

Some Thoughts on Auditions

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Introduction

Many years ago, after I won a major audition, a colleague of mine asked me what the secret was to winning an orchestral audition. After some thought I told him that the secret was to “play your heart out with great accuracy”. Of course, that is a simplistic statement and it begs the question, “How do you do that?”

Probably the most difficult and stressful part of pursuing a career as an orchestral player is the audition process. In no other part of your professional life will you have to play so much difficult music in such a short period of time with so much at stake.

How do you deal with this stress? How can you prepare yourself to present your playing at its highest level at “the moment of truth”? I have two main concepts to think about as you begin preparation for an audition:

1. Leave no stone unturned in your preparation; and
2. Do not worry about things beyond your control.

In this paper I will address these two main concepts, as well as others. I have taken over 20 orchestral auditions and have won three full time jobs. This has kept me gainfully employed for 26 years. I have also been on the audition committee for quite a few as well. I am often shocked by the things people haven't addressed in their audition preparation.

The following steps are written specifically for oboists, but other instrumentalists can apply most of these ideas to themselves.

Your Instrument

As soon as you know your audition date, make an appointment with your repair-person to have your instrument checked out. At the audition, your instrument must not feel “in pretty good shape”. It must feel perfect. Don't be naïve about this. What happens if your oboe is ever so slightly out of adjustment or leaking, even just a bit?

1. You will miss notes.
2. You will need to press down harder than necessary on the keys. This extra tension in your fingers will spread through your hands to your arms and shoulders and throughout your body causing a tense situation (the audition) to feel even more strained. The additional tension may trigger a “panic/survival” mode, which I don’t think is the best frame of mind in which to show your most beautiful playing.
3. You will have to sacrifice dynamics on the soft end because you won’t feel confident in your instrument to take chances playing really softly.
4. You will need a buzzier reed to help compensate for the oboe not covering. Obviously, you would prefer to use your most beautiful sounding reed at an audition.
5. Your low notes will be even flatter than usual because you won’t want to risk lipping them up for fear of cracking them. The better an oboe covers, the more pitch flexibility you have in the low register.

Reeds

You don’t want worry about whether or not you have a great reed to be an issue at the audition. If you normally make a reed a day, you should prepare for the audition by making at least three a day for a few weeks before. Choose your cane carefully and reject any that doesn’t seem to be of the highest quality. Use cane from batches that have been successful in the past. Of course, this means you should have on hand plenty of cane from a variety of batches.

I recommend that, three days before the audition, you should have a choice of twelve top quality reeds. If you feel, going into the audition, that you have a *choice* of reeds, it will remove a tremendous amount of pre-audition stress. Weed out the lesser prospects during the last day or two, but when you arrive at the hall you should have at least three or four excellent choices.

Don’t get emotionally attached to any single reed. It will always break your heart in the end.

Don’t decide on your “audition reed” too far in advance. Use the one that is working best at the moment of the audition, even if you weren’t expecting it to be “the one”. Make sure your reeds are broken in before the audition. Each one should have three or four playing sessions with drying out time and adjustments in between. At auditions you often have a lot of sitting around time, and you don’t want to worry about your brand new reed stiffening up.

Tempo Choices

If you haven’t performed some of the works on the list, it is essential to prepare them in such a way that you seem experienced and seasoned. You should listen to at least three different recordings of each excerpt. Why three? Because you must know the range of tempo and interpretive possibilities. Every excerpt has a range of acceptable tempi. There may not be a “right” tempo, but there are many wrong ones. You must choose a tempo within that acceptable range and it must seem reasonable. Playing a fast excerpt too fast can make you look silly and as if you are trying to show off. Too slow a tempo in a fast excerpt makes you look technically insecure, or in the case of a too plodding slow excerpt, might bore the (most likely already impatient) committee. Memorize your tempi so you can always play the speed you intend even when under stress. I would suggest picking a measure or two to remind you of your chosen tempo. Sing those measures to

yourself before you start. Often the best measures to be your tempo reminders are not the first few in the excerpt but somewhere in the body of the excerpt.

When listening to recordings of the audition pieces, get to know the whole work, not just the oboe part. Don't use excerpt books, get the complete part. Follow the full score if you can. Know what is solo and what is tutti. If you are in unison with a clarinet, for example, you would probably want to use little or no vibrato. If, after the clarinet part ends, the oboe continues as a solo, your tone and vibrato should probably change. Some piano markings should actually be played very softly, whereas others, such as in the Brahms Violin Concerto, are "solo piano" and have to be sung over a thick orchestration.

If the orchestra sends you specific excerpts, obviously you should concentrate on these, but it is wise to study the entire piece. I have been asked on a number of occasions to play things that weren't on the "list". Saying to the committee, "but that's not fair!" is not an option.

Technique

I often tell my students that playing the slow solos well will win the oboe audition but playing the fast solos poorly will lose it. In other words, clean technique won't win you the audition but sloppy technique will lose it.

Thorough preparation with a metronome is essential. There are many good ways of drilling technique and I in no way profess to have the "correct" method. I think, though, that no matter how you drill technique, it should always be rhythmic and done with an inner pulse. Play with the same style and energy at a slow tempo that you will when it is up to speed. Don't ever be sloppy when practicing technique. If it's not clean, you are practicing too fast.

When people practice technique, they often get into a rut. That means the same notes get slighted, shortened or "blipped" every time and students solidify these inaccuracies by repeating them. Look for ways to make a technical passage seem new. Play quadruplet 16ths as triplets and vice versa. Change the starting notes of the triplets. This changes the accents so that different notes are on strong and weak beats. Play dotted rhythms straight and straight ones dotted. There are unending ways to make a stale passage fresh. Try to find interesting and imaginative ways to do this.

There is a point in technical practice where you change from *hoping* a passage will come out cleanly to *knowing* it will come out. With some passages this will come easily and others might take weeks or months of daily work. It is important to get to this *knowing* point before you get to the audition. You can then calm your nerves by saying to yourself, "I know I will ace this because I've done it a thousand times." This will be much more comforting than "If I'm lucky, I won't screw this up."

I often speak to my students about their "Inner Freak-Out Meter". This is a method of checking in with your inner anxiety level. Let's say we monitor this level on a scale of one to ten, "one" being comfortable, cool, and confident that you will nail the solo 100%. "Ten" on the other hand you would be, well, freaking out. Now, find the tempo you can play the opening of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* perfectly *with a one on your Inner Freak-Out Meter*. It doesn't matter if you have to start at one-quarter tempo or slower to get the Inner Meter to register a one. As you increase the tempo in your practice, keep monitoring the I.F.O. Meter and keep it on one. (OK, maybe one and a half.) If it starts to rise, you're practicing too fast! If you keep it on one you will never experience any anxiety about this excerpt. This is important, because building technique should be a

process of building inner confidence as you drill your fingers. If you can play it perfectly but your Meter is on four or five, you're still practicing it too fast because you're not building confidence, you are reinforcing anxiety. Now just imagine if you spend six months practicing *Le Tombeau* without ever letting the I.F.O. Meter register more than one. It might take the full six months to get it near the finished tempo, but you will have built yourself into a mental super-person in the process. If you then have to play *Le Tombeau* in an audition, you can say to yourself, "I've never felt anything less than 100% confident about this excerpt and I've NEVER played it less than perfectly." You will be confident you will nail it and you will. Imagine the advantage you will have over your mortal colleagues who are registering high numbers on their I.F.O. Meters.

Distinguishing Yourself

If you manage to play with a beautiful sound and impeccable technique, you will already be above the majority of applicants. This is not enough. You must use a different color and style for each excerpt. This means that your sound in *La Mer* should be different than your *Eroica* sound. You often need a slimmer and more ethereal sound in French music than in German. Vibrato should vary from fast and passionate to languid to non-existent depending on the nature of the excerpt. Also, all staccato notes are not the same. In a Rossini overture, the notes should be short, crisp and bright. If you are playing Wagner, however, the same musical notation often requires a fatter and longer staccato. (A former conductor of mine likened them to "fat, dripping sausages".) Most oboists are obsessive about having a "dark" sound. You should always have a beautiful and complex sound with the darkness or brightness matching the quality of the music.

Every excerpt should have its own distinguishing character. This is done partly by having a very flexible reed, but mostly by taking time to quietly reflect about every passage *away from the oboe*. You should spend a fair amount of time without the oboe in your hands thinking what every excerpt would sound like if you had unlimited ability. You should listen to great singers and string players – who generally have far more expressive skills than most oboists. Imagine how it would feel and sound to sing like Jessye Norman or play like Yo Yo Ma. Imitate their style and sound, and their music's breadth. Imagine a reed with the potential to produce that range. Do *not* limit your listening to oboists. My former teacher, Ray Still, always recommended listening to great jazz musicians. He felt the most accomplished wind players in the world were the top jazz saxophonists.

You should record every excerpt before the audition. This can be excruciating, but better you hear and correct your own flaws than waiting for the audition committee to hear them. Trust your instincts. If you feel a phrase is not "working", try to figure out why. It could be as simple as one note out of sync with the intended direction of the line. If it is right, you will know it.

Spend time with a tuner. Make sure large interval leaps are accurately in tune. Be aware that a habitually out of tune note begins to sound right if repeated enough times. Learn your instrument's intonation tendencies. Check the notes that often lean sharp or flat so that you can compensate enough without going too far the other way. Use the tuner's meter to check with your eyes and the tuner's tone to practice intervals with a steady drone.

Have a "game plan" for every phrase of every excerpt. Every phrase should be thought through in advance so you always know its intended direction. Know where each phrase is heading and go to the arrival points (not necessarily the highest note) and recede from them too. A well thought through game plan is also a great way to deal

with nerves. If you have a plan for each excerpt you can focus on it and you therefore won't have the "mental band width" to also think about how nervous you are. Rather than deny nerves, have something specific on which to concentrate and your mind won't be free to wander and be nervous.

On the other hand, nerves that aren't debilitating can propel you to play better than normal. Nerves make you feel alive and remind you that you want to present yourself excellently. Nerves aren't a sign of weakness but a sign that you care about doing your best.

In the big romantic solos, tell a story and paint a picture. So many people just play pretty notes instead of taking the listener by the hand and leading them somewhere. Make up your mind about what *your* story is and sell it to the listener.

You must exude great energy but also repose where the music calls for it. When Larry Combs won the Principal Clarinet job in the Chicago Symphony, one of his colleagues told me about his audition, "He played in color. Everybody else played in black and white." I give you the same advice: Play in color.

Don't play it safe. Take musical chances. There will be dozens of safe, conservative applicants losing every audition. Play to win, not to avoid losing.

Do I Deserve to Win?

If you've never gone down this particular mental road, then you probably don't understand the question. But let's face it, we are all insecure at some level and it is easy to fall into the trap of asking yourself if you in fact deserve to win. I've had a number of students ask me this question - talented, hard working, outwardly confident students.

The way I see it, someone deserves to win who has spent years studying and lots of money on lessons and tuition. Someone who has made and whose family has made sacrifices for this dream. Someone who has passed up social opportunities to instead practice, someone who has desperately struggled to make better reeds, someone who borrowed or scrimped to buy a new instrument, someone who has agonized over getting a particular excerpt clean and beautiful. Does that person sound familiar? Of course you may not be the only one who deserves to win, but if you fit the above description, then you definitely deserve to win.

Practice Auditions

You should play at least three practice auditions for *trusted* friends or colleagues. Don't play for anyone who you suspect might have a negative agenda about you or may be tempted to play mind games with you. Some people use this opening into your psyche to blast you with things they always wanted to tell you, with their hidden agenda being to hurt you. Find supportive people who have your best interests at heart.

Make these mock auditions formal and uncomfortable. They should, as much as possible, simulate the audition experience. Warm up in a different room than the "committee". When ready, walk in and have them decide the excerpts in an order of their own choosing. No talking or joking. They should take notes, but wait until afterwards to discuss them with you. Make copies of the music for them. Record this audition and listen later after receiving their comments.

Things You Can't Control

People waste a tremendous amount of time worrying about things beyond their control. These include:

1. Who will be auditioning.
2. How many people will show up.
3. What number you draw and what that means.
4. The temperature of the hall.
5. The acoustics of the hall.
6. What the committee is listening for.
7. The weather.
8. Your health on the audition day. (This can be partially controlled in advance, of course, but by the time the audition arrives, you feel how you feel and you must accept that. If you don't give in to feeling lousy, it's amazing what you can pull off during a relatively short audition.)
9. If they like you or not.
10. If you will win.

You cannot control any of the above, so don't waste energy worrying about them. Command yourself to put these thoughts out of your mind. You will be surprised how effective it can be to tell yourself, "I can't do anything about that so I won't worry about it."

Things You Can Control

1. Your attitude.
2. Your preparation.
3. Your reeds.
4. Your performance.

All of your concentration should be on the above. This is plenty to worry about and should be all-consuming.

Arriving at the Hall

If I am unfamiliar with the city, I like to make a trip to the stage door the day before the audition. This way I will know where I'm going and it will seem a little more familiar on the audition day.

At auditions you will probably run into old friends, classmates and colleagues. This is *not* the time to renew acquaintances and to discuss old times. Wait until you are finished before doing that. Be polite, say hello and don't try to "psyche out" anyone, but remember that all of your energy and concentration should be spent on getting ready to do your most beautiful playing.

I like to start a "page turner" book a day or two before the audition. I tend towards mysteries or thrillers in this situation but you will have your own tastes. I don't want to wait until the day of the audition to start the book because then it's often too difficult to get into it. I want to be "hooked" on the book before the audition. This way, if the Personnel Manager tells me that I won't be playing for another two hours, I can say to myself, "Great, I can read my book!"

Be in touch with your reeds to figure out how wet they should be. Some reeds work best if they are kept damp, but others will balloon open and be unplayable if they are wet for too long. Some should dry in your closed reed case and some should be left to dry in the

air and re-soaked when needed. A wet reed in a closed reed case will always dry slower and remain more open than the same reed left to dry in the air. This “reed management” is a crucial part of having your reed at its best at the moment of the audition. Sharpen your knife before you leave for the audition for tiny last minute adjustments. Double check that you have with you a few plaques (can you imagine only bringing one and accidentally dropping it between piano keys in the warm up room and not being able to get it out?) and cutting block.

The Audition Itself

When you enter the hall for the actual audition, don’t warm up on stage. If you must check your reed, do it very quietly, discreetly and *briefly*. It’s better to check it just before you enter the stage and hope it doesn’t change too much in the 10 seconds it takes to walk in. Playing scales or noodles will never help you in the eyes of the committee, and can definitely create a negative impression on them before you even start the first piece. It’s incredible how many people have ugly warm-up noodles. Starting without warming up in front of the committee can give the impression of great mastery and confidence.

Take a few moments to immerse yourself in each excerpt’s style *before* beginning. From the reed’s first vibration you must be “in character”. After the first few measures of the first piece the committee members will have one of two thoughts: “No”, or “I’d like to hear more”. You don’t have time to get going before sounding good. You must be *immediately* impressive.

Audition Mantra

My former teacher, Gladys Elliot, gave me this audition mantra to say to myself over and over again. It works for me.

1. No fear.
2. No inhibitions.
3. No desire to please.
4. Nothing shall stand between you and the job at hand.

The third one is especially valuable for many people. Don’t try to please the committee. You can not *make* them like you. In Zen-like irony, the best chance that they will like you is if you don’t care if they like you.

The second part of the mantra is:

Through intense concentration, inhibitions melt away and we are free to perform, unfettered by self-doubt.

If You Don’t Win

There is no shame to losing an audition – most great players have lost many of them. Avoid the temporary balm of being bitter or claiming it wasn’t fair or was “rigged”. Nobody wins every time. Keep in mind that the growth you gained from the long hours of preparation is still with you. It is never wasted time to practice well. Try to ask yourself what went wrong (if anything), and how can you use this experience to better prepare for the next one. Look for ways to present yourself even greater next time. There will always be another audition.

If you make each situation positive and full of growth, you will be a bit more “battle hardened” each time and ready to approach the next audition with renewed enthusiasm and determination.