

NOTES ON AUDITIONING

Musicians who play orchestral instruments are generally called upon to learn the 20 to 30 orchestral excerpts that customarily turn up in auditions for any professional orchestra – salaried, per service, freelance, pit or otherwise. It can become burdensome and even soul-crushing to have to continually woodshed these excerpts. They can lose their musical vibrancy and meaning, and can become stale and a source of anxiety.

Except...

The good thing about these excerpts is that they're short. This gives you the opportunity – if you choose to take it -- to go into exquisite depth about each one, examining its place in the fabric of each work, its stylistic characteristics, its particular sound and “essence” as it reaches the ears of the listener, and the range of its performance possibilities. If you prepare in this way, the excerpts will begin to come back to life *as music*, not excerpts; your spirit will be refreshed; and you will present yourself at an audition as a lively and communicative musician.

Principles of auditioning

For the person listening, the goal of an audition is to get the maximum amount of information about the auditioner in the minimum amount of time. In current professional audition formats – either behind a screen or with limited opportunity for interaction with panel members – the listener can only gain this information from what they hear. Thus, an auditioner must provide as much “information” in their playing as possible, to answer the following questions:

- Does the auditioner play with a consistently fine sound?
- Do they present the fullest range of their capabilities, in terms of technique, intonation, dynamics, instrumental color, stylistic awareness, rhythmic solidity, musical sophistication, listening and ensemble skills?
- Does the auditioner show an awareness of the larger context of the excerpt? Do they play like they know what's going on around them? Do they play it as if they were playing the work in an orchestra, or like an “excerpt?”
- If given the opportunity, are they flexible? Are they able and willing to respond quickly, skillfully and wholeheartedly to requests for changes? (E.g., “Would you please play this excerpt again at the following tempo...” “Could you please try to play this part *sul taste* and at the point of the bow?” “What are some alternate ways you might bow this?” “Could you try this again *dolcissimo*?” “Could you play this with a darker, more burnished sound?”)

- Does the auditioner demonstrate in their playing that the conductor – who has endless *triage*-like priorities they must address in rehearsals -- will not need to worry about correcting their musical fundamentals or losing precious rehearsals time repeating requests due to inattention, inability or unwillingness to adjust?

Questions to consider when preparing orchestral excerpts

What role do the various portions of the excerpt play in the context of the full score? (Foreground vs. background; individual vs. section vs. multi-section solo; first presentation of the material vs. reprise/variant of the material from other instruments, etc.)

What came before the excerpt in the music? What follows it?

Coming to terms with the expressive notation: What does each marking mean? Why is it there? What is the composer trying to tell the performer, in the context of the whole score? (Rule of thumb: While there's no "interpretation police," a performer is not free to ignore a composer's markings. One might ultimately determine that the markings don't "work," but one must consider them, try them and understand what may be "behind" them before rejecting them.)

Why has this excerpt become "standard"? What do you think the panel wants to learn when they hear this excerpt? What information does the performance need to convey about the performer to the audition panelists?

In terms of tempo, style, articulation, dynamics, rhythm and instrumental technique (e.g., double-tonguing vs. single-tonguing, on vs. off the string, choice of instrument, choice of mallet, breathing choices, fingering) and other elements, what is the range of possibilities for how the excerpt could be performed? Are you prepared to perform the excerpt in any of these ways, if asked? How do you decide which interpretive choices to present at your audition?

What mood do you want to convey in the excerpt? In other words, what kind of music is it? A dance? A procession? A song? A motor rhythm? A public declaration? An intimate expression? A declarative statement or an ambiguous expression? (i.e., narrative or improvisational?)

What's the *direction* of a given musical phrase? Where is it coming from? Where is it going?

What are the phrase lengths in the passage?

How fast or slow is the "harmonic rhythm" of the passage? (This can help determine tempo.)

Do the bar lines convey the shape of the music, or do they need to be ignored to bring out the intended phrasing (e.g., groupings of three or four bars – quasi 9/8 or 12/8 -- as one "measure")?

What information do metronome markings in the excerpts convey besides numerical values? Can they also be viewed as expressive notation?

Practice strategies in preparing an audition excerpt

- Sing through the excerpt with full expression and dynamic range; clear, intentional articulation; fully committed rhythm; and a beautiful sound.
- Conduct the entire orchestra score of the passage in question.
- Study the excerpt away from the instrument.
- “Air play” the excerpt fully to oneself while holding the instrument and being completely still. Check to see what feels insecure technically or uncommitted musically.
- Invent images, characters and metaphors to tell the “story” of the excerpt while you are playing it.
- Analogize the content of an excerpt to another art form, e.g. a dance, a cooked dish, a line drawing, a film scene.

Resources to assist you in your research

Find the most authoritative full score (online or print) that you can and study from it. There’s no substitute for a direct encounter with the full score.

Listen widely to recordings (which you do already). But make sure to listen to a wide range of approaches – e.g. modern-day performances, mid-20th century “Golden Age” performances, period instrument performances where applicable, early historical recordings. Recordings by orchestras and conductors of the same nationality as the work can be illuminating. Also, recordings conducted, supervised or sanctioned by the composers themselves may be valuable. As they say in the law, no evidence is “dispositive,” but the widest variety of listening ensures the most open mind, and also discourages you from being unduly influenced by any one recording.

Become familiar with the whole piece, not just the excerpt, by listening to recordings and following along with the score.

Consult research sources about the pieces and/or composer like online program notes (or “programme notes” as they’re called in the U.K.), CD liner notes (often available for download on Naxos Music Library entries), Wikipedia (often not a bad starting point, especially if you use the footnotes and references to lead you to other sources), jstor.com or Google Scholar articles.

Consult instructional videos and articles online about auditioning in general and/or about issues concerning specific excerpts, and visit sites such as <https://auditioncafe.com>, <http://orchestraexcerpts.com> and <https://allisyar.com/orchestral-audition-lists/>.

Ask your studio professors for their research suggestions, and who else they might suggest you contact for assistance. (One of the wonderful things about our profession – unlike, say, the mass entertainment industry -- is that, with very few exceptions, professionals in our field are quite accessible by e-mail and more than happy to engage with an enterprising and serious student. Don't hesitate to contact prominent professionals in your field – if your inquiry is respectful and substantive, you'll likely find people responsive.)

Being at ease in audition situations

An audition is an opportunity to make beautiful, committed music for a listener. You are not a supplicant – you are an artist. You should consider it an honor for a listener – including an audition panelist -- to hear you play.

If you have prepared for *maximum flexibility* in your approach to the excerpts, you should feel at ease presenting your interpretations as *choices* that you, as a fine and informed musician, have made.

Do not try to “psych out” the panel, by attempting to determine in advance what the members want to hear, what kind of sound they prefer, what the standard “received” approach to the excerpt may be. You are an excellent musician who has studied and prepared the material thoroughly. You are fully committed to your musical decisions. If you present the music with this commitment and expressive desire, it will set you apart as a musician worth listening to, not just a cog in an orchestral wheel. The panel will notice. And if, after presenting such committed musicmaking, an orchestra still doesn't want what you have to offer, temper your disappointment by realizing that you might not have been happy in such a group anyway.

Almost all professional orchestra musicians take numerous, sometimes scores of auditions before they land a salaried position; they just don't tell you about all the ones they lost. Play the long game – auditions are opportunities for growth, and above all, opportunities to play great music.