

Preparing a Successful College Percussion Audition

By Eric Hollenbeck

As the level of musicianship in colleges and universities rises, the pressure put on prospective students to prepare an impressive audition increases. A college percussion audition can be seen as a relatively short amount of time in which a teacher determines an applicant's character, musicianship, work ethic, personality, and ability to work with others, or as a 10-30 minute display during which all of a student's hours of practice, study, and talent are briefly viewed, evaluated, and compared to others.

In any audition, preparation is essential for success. Everyone who has performed an audition has a story about something going wrong or something unexpected happening. If we are thoroughly prepared, unforeseen circumstances will not affect our performance.

PREPARATION

The first step in preparing an audition is to set clear goals. Also, realize that the main purpose of an audition is to align your interests and abilities with the interests and talent level of the particular school. Answer the following questions: _

- What do I wish to do as a percussionist?
- What is my ideal job, gig, or position?
- Will a degree from this particular college or school help me achieve my goals?
- Which schools and/or teachers can best serve my interests?
- Are the above schools within my abilities and means?

The answers to these questions may involve several months of research and the input of parents, teachers, and friends. Almost every university has a Web site where you may view or request information on particular degree programs, audition requirements, faculty, focus of study, and expenses.

PREPARATION TIMELINE

Most college auditions take place between mid-January and March, with January as the application deadline. Sometimes a student will have a choice of audition dates. The earlier the application is submitted, the greater the chances of your preferred audition date being granted. It is wise to audition for your first-choice school last, assuming that you will grow more comfortable as you continue to audition. It is recommended that a student apply to at least four schools. Here is a sample timeline for your preparation (based on fall enrollment):

12 months prior to audition (January): Begin researching institutions of interest.

8 months prior to audition (May): Request application materials and audition requirements.

7 months prior to audition (June): Choose audition repertoire and compile an audition list and notebook.

6 months prior to audition (July): begin learning most challenging of new repertoire chosen for the audition.

4 months prior to audition (September): complete and submit applications, recommendations, transcripts, and preliminary tape (if requested).

2 months prior to audition (November): all pieces should be learned in their entirety, although under tempo.

2 weeks prior to audition (early January): schedule two mock auditions or recitals, the first with a teacher, and the second (a week later) with as many people as you can find.

PRELIMINARY TAPE

Along with the application, many schools require the student to also submit a tape representing the student's playing ability. It is important that you create the best sounding tape or CD possible. (The application may state tape, but a CD is usually acceptable unless specifically noted. CDs offer the best sound and therefore make the best impression.)

Most often, the percussion teacher will evaluate your recording. He or she may have 50 tapes to listen to. If so, your tape may be ejected after the first major flaw; therefore, choose your pieces carefully. Do not put every piece you know on the tape. Only submit three or four pieces, with the best recordings first. If you have three good pieces and the fourth is weaker, go with just three.

Schedule some time after a performance to record yourself. Often, one or two days following a recital will be your best time. Give yourself a few hours on each piece, and try to find three or four pieces that you perform at the highest possible level. Many great players never get the opportunity to audition because they did not put in the necessary time preparing a good preliminary tape.

CHOOSING REPERTOIRE

Repertoire selection is a very important aspect of audition preparation. Most schools require the prospective percussionist to audition in three basic areas: keyboard percussion, timpani, and snare drum. Your performance must answer the following questions: Do you understand what it takes to produce a good sound on each instrument? Do you have a good sense of time? Do you have a sense of phrasing? Are you sensitive to the dynamic contrasts of each instrument?

These abilities do not have to be demonstrated through the most challenging literature. Realize that you may be practicing all three areas each day as the audition approaches. Therefore, it is important not to choose too many pieces. It is more important to play a few pieces well than to play many pieces badly. Usually, time will allow for one or two major pieces on each instrument, plus sight-reading.

SAMPLE AUDITION LISTS

Freshman Percussion Audition

Marimba 2 mallet

Major scales and arpeggios, 2 octaves

"Violin Sonata in A Minor"-J.S. Bach

Marimba 4, mallet

"Yellow After the Rain"-Mitchell Peters

Snare Drum

Intermediate Snare Drum Studies #32-Mitchell Peters

Timpani

*Musical Studies for the Intermediate Timpanist #26*Garwood Whaley

GRADUATE PERCUSSION AUDITION

Xylophone

"Porgy and Bess" (catfish row)-George Gershwin

"Polka" from "The Golden Age"-Dmitri Shostakovich

Marimba

"Sonata in B Minor," Mvt. III-J.S. Bach

"Time for Marimba"-Minoru Miki

Snare Drum

"Etude #1"-Jaques Delecluse

"Scheherazade"-Nicolas Rimsky-Korsakov

Timpani

"Saete"-Elliot Carter

"Symphony 9"-Ludwig Van Beethoven

The above lists are very general and may not reflect a particular student's strengths. If you are stronger in one area timpani, for example-your audition list may encompass more timpani literature of greater difficulty. You might reduce the amount and/or difficulty in another area in order to showcase your strengths. The above lists also do not include drumset, hand drums, steel drums, rudimental snare drum, electronic percussion; vibraphone, or improvisational skills, which are specialties of many students and music schools. The above literature was chosen based on the overall difficulty of the entire audition, representing different styles and periods in music, and one particular interest and ability.

Once you have selected your repertoire, ask yourself the following questions:

- Can I adequately prepare the entire list in the given amount of time?
- Does this list reflect my strengths?
- Do the institutions have the equipment available for me to perform this literature?

For example, many schools do not have a glockenspiel in the audition room; therefore you might end up playing these excerpts on xylophone or marimba. You also may not want to program a piece that requires extreme amounts of timpani pedaling. Even if you are playing on a familiar model or set

of timpani, spring tensions and pedal positions might be vastly different.

AUDITION LIST AND NOTEBOOK

Once you determine your audition repertoire, create a list similar to the lists above. Be careful that the list is accurate in spelling with consistent treatment of abbreviations. This will be the list you will hand the people for whom you are audition. Compile the music into the notebook in the same order as your list. If you are going to play orchestral excerpts, be sure to learn the entire piece, not just the standard excerpt. Include the entire part in your notebook, and try to find the original orchestral part rather than a reprinted version.

MUSIC PREPARATION

Establish a timeline for practicing each piece on your list. You may already know several of the pieces, but some of the pieces may take you several months to learn. Then work on a daily/weekly/monthly practice schedule. Practice pieces that you are learning every day. Divide pieces that you already know into two groups and alternate the groups every other day (group one, M, W, F; group two, T, Th, Sat).

Additionally, sight-read a few times each week. I find that reading duets with a friend is more enjoyable and helpful than sight-reading alone. You might also consider keeping a practice log. This will allow you to see your progress, and it keeps your practice sessions in line with your goals, especially if you keep the journal for a long period of time. Noting metronome markings in your log may aid in the gradual achievement of a particular tempo.

Besides knowing all the notes, rhythms, and dynamics, you will also want to know something about the composer, the method of composition, and the importance of the work to the body of percussion, jazz, ethnic, or orchestral literature. From what stylistic period does the piece come? What is the harmonic progression or the form of pitch logic used? What is the overall form of the piece? Who premiered the piece, and when? Are there other pieces that could be related to the one you have chosen? What are some of the different ways the piece has been performed? Knowing some of this information can give you valuable insight into the piece, thereby providing validation for your particular interpretation.

During the months of practice it may help to adhere to the following rules:

1. Be a ruthless self critic during your practice. Outside of practice, focus on the progress you are making.
2. Record yourself often and do not allow anything to get by without scrutiny.
3. Keep your long-term goals in the forefront of your mind.

MOCK AUDITIONS

Mock auditions provide a great opportunity to make sure you are performing under pressure. Little things that you may have overlooked will become apparent, like forgetting to turn off the snares, how to arrange your mallets, or perhaps how many music stands you will need. Be aware that if the mock auditions are close to your audition date, then their function is also that of a confidence-builder. A good teacher will alert you far in advance if you are not ready.

STUDENT CONTACT

Many times a student's interest in a particular college or university stems from an acquaintance who attends or has attended that institution. Ideally, this contact may offer the best insight into what the actual audition will entail. If you do not know anyone, the percussion Web site may contain the names of a few percussion students you could contact. Do not be afraid to call or e-mail them; it is often more helpful to contact a student about this information than the percussion instructor. Knowing answers to the following questions will be helpful in preparing your audition:

- What instruments will you be playing on?
- Who will be in the audition?
- What is the audition room like?
- To the student contact: What was your audition experience like?

Establishing this contact will also help you feel comfortable at the audition. Knowing someone in a strange place can be very calming.

TRAVELING TO THE AUDITION

If you are traveling a long distance for the audition, arrive the day before. A good night's sleep will help you deal with audition anxiety. You may also be able to tour the facility, find your audition room, talk to some of the current students, and perhaps practice on some of the instruments involved in the audition.

THE AUDITION

The audition day will probably involve a tour of the school, qualifying examinations, and meeting faculty. Try to be a little early for everything and listen carefully so that you can answer questions clearly. Once you arrive at a particular place, relax and be yourself. Wear comfortable clothing, but look professional.

Enter the audition room in a relaxed manner. Say hello and introduce yourself. Do not be so focused on your playing that you forget to display basic people skills. Immediately set up each performance area and remember that these people are waiting on you, as are other auditionees! I find it beneficial to set up all of the areas first. Often, the student determines what instrument he or she would like to start on; if so, I start on my strongest instrument.

Take a deep breath and sing a little of the piece in your head to establish tempo. Be sure not to stop once you have begun to play. If you do have a mental slip, keep playing something, but do not stop. This moment may seem to last a lifetime to you, but the listener may not have even noticed. If you stop or say "I'm sorry," you will have broadcast the fact that something went wrong.

You may be asked a few questions before or after you perform. Some of them will likely be the same questions you answered for yourself when determining your initial goals. What do you wish to do as a percussionist? What is your ideal job, gig, or position? Why are you interested in this school? Where did you learn about this school? By answering these questions, you will also reveal the following: Are you organized? Do you have long-term goals? Do you have some intellectual curiosity? Do you have a positive attitude? Will you be a good fit with this school?

If time permits, you may have questions for the people auditioning you. In asking questions, be careful not to assume that you are admitted. For instance: If accepted, with whom will I be taking lessons? What types of scholarships are available to percussionists? What playing opportunities are available to me? When leaving the room, thank the audition committee for their time.

POST AUDITION

Once your audition is over, congratulate yourself on a job well done. A few details may remain in your mind, but the overall presentation has been strong and you have done your best.

Upon returning home, send an e-mail to the professors thanking them for the opportunity to meet and play for them. Your acceptance will depend on more than your audition; the admissions department often shoulders that responsibility along with theory and history professors (if qualifying exams were given). You may expect to receive a letter of acceptance or rejection by or around April 1 (depending on the individual school). Whatever the letter may state, realize that progress was made by preparing and following through with the audition process. While the letter reflects the school's perception of your ability to fit the needs of that particular school, it also reflects one place in time, and is not an evaluation of your entire musical future.

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Hollenbeck has performed with diverse performing organizations ranging from principal positions held in Fort Collins and Cheyenne Symphony Orchestras to appearances with the Alabama, Sinfonia De Camera, Chicago Civic, Tallahassee, Columbus Symphony Orchestras, and as timpanist for the International Cathedral Music Festival, London, England. As a chamber musician, Eric has appeared with the Chicago Chamber Players, Eighth Blackbird, Xavier Cougat Orchestra and the Jack Daniels Silver Cornet Band.

As a recitalist, Eric has performed in England, Ecuador, Mexico, Canada, and over thirty universities in the United States. He has presented clinics and master classes at several PAS Days of Percussion, MENC and CMEA state conventions and as a featured performer with the Northwestern Percussion Ensemble at the 2002 Percussive Arts Society International Convention.