

# Preparing for Festival Auditions



A few years ago, I wrote an article for the International Trumpet Guild Journal Jr. dealing with reducing stress and performing to the best of your ability during an audition. This article can still be found in my "Blog" on this site, but after teaching more and more high school students to audition for festivals, I find my original article to need some revision. The idea was to write for 7th or 8th graders, but since high schoolers don't take kindly to being talked to like a middle schooler, here's a new take just for you. I hope you find some insights. Feel free to ask questions or make comments!

## **Why are you taking the audition?**

This question might sound simple, but it needs to be addressed. The original motivation for taking an audition, whether it be for district or county band or for the Chicago Symphony needs to be self-induced. Parents always want what's best for their kids, and sometimes that means pushing them to audition for certain musical organizations; they think that pushing you to audition will turn into motivation and inspiration to continue in your musical progress. While this sounds like a good idea on the surface, if YOU do not want to audition for something, you will not have the dedication and resilience required to sustain the preparation period. Issues will arise, things will get tough, and you will bail at the first sign of problem. Please be personally dedicated to whatever it is that you are auditioning for.

## **Are you willing to work?**

After figuring out why you want to audition for this group, ask yourself if you are willing to work for the goal, or are you stuck on the outcome but not willing to put in the hours to get there. I understand the trepidation surrounding audition preparation, but trust me, if you are averse to the process from the outset, things aren't looking good for achieving the goal. Practicing an hour or more per day is a must for the progress required to win an audition for a high school festival. If you are not willing to put this amount of time in, that's ok, but realize that someone else always is. Nothing comes easy and nothing is free.

## **The Fatal Error**

Let me let you in on a little secret: there are two ways of beginning this process. There's a way that will require a lot of re-work, a lot of frustration, and a lot of wasted time. And then there's a way that will save lots of time, effort, allowing your energy to be utilized toward your goal. Which way would you prefer?

Option A looks like this:

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Jump right into the piece. Hack through from top to bottom, slowing down for hard spots and playing quickly through the easy stuff. Ignore some errors as they fly by. Push for the high notes. Does any of this sound familiar?

Option B looks like this:

First, separate the technique from the music. Work on technique for as long as it takes to feel solid with flexibility, articulation, range, fingers, etc. Look through the audition material; if this is one solo piece, determine what techniques are used and “shed” them. While doing this, find a bunch of good recordings and listen, listen, listen to the piece. Study it with the solo part. Figure out what the person playing is doing, if you like it, and if so, how you can replicate it. Do this for 4-6 weeks.

When the technique has come together, slowly start working on the piece. Find the hard spots and work at them. Start at the end of a section, playing just the last bar. Then play the last two. Do this until you can play them perfectly three times in a row. Then add a bar before. Shed and play through perfectly three times. Do this until the entire section is solid. This will take weeks or months!

## **Be patient**

Just like training for a marathon, learning a piece well enough to be successful in an audition does not happen overnight. It requires a lot of dedication and perseverance. Things will not go well a high percentage of the time at first, but through incremental and smart practice, you will begin to find things easier and easier. Sometimes nothing you do will help, and that is what we in the business technically call “one of those days.” Deal with it. This happens to everyone!

## **Know what judges want to hear**

Which do you think a judge would rather hear? (Be honest!)

Student A: Plays everything perfectly well. All high notes are in place. Good intonation. No cracked notes. Very solid

Student B: Has a few mistakes. Misses a couple high notes. Really good phrasing. Tells a story through playing. Has a great sound. Seems to really know the piece and what it means to him or her.

If you picked B, you would be right. Judges do NOT only want perfection, they want to hear the student who knows the piece, knows how he or she wants it to go, and just plays the #@% out of it! A judge will hear 5-10 note perfect performances during a day of auditions, but only 1 or 2 will really stand out musically. Please be one of those two!

## **Getting Rid of Nervousness**

Everyone who has ever taken an audition or simply played in front of others knows what nerves feel like. Jittery hands, sweat, and a stomach full of butterflies are considered normal in this situation, but why do these symptoms arise in a stressful situation like auditioning?

A tiny part of the brain called the Amygdala is responsible for our horrible reactions in audition situations. The Amygdala is responsible for what we know as the “fight or flight” response. When a

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danger is detected, this little part of our brain kicks into overdrive and signals other parts of our body to respond. Heart rate increases, palms sweat, breathing becomes shallow, all preparing us to flee or fight a predator. This system was useful in the neolithic period, but now, on stages across the world, humans are left with performance anxiety or what we call "stage fright."

Understanding why this is happening is not good enough. We must figure out how to control our reactions to auditions. One way to quell our nervous system is to be prepared. When we are prepared for an audition, anxiety levels are kept to a minimum, and the fight or flight system is not activated as easily. A former teacher told me that to be prepared enough for an audition is to be awakened at 4 AM and play perfectly, from memory, the entire list or solo. Now that's prepared!

## **Confidence**

Entering an audition room, the panel of judges (if they can see the auditionee) already knows how well he or she will play. No, it's not because that person has the fanciest case or gold plated instrument, it's the way which the person carries him or herself. Stand tall...walk with purpose. This will carry over into your playing.

Speaking of playing, if you are abundantly prepared (ie the above sections), confidence will be natural. You will not be hoping for a certain section or a particular excerpt because all of them will be solid and all will be your favorite.

Set yourself up for success and enjoy the process!