rome" is an excellent example to start answering some of these questions. "Pines" is asked in auditions because the panel wants to hear if the applicant can produce a good quality of sound at a loud dynamic level and has the ability to pace tempo and dynamic

changes. In the orchestra you must use brass or aluminum mallets to cut through 90 other musicians. In an audition, who really wants to sit 30 feet away from someone pounding out "Pines" with brass mallets? Not me! And I bet the cellist on the panel doesn't either. In order to represent the full, loud sound of the orchestra when playing alone, I use hard plastic mallets instead of brass. This helps me avoid the harsh attack necessary to project in the orchestra, and the sound isn't abrasive when alone.

I have found the best way to learn how to pace the first movement of "Pines" is by playing it with the orchestra. This is especially true of the ending. The tempo changes and slight acceleration is not something that can



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be mathematically explained, but must be learned through experience. In the absence of performing with a live orchestra, playing along with many recordings can help you learn how to convincingly pace these tempo and dynamic changes. Doing so will help you effectively build the excitement Respighi wanted.

PRACTICAL PREPARATION

While practicing hard and playing excellent mock auditions is great, all that really matters is how you perform at the audition. Because so much is riding on that one day, it is vital to do everything possible to put yourself in the best position to play well, besides practicing a million hours. This is what I call the practical side of taking auditions. I ask myself several questions to help me begin to think about what else I can do to put myself in the best position to play well.

Will James
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- What can I do beforehand to make the day of the audition feel as normal and comfortable as possible?
- How can I organize my practice time, and what kind of practicing will yield the best result?
- What can I do at the audition itself to put myself in the best position to play well?
- What should I be eating, how should I be sleeping, and what non-musical things should I be doing in the final days before the audition?
- How should I pack and travel to the audition?
- How can I organize my instruments so that they are readily accessible once onstage?
- What sort of mental preparation can I do so I stay mentally focused onstage?

Finding the answers will hopefully eliminate most of the distractions and stress of taking an audition so that once you are onstage nothing is interfering with your ability to play well. The answers to these questions will be different for everyone. The following ideas work for me, and hopefully some of them will work for you.

Staying organized right at the beginning of preparation is essential, so I organize my audition practice time with three tools. First, I establish a long-term timeline that helps me stay on schedule when learning new repertoire and solos. Second, I make a weekly schedule so that I keep all of the repertoire in an appropriate rotation. Finally, I use an ongoing list of trouble sections that need daily work. In addition I prepare myself mentally by reading several music and sports psychology books that deal with the personal issues I normally face at the audition. My favorite is *Fearless Golf* by Dr. Gio Valiante. This book has helped me stay focused and positive as well as calming my nerves. As the audition gets closer I play lots of mock auditions, especially for non-percussionists, because a panel is made up of mostly non-percussionists. I also try to take care of my body by sleeping and eating well.

Once I am at the audition and know what time I am going to play, I warm up accordingly depending on the amount of time I have. I try not to arrive too early because I want to be mentally fresh. I also want to keep my body relaxed, so I keep all of my sticks, mallets, and

small instruments in a small cart so that I can wheel them onstage with little effort. For the same reason, I never hesitate to ask for help carrying snare drums or cymbals. Once onstage, I try to move slowly between instruments to keep myself calm, and I take my time between excerpts.

In the end, I know that I have done everything I can possibly do to achieve my best personal performance. The eventual result is out of my control; that is up to the panel. But if I can leave the audition having executed my game plan, then it was a successful audition.

William James is the Principal Percussionist of the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra. He won the position in 2007 while a member of the New World Symphony. Will started his education at Northwestern University while studying with Michael Burritt and James Ross. He then moved to Boston to study with Will Hudgins at the New England Conservatory. PN