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Thoughts on Audition Preparation

by

Weston Sprott

Where do I find out about auditions?

Advertisements for positions in most American orchestras are listed in the International Musician, a magazine sent monthly to members of the American Federation of Musicians (www.afm.org). You can also find out about international auditions at www.musicalchairs.info. If you are serious about getting an orchestral position, I think it is important that you join the union and check the postings for new positions on the 1st of every month.

Which auditions should I take?

I believe it is important to take auditions ONLY for positions that you really want to have. By choosing to take auditions that you are only extremely serious about, you improve your chances of being successful. Be realistic, yet optimistic, about which auditions you will take. If you are serious about the auditions you are taking, you are more likely to work with the level of intensity and motivation it takes to be well prepared. Determine for yourself what your goals as a musician are, and make your audition selection align with those goals.

I've decided to take the audition. When should I start preparing?

I usually try to make my audition preparation last 6-8 weeks. When I'm not in preparation for an audition, I try my best not to work too much on excerpts. It is important to learn all of your standard excerpts and be familiar with the notes, rhythms, style, etc. well in advance of thinking about taking auditions. However, once you have this knowledge, I don't think it's particularly beneficial to slave over Tuba Mirum and Bolero when you could be working on other things to improve your artistry. Having said that, by taking this approach, you give yourself the ability to work in a very focused manner on the audition list without burning out on the excerpts. While in preparation, it is important for me to attempt to work only on the audition list. The excerpts and required solo become the integral part of all practice. While you can't eliminate all other obligations in your musical life, you should attempt to eliminate as many of them as you can so that you can put as much energy into the list as possible. This does not mean you should be negligent in your warm-ups or practice of fundamentals. It just means you

should avoid scheduling recitals, playing “just for fun” concerts, and gigs that hinder your preparation.

So, I’m 6-8 weeks away from the audition. The list is very overwhelming. How do I go about putting it all together?

Often, audition lists are quite extensive and can seem overwhelming at first glance. I remember my first major audition experience was for Associate Principal Trombone in the Cincinnati Symphony. I was 20 years old and staring at a list of more than 20 excerpts, a concerto and sight reading. For me, that was asking quite a bit! Having to work on a list that long, and having since worked on other lists, some similar, some less difficult, and some more difficult, I have learned several things about successful preparation.

First of all, try your best to not be intimidated by any audition list. For many people, myself included, our first instinct upon getting the list is to play through several of the excerpts. You soon become aware of just how difficult some of these things are and how much is being asked of you. You practice many of the excerpts for a few weeks, and though you’ve made improvements, there still seems to be a lot of work left to do, and now you’re only a few weeks away! You should be pretty close to ready by now, but... you’re not, right? I think this is common, and it’s a result of putting too much pressure on yourself to always sound like you’re ready to play the audition at this very moment.

You must always remember that this is a process. Quality results rarely come quickly, and you must be patient and have faith in the time frame that you’ve set for yourself. As a teacher of mine once told me, Lance Armstrong doesn’t bike like he’s trying to win the Tour de France EVERY DAY. Rather, he has a long training regimen that lasts for months leading up to the big race so that he can be in peak form at the right time. You don’t want to peak too early and leave your most polished and inspired performances in the practice room. Don’t be concerned with instant perfection. Instead, channel your energies so that you are in the frame of mind to be constantly improving. Physically and mentally prepare yourself at a pace that will allow you to be at your best when your best is needed.

Ok, ok, ok, so what’s your routine?

Disclaimer: The following is a sample of what I do when preparing for auditions. I have had success with this, and I have known several others who have had success with it also. Everyone has something that works for them. So, take this as food for thought. Try it out, alter it to fit your needs, throw it out... whatever!

So... let’s take an example list:

North Carolina Symphony, Principal Trombone, 1994

* Solo of applicant's choice

First Round

- * Berlioz, Hungarian March
- * Berlioz, Symphonie Fantastique (Movement 4)
- * Hindemith, Symphonic Metamorphosis (Movement 2)
- * Mahler, Symphony No. 3 (Movement 1, all solo passages)
- * Mahler, Symphony No. 5 (Movements 1 and 3)
- * Mozart, Requiem, Tuba Mirum (trombone 2 solo)
- * Ravel, Bolero
- * Rossini, La Gazza Ladra
- * Rossini, William Tell Overture
- * Saint-Saens, Symphony No. 3 (poco adagio solo)
- * Schumann, Symphony No. 3 (Movement 4)
- * Strauss, Ein Heldenleben (Battle Scene)
- * Strauss, Till Eulenspiegel
- * Wagner, Prelude to Act III of Lohengrin
- * Wagner, Tannhauser
- * Wagner, Ride of the Valkyries
- * Sight Reading

Final Round with Brass Section

- * Brahms, Symphonies No. 1, 4
- * Bruckner, Symphony No. 4
- * Hindemith, Symphonic Metamorphosis (Movements 2 and 4)
- * Schubert, Symphony No. 9
- * Tchaikovsky, Symphonies No. 4, 6
- * Verdi, Nabucco Overture

Now, upon first glance... yikes! That's a lot of music. The first thing I do when I see a list such as this, is take out a pencil and paper and divide the excerpts into different categories. Which ones are high? Which are low? Loud? Fast? Soft and high? Lyrical? Technical? Which ones are most difficult for me? Which ones have I never worked on before? Which are easy for me? Etc... Use this information as a base from which to prepare your practice regimen for the next weeks leading up to the audition. The first categories I address are the "Which are most difficult?" and "Which don't I know?". Hopefully, you already have recordings of all of these pieces and are familiar with them, but if you don't, go to the store and get them RIGHT NOW!

Week 1

So, we have 8 weeks. I like to spend the first week or so just getting myself back in the mood and the feel of playing excerpts. This is also the best time to eliminate any lack of familiarity with particular pieces on your list, and a good chance to play through some of your old favorites (ie Bolero, The Ride, Hungarian March) just for fun. Let's say for example that from this list, you've never heard the Overture to Nabucco, you've heard

Mahler 5, Symphonic Metamorphoses and William Tell, but never really worked on them. The rest of the list you've seen at some point in lessons and you've practiced them, but REALLY practiced them? It's been awhile. I would spend the majority of the first week in the practice room getting the notes and rhythms of these unfamiliar excerpts in my chops. When you've reached a decent level of fatigue with this on a given day of practice, give yourself a break, then come back and play some of the old favorites through just to reacquaint yourself with them. When not practicing, be listening constantly (especially to the tunes you don't know so well). When in "audition mode," I almost always have my CD player on and I'm listening to pieces that are on the audition list.

Weeks 2-6

Now that you're quite familiar with the entire list, it's time to get into the big part of the workload. Look again at the way you divided the list into categories, and devise a routine that will allow you to practice effectively every day. I have learned from experience that practicing five really high and loud excerpts over and over again for an extended period of time not only leaves me in a state of fatigue that day, it completely ruins my practice goals for tomorrow. Therefore, organize your practice in a manner that is balanced and time/energy efficient. Each day should include a combination of excerpts that works all different ends of the instrument.

I aim to approach each practice session on an excerpt with a specific goal in mind. For example: Today I'm going to work on playing Tuba Mirum perfectly in time. I give myself 15 minutes to accomplish this particular goal. (Work on inner pulse, sing it through, conduct through it, sing it with the metronome, play it with the metronome, once through playing all the subdivisions, now without the metronome hearing subdivisions in your head, etc.) I record this 15 minute practice session, and listen back when it's over. Listen back with a pencil, and mark the places where your time slipped, all of your pitch errors, articulation inconsistencies, etc. on the music and spend some time thinking about what you can do to improve these imperfections. Now that you've spent a good 15 minutes playing through the excerpt, it is probably more beneficial to spend some time conceptualizing what you can improve. Taking an inventory of all the faults in the excerpts will give you a good idea as to what the focus of your next practice session on this excerpt should be. Allow your thoughts to sink in, and you can apply this knowledge later. Fight the temptation to pick up your horn and try to prove that you can do it right. Have confidence that you worked hard, you approached it intelligently, and it will be better next time you play it. It is absolutely imperative that every practice session is goal driven and specific in purpose. Unguided and unfocused practice is often the equivalent of not practicing at all. The whole process of listening and evaluating usually takes me 10 minutes or so. Then I take another five minutes off to relax my mind, and then on to the next excerpt. Time to improve slide accuracy and pitch in William Tell . . .

If I were to break down the above list for myself, it would look something like this...

Day 1

Tuba Mirum
Symph Metamorphoses
Rhenish
Till Eulenspiegel
Mahler 5 (Mvt. 1)
Brahms 1
Tannhauser

Day 2

Saint-Saens 3
Hungarian March Bolero
William Tell
Mahler 3 (solo #3)
Lohengrin
Heldenleben

Day 3

Mahler 3 (solo #2)
Gazza Ladra
Sym. Fantastique
Mahler 5 (Mvt. 3)
Mahler 3 (solo #1)
Brahms 4
Ride

Each day, I would warm up and work fundamentals for 30 minutes. Then I would take a break and dive into this routine. Day 1: Tuba Mirum for 15 minutes as detailed above, 15 minute break, Symphonic Metamorphoses for 15 minutes, 15 minute break, etc. Its not important that this is all done in one session. In fact it is probably better to split it up into 2 or 3 sessions throughout the day if your schedule will allow. After my last practice session on the excerpts, I would allow a break of at least a few hours.

I would come back that evening for one final session that may last about an hour. I spend about 30 minutes working on the prepared solo and playing through the section excerpts. Then, I pull about 5-10 excerpts out of a hat and random and play them down audition-style for the mindisc recorder. Warm down and you're done for the day.

My calendar would be: Mon-Day 1, Tues- Day 2, Wed- Day 3, Thur- Day 1, Fri- Day 2, Sat- Day 3. When working this hard, it is necessary for me to have one day a week where I simply warm up for a few minutes, play 30-45 minutes of fun music (Rochut, other solos), and then allow myself to relax. Its been a long week! Spend the majority of this day relaxing, enjoying a good steak, watching football, hanging out with your friends. Sunday is the day of rest. Your mind and your chops need/deserve a break, because after all, its back to work tomorrow!

Weeks 7-8

These last couple of weeks leading up to the audition are extremely important. Hopefully by this point, the vast majority of technical and musical imperfections have been sorted out. Continue to practice your excerpts and solo with regularity, paying extra attention to the couple of excerpts that still need a little more polish. At this point, you should be focusing mostly on your ability to play through the excerpts. You should start shutting down your “work!” mode and start dialing up your “perform” mode. You are now approaching the time where you don’t have fifteen minutes to get these excerpts right. Soon, you will be on stage and expected to perform them well the first time you play them.

Practice the art of playing something well the first time. I have noticed many players who are content to play something at a mediocre level at first, then a little better, then a little better, and 20 minutes later they have a product that’s slightly above average. What we need is something spectacular for the first time. By now, my music is overrun with notes I have made to myself (from all those listening/evaluating sessions, remember?), so what it takes for me to perform the excerpt well is laid out right in front of me. The difficult part is remembering all of those things when you play.

I will spend 90 seconds or so before each excerpt just thinking about what I need to do to make it a successful performance. For example: Before playing Tuba Mirum, I will look at my markings and remind myself of all the things I’ve worked on that are now marked in my music. In my mind I’m saying, “I want this excerpt to sound bold and confident. It’s quite possibly the first thing I’m going to play. Hear the tempo of the 8th notes in bar five to set my tempo and establish the thought of subdivision from the beginning. Embrace the high Ab in bar 5 instead of shying away from it. Make sure the Eb’s and F’s in the second half of the excerpt are low enough in pitch. Make nice hairpins in the arpeggios and keep the tempo moving forward.” My parts actually go into more detail than that sometimes, but that’s the idea.

One last note about marking notes on your music... I like to put a one word description above each excerpt that reminds me of the color/style I would like to inflect (i.e. Tuba Mirum-Bold, Bolero-Sexy, Heldenleben-Energetic, Rhenish-Calm, etc.). Your goal in an orchestral audition is not to just play everything as cleanly as possible. Rather than playing to not make mistakes, you should be actively making impressions on the listener. The goal should be to make the committee say “Wow!” after each excerpt, and for a different reason each time! Be like a painter with hundreds of brushes and a palette of hundreds of colors. Think of each excerpt as an opportunity to show something different that you have up your sleeve. Now, take a deep breath and play it through, just like you’re on stage.

Each day leading up to the audition, lessen the amount of time that you spend thinking through the excerpts. Being so familiar with your written notes, you will be able to process all the information clearly with less time each day. The goal would be that a few days before the audition, you can think over an excerpt for 10 seconds, play it, think about the next one, play it, etc.

Nitzan Haroz, Principal Trombone of the Philadelphia Orchestra, told me to think of these markings on the music as your GPS system. Have all your directions written on the page and simply read them to yourself before and while you play. This takes a lot of remembering out of the equation. There's nothing worse than leaving the stage and thinking, "Well, I could have done it better, but I forgot to do that thing I worked on!" I've done it before. Its quite painful.

Make sure that you take good care of your chops during this time. It is better to be a little tight, yet fresh on the day of the audition than to be completely overworked. Plan your practicing in the last week or two so that your chops will be in the best possible condition for the 2 or 3 days that you need them to be.

I've got the physical part of the preparation down. What should be going through my head?

The mental aspect of audition preparation is too often overlooked. We've all heard "in tune, in time, with a good sound," but its just as important to be aware of the mental state you need to be in to actually produce these things when you're on stage. Think ahead of time about all of the things that will happen at the audition. If you can, look online and get a picture of the concert hall where you will be playing. Imagine yourself in that place. Visualize yourself playing well. Spend time building up your confidence and belief that you can and will take on the task at hand. There's nothing wrong with having a personal "pep rally" every once in awhile. Don't be arrogant, but DO be confident. You are preparing to put on a solo presentation, and the committee wants to hear a confident, self-assured, expressive musician. If you are steeped in self-doubt, it is impossible to achieve this. Developing a positive attitude about the audition process and about your ability to perform well is paramount. None of us are promised a winning result at an audition, but you can feel satisfaction in knowing that you did your best to become the best that you are capable of becoming. You've done everything that you can do. Go out there, play to the best of your abilities, and hope for the best.

Any thoughts about audition day?

Get a full night's sleep the night before the audition. Have a nice healthy breakfast, and keep your head straight. I often have the urge to wake up, scarf something down, and pull out my horn really soon. Don't be too anxious to find out how your chops feel. You don't need to see if your high D's are back at your apartment on the other side of the country. You've been taking care of your body, chops and your mental state, so everything should be there when you need it. Attempt to make your morning as easy as possible. Relax yourself. Have a nice slow warm-up that doesn't wear you out. You just want to get everything up and running and feel flexible and awake. Resist the temptation to play through several of the excerpts. After you are warmed up, it is better to either mentally go through the excerpts or just start a few of them. You never know how much playing you will be expected to do, so you want to make sure that you have all of your energy saved up for the time when you are auditioning.

Arrive at the audition at the time you were told to come. Arriving too early just leads to anxiety issues. You see the groups that are there before you. People are talking

about who advanced and who didn't, what they had to play, what restaurant everyone's going to after the audition, what mistakes they made, etc. None of this is beneficial to you. You need to be concerned solely with yourself and maintaining a relaxed, positive state of mind. By all means, be nice to the other people that are there. Check in with the personnel office, say hello and smile when people speak to you, but distance yourself from too much extracurricular activity.

Audition days always bring about a certain amount of stress no matter what you do. Being aware of this fact will help you keep your composure. Mentally prepare yourself for the possibility that things will not go as planned. The audition is running an hour late, so now you're hungry because you ate too early. Your chops don't feel so great. You're getting nervous. When these things happen, just exhale and think, "Well, it's no surprise. Just stay calm and do the best you can." Don't leave your best takes in the warm up room. Take advantage of the warm up time to get yourself relaxed and get your chops ready to work. Don't think of this as your last fifteen minutes to crash practice! If you haven't figured it out by now... well... you're probably not going to figure it out!

What about other people at the audition?

Don't be concerned with other people at the audition. Inevitably, at any major audition, there will be some good players there. You may have some of their CD's, you may admire their musicianship, but you shouldn't be intimidated by them. You can't allow other people to affect your psyche. I remember having an experience where I was signing in for the semi-finals of an audition, and I saw the names of the other people that were there. I thought to myself, "Wow, a lot of these guys are REALLY good. I better be on my A-game or I'm not going to stand a chance!" I have learned that is the absolute wrong attitude. Sure, there are other good players at the audition, but you're a good player too! Thinking about other people auditioning can only negatively affect your performance. Know that you have prepared well, and you have something musically unique to offer that the committee might love. Also, don't change things at the last minute. You are likely to hear someone in the warm-up room next to you playing an excerpt differently than you have prepared it, or playing some wild flexibility exercise that you didn't even know existed. Try your best to pay this no attention. Have confidence in your preparation and your musicianship.

Any suggestions for when you're on stage?

I can't remember how many times I've been told before a recital or an audition, "It's a beautiful hall. Have fun!" I then think, "Have fun? Are you kidding? This is the most pressure packed day of my life!" For the longest time, I never understood the notion of enjoying your performance at an audition. Now I do, and I'm glad to say that it makes a difference. Take a couple of deep breaths and play a couple of notes into the hall if this makes you feel more comfortable. (If you choose to do this, please make sure these notes sound good. It's not technically a part of the audition, but people ARE listening!)

This moment is the culmination of all of your hard work, and it's your time to shine. Just keep your mind focused on taking a good, controlled breath and playing what

you have prepared. A large part of having that “enjoyable” experience is to play for yourself. Don’t play for the approval of the committee. Present the music in a manner that says, “This is how it goes.” as opposed to, “Is that ok?”. The people out in the hall are waiting, hoping that you will impress them. If you present a confident, self-assured performance, there’s a good chance they will like you.

Finally, don’t be bothered by mistakes. You shouldn’t expect to make mistakes, but you shouldn’t be thrown off by them either. A cracked note or two is not going to ruin your chances. Your overall presentation, tone, pitch, clarity and phrasing are much more important than being note-perfect. Interestingly enough, in every audition I’ve won, I’ve made mistakes (I cracked a couple REALLY bad!). The few times I played note perfect? Not as successful. The lesson? Don’t put so much pressure on yourself to play the “perfect” audition.

Is there a difference in the way you play each round?

I have talked to a lot of people who say, “In the first round, the committee is just looking for a reason to cut you. It’s all about playing in tune and in time. In the later rounds, that is when you get an opportunity to open up and they are really listening to what you are doing musically.” Basically what they are saying is that you should play the first round “in the box” and as cleanly as possible, and then really go for it in the semis or finals. Personally, I don’t subscribe to this theory. I think you should give everything you have in every single round of playing. If you have prepared well, you will be able to do this while still playing “in tune, in time, with a good sound”. Eric Carlson, 2nd trombonist in the Philadelphia Orchestra, once told me that if you advance in the first round of an audition, you should do more of the same in the second round. The committee voted for you in the first round because they liked what they heard. Why would you go and change it? I think that’s quality advice.

Any thoughts about inderol or proponenol?

I don’t want to endorse or criticize the use of these drugs. My personal feeling is that performers should not be dependent on them. I have known people that use them for every important performance they have. I can’t endorse that. Other people use them on rare occasions when they really can’t afford to have their nerves shake them (a big audition, playing Mahler 3 at Carnegie, etc) and I think that’s ok. When you are doing performances for learning experiences, you should avoid using these drugs. Student recitals and concerts, mock auditions, school auditions, rehearsals, etc. are situations that are meant to give you the opportunity to see how you respond to performing in a pressure situation. There is no real reason to use inderol/proponenol in these situations. Only use inderol if you feel that you have to. Additionally, if you make the decision to use it, give it a test run before you use it in the real situation. You might be surprised to see how your body responds to the drug. Some people get dry mouth as a side effect. Others find that their playing gets dull or overblown because they are too relaxed. Set up a mock audition for yourself and see how you feel when using inderol.

Some closing thoughts...

I don't claim to be the authority on audition taking. I have taken several auditions with varying degrees of success. To my credit, every audition I have taken has been an improvement from the last one that I played. I think that just shows that playing and auditioning well is a never-ending learning process. While the details of preparation often change, there are few things that I have found the vast majority of successful audition takers have in common.

First, and most importantly, these people are all hard workers. There is no substitute for industriousness. Quality results don't come from shortcuts. The difference in the level of so many talented people is usually found in work ethic.

Secondly, they all have good teachers. Luckily, ALL of my teachers have been people that I admired as players, teachers, and human beings. They were all people who were doing what I wanted to do, and they were all very demanding while still managing to promote individuality in my musicianship. Furthermore, they did their best to make the challenge of playing and improving an interesting and enjoyable experience.

Lastly, successful audition takers are generally organized. Be organized about how, when and why you practice. Make photocopies of your excerpts, and have them all bound into one book. This way you can always be assured that you have all of your music with you.

What you have read is a look into the way that I prepare for auditions. Hopefully it can serve as a useful resource to others who are taking auditions. Best of luck to you!

Weston Sprott, a native of Spring, TX, began his formal training under the tutelage of Michael Warny, trombonist with the Houston Grand Opera and Ballet Orchestras. He began his undergraduate study at Indiana University in Bloomington with Carl Lenthe (former Principal Trombonist of Bavarian State Opera and Bamberg Symphony) and continued his studies at The Curtis Institute of Music. At Curtis, Weston studied with Nitzan Haroz (Principal Trombone- Philadelphia Orchestra) and graduated in the spring of 2005. While a student at Curtis, Weston served as Principal Trombone of The Pennsylvania Ballet Orchestra (Philadelphia) and Principal Trombone of The Delaware Symphony Orchestra. Weston was also an active freelancer in Philadelphia with The Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia and the Haddonfield Symphony.

As an orchestral musician, he has performed with The Philadelphia Orchestra, Oslo Philharmonic, the Tanglewood Music Center, Spoleto Festival USA, Hot Springs Music Festival, The American Wind Symphony Orchestra, the Sphinx Symphony (Detroit) and several others. Outside engagements have led to performances with gospel and jazz artists Take 6, Donnie McClurkin and Branford Marsalis. Weston is currently Second Trombonist of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, a position he has held since May of 2005.

