

## **An Empowered Approach to Orchestral Auditions**

By Eli Epstein

At orchestral auditions there are many factors we cannot control:

- Where we play.
- When we play.
- What we play.
- What they're looking for.

We need to take steps to make ourselves feel as comfortable as possible in, what can be, an unpredictable situation. Therefore it's important to try to control the things we can.

- Excellent preparation.
- Pacing.
- Being focused on the technical and expressive techniques.
- Having a strong inner focus.

Some of what you read here may make more sense after you've experienced one or two auditions.

### PREPARATION

- Write for repertoire lists as soon as the position is posted in the International Musician and other sources.
- Practice from actual orchestral parts whenever possible so that the page format will look familiar to you at the audition.
- Listen to recordings of the pieces on the list, for tempi, style, and context. If possible, try to listen to recordings by the Music Director of the orchestra for which you are auditioning in order to learn his/her tempi and musical ideas. Conductors will judge you to be brilliant if you anticipate their musical wishes.
- Practice excerpts as you would practice an etude. Don't repeat them over and over again even though they are usually short. Try to keep your mind working all the angles on an excerpt. (See "Working All the Angles" in the Power Practicing chapter.)
- Don Liuzzi, Principal Timpanist of The Philadelphia Orchestra suggests asking yourself, what do you love about each excerpt? Convey what you love.
- Identify a few words that describe the mood of each excerpt you are working on and write them down. For example, for the opening of Heldenleben, descriptive adjectives could be "bold, heroic, stately." For the opening of Mahler Symphony No. 1, "tender, caressing, comforting" seem fitting.
- Practice excerpts with "eyes open - eyes closed." Listen to your playing very closely with your eyes closed and see how deeply you have learned. Go back and correct what you need to learn more deeply.
- Memorize each excerpt. This ensures that each one is learned in a very deep way and helps avoid too much dependence on the printed page. It's very important to deeply know each excerpt so that it feels like "an old friend" at the audition.
- Use a metronome 80% of the time in your preparation in order to develop an excellent

inner pulse. Audition committees are usually looking for players with pristine rhythm and pulse, an important skill for orchestral musicians, the best of who subdivide all the time.

- Rhythm, inner pulse, and subdivision are important to establish at an audition; they give our mind structure. Excellent pulse adds sparkle to whatever we play.
- Select a group of 3-5 excerpts to practice each day. It's not a good idea to play through the whole list until closer to the audition day.
- Identify the excerpts that you may need to work on several days in a row (i.e. the Third horn part of Mendelssohn Symphony No. 3.) Keep coming back to those tough technical ones in order to deeply establish them in your muscular memory. Always start with a metronome; practice slowly at first, then faster, then up to tempo.
- Get coaching from an experienced orchestral player whom you feel is challenging you and raising the level of what you're doing.
- Richard Sebring suggests recording yourself in this way: Set aside one day in the week when you will record yourself for a short time playing an audition round. Simply play through a group of excerpts without stopping or repeating any of them. Then, do the same thing a week later. This will build your level of focus each week leading up to the audition.

## PACING:

### TWO WEEKS BEFORE

- All excerpts and the required concerto ought to be memorized.
- Continue to get coaching.
- Continue listening to recordings until the day before the audition to solidify tempi, style, etc.
- Continue practicing 80% of the time with a metronome.
- Continue practicing 5-6 excerpts per day.
- Practice an etude along with excerpts (even just 15 minutes per day). Etudes keep our playing honest.
- Play audition "run throughs" in front of people whom you respect and who you feel will be supportive. This will help you get used to this unusual, unresponsive situation. Tell the listeners that you will play through the concerto exposition and 5-6 excerpts, and they should not comment until you are finished. You might want to ask them to try to distract you with cell phone ring-tones and rustling papers to help you develop mental toughness.
- Schedule a recital during this time; I think it helps to play something fun in public like the Brahms Horn Trio Opus 40. I've noticed that people who do this seem to be more fluid, focused and confident about their approach to the horn at the audition. The short sound-byte excerpts will seem easier, after playing long Brahmsian movements.
- Identify the 2-3 excerpts on the list that are the most challenging for you (e.g. the opening of *Ein Heldenleben*). Practice these daily, starting slowly and getting faster, as before.
- Pick a few excerpts in addition to these, so that you will cover the *entire list* over the course of a few days. Continue this 3-4 day cycle. Remember to keep practicing in a focused way.
- Exercise every day to keep toned and reduce stress.

- Be encouraging and supportive of yourself!

## THE DAY BEFORE THE AUDITION

- Do your traveling the day before, whenever possible. It's not a good idea to travel the day of the audition. Travel can be unreliable and physically and mentally stressful.
- Be as comfortable as you can. Decide whether you prefer staying in a hotel or with a friend.
- Exercise well, get fresh air, and relax.
- Practice for a shorter time than usual--just an hour or so. The reason for this is to promote good lip responsiveness and flexibility on the next day. By this time we have done all the work that matters anyway. Don't get into "panic practicing." Don't play through the whole list. Practice the warm-up routine you know so well; it's comforting. Practice a little Kopprasch, the exposition of the concerto and perhaps a couple of the more challenging excerpts. If you've prepared well, it's all in your muscular memory. Sing through the remaining excerpts on the list, using the appropriate vowels. Remind yourself of the expressive adjectives you selected for each excerpt.
- Buy food to sustain you for the next day: simple foods such as bagels, bottled water, bananas, walnuts, etc.
- Avoid caffeine, alcohol, vinegar or spicy foods.
- Before you go to sleep you may want to visualize yourself going through the audition in a very peaceful, detached kind of way. Close your eyes; take many deep relaxed breaths; relax every part of your body, and see yourself self-possessed, breathing deeply, supporting well, and singing every note musically, your body and mind working beautifully in synch.
- Tell yourself that all you need to do is the best you can, and the rest is out of your control.
- Get a good night's sleep.

## AUDITION DAY

- Eat a normal well-balanced breakfast. Bananas and walnuts calm us down. Drink lots of water--stay hydrated all day. Avoid dairy, since dairy tends to curdle in the mouth and create mucus. Use soy or rice milk instead on your cereal.
- Give yourself plenty of time to arrive as requested.
- Ask the personnel manager or his/her assistant when you can expect to play. If it's soon, make sure you have sufficient time to warm-up. Others may be more warmed up than you and can go a little sooner. You can always request to play slightly later.
- If you have a long time to wait, get out of the hall and go for a walk, read a book, or listen to a tape you like. Don't warm-up if you have to wait a couple of hours.
- Try to find a private place to warm-up and relax, away from the crowds of fellow auditioners.
- Pace your warm-up so that you finish within about 20 minutes of your scheduled time or whatever timing feels most comfortable to you. Try to feel primed and ready to go, but not over practiced and tired. Instead of using up your face, sing through the excerpts with vowels and expression. Rehearse your approach (breathe-support-set-play). Practice

- slowly one or two tricky muscular memory excerpts, such as the *Till Eulenspiegel* Call.
- Avoid talking to others, beyond saying “hello” and “I’ll talk to you afterwards.” People are usually feeling stressed and competitive; this increases their negativity. Stay away from loud, obnoxious people.
  - I’ve heard people say things like, “You’re using THAT mouthpiece???” and “You’re STILL in school???”
  - This is not a friendly horn convention. Usually the person who wins an audition has stayed very detached from others and has been focusing on him/herself.
  - Bring earplugs and/or an I-Pod. Try at all costs to avoid listening to others warm-up, and do not listen to others’ auditions. How people sound through a closed door or when warming up is not how most of them really sound in the audition.
  - When you’re told you will play in a few minutes, empty all your slides and talk to yourself. Again: don’t listen to the person playing before you. Plug your ears with your fingers if you have to.
  - Breathe deeply and talk to yourself. Remind yourself that
    - You cannot control the outcome,
    - You cannot make them like your playing.
    - All you can do is play like you.
    - Remind yourself of all the work you’ve done and how much you love music.
    - All you need to do is to focus on the task at hand
  - Since there is so little we can control in an audition, it’s important to “get our power back.”
    - Summon all of your strength and courage. Tell yourself, “I am self-possessed, strong and powerful. I will play like me,” or any similar list of positive self-talk that will have an empowering effect on you.
    - Sit in a chair and go through a relaxation process:
      - Place your feet flat on the floor.
      - Close your eyes.
      - Breathe in deeply and breathe out long.
      - Relax all the muscle groups.
      - Leave all the distraction behind.
    - Set up each excerpt’s tempo and mood. Remember the three adjectives you used to key into the mood.
    - Remind yourself to breathe deeply and support well.
    - Do a count down in the tempo of the excerpt. (4, 3, 2, 1). This helps build in structure for yourself.
    - ***Remember to convey what you love about each excerpt.***
    - SING every note musically.
  - Focus only on the excerpt in front of you. Try not to think about the next excerpt.
  - Richard Sebring, Associate Principal Horn of the Boston Symphony Orchestra suggests to “Think about *what* you’re doing, not *how* you’re doing.”
  - When you walk out on stage try to make eye contact with the committee if possible. This helps make a connection with them.
  - Plan to play a few warm-up notes (practiced beforehand) to get an idea of the hall’s acoustic.
  - Make yourself comfortable and adjust the stand if necessary.

- Try not to feel rushed. Even though the proctor may want to move things along, remember that you've worked very hard and have gone to some expense to be there. The committee can wait a little longer to hear you.
- If it's noisy, wait for the noise to stop or ask the proctor to do something about it. You and the people who are listening deserve to be distraction free.
- After each excerpt, encourage yourself. You can expect to hear no response from the committee. Expect an eerie silence.
- It's your responsibility to provide that emotional support for yourself. Tell yourself you did well. Stay focused on what you love about each excerpt.
- If you feel that you could do a lot better on an excerpt, ask if you may play it again. Usually you will be allowed to do so. This shows that you bring your own standard.
- Try to keep things moderately moving along. Don't empty all your slides in between each excerpt. Give yourself enough time to set up each new excerpt and then, go for it!

## THE NEXT ROUND

- If you are selected to play in the next round, ask when that will begin and when you can expect to play.
- If it is hours away, try to get away and eat a light meal, go for a walk, rest, relax, and definitely do not practice--remember, all of the important practice-work has already been done.
- Pacing is extremely important: you'll need all the strength, stamina, focus, and energy you have, LATER.
- Again, warm-up with enough time before you have to play.
- Know that by selecting you for the next round, the committee has heard a lot in your playing that they've liked. You ought to feel encouraged by that. However, it's very important to recognize that you still can't control the outcome. Try to stay completely focused inside; concentrate only on the task at hand, as you did so well in the first round. Keep it simple!
- All you can do is:
  - Become self-possessed; summon all your strength and courage.
  - Remember what you love about music.
  - Communicate what you love about each excerpt.
  - Play like you.
  - Breathe deeply.
  - Support.
  - SING EVERY NOTE.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Some of my students have said that it helps them to bring this guide along with them to auditions. They've said it calms them down, keeps them centered and helps them focus on positive things.

Remember that the most you have to lose is a job you don't already have; that the audition winner is not necessarily the best player, but the one who happens to fit into what that particular

committee or music director is looking for on that particular day in that particular hall.

Try not to be discouraged if at first you don't succeed. Most horn players in major orchestras today have taken numerous auditions. You might want to ask the committee members for comments on your playing and how you might do better next time. Sometimes their comments might make you aware of something you need to work on. Be very courteous to the committee members when asking for comments. Although you might be disappointed about not winning the job, be respectful about the feedback you receive. You'll go onto the next audition wiser, stronger and better prepared.

It's a challenging process, but one with which we can become familiar. I feel that I learned from each audition, how to prepare better for the next one, what I would do differently, what I would do the same. Although the audition process can be arduous and unpleasant and may sometimes even seem unfair, try to realize that by going through this process, you'll develop into a better, stronger, more focused, more disciplined, and more consistent horn player. This rigor will help sustain you throughout your career.

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