

Audition Observations

By Tom Gibson

Very recently I was afforded the opportunity to sit on an audition committee with my fellow section-mates. I learned so much as a result of this experience that I began making a lengthy journal entry. As I was scribbling frantically in my "book-o-thoughts", I realized that the lessons imparted to me would be of value to others as well. After all, the great majority of us has been or will be in this situation.....perhaps many times. We can all stand to gain from others' insights and experiences.

What follows are my thoughts and observations as concerns the audition process. The comments are general and are in no way meant to demean or embarrass individuals....we have ALL had our moments of triumph and failure. The human experience is fraught with such highs and lows and the wisest among us will seek to profit from both! I write in the spirit of gaining knowledge, not in the role of judge and jury. After all, this began as a note to myself. In many ways, writing this is instructive and therapeutic. Let's all learn a little, shall we....._

First of all, a great crop of candidates showed up for our audition. The resumes were spectacular....the finest schools, most noted teachers, and well-respected ensembles were all represented. We were very excited to here these people play. This, perhaps, bears repeating- **we were very excited to hear these people play!** None of us looked forward to hearing someone "crash and burn". Quite the contrary, in fact. We were ready to revel in some glorious trombone sounds....to delight in the intensity and passion of the performer.....to share in their joy at playing this most noble of instruments! We didn't get the chance. Why?

Here's my guess:_from experience, I know all about the "jitters" before what is perceived to be a pressure performance. Been there....hated that....will probably be there again! But check out the last paragraph. We were rooting for these folks to play not just well, but GREAT!!! Just knowing this would have soothed many a tattered nerve I suppose. It is easy to imagine the committee as adversary. Their voices, if heard at all, are so dead-pan and serious behind that screen. Even worse than the whispers are the hours- long silences between excerpts!! ARGH!! "What are they

thinking? Why don't they speak in a friendlier manner? Play it again??#\$!! Oh, they HATED it! Obviously they don't like me. If they did, they'd be nicer...they wouldn't want to hear it again if they LIKED it/me".

It was enlightening to observe these thoughts physically manifest themselves in the performer. I had the unique experience of being on the stage-side of the screen with the candidates...a front row seat, if you will. I was instructed to say very little. This is done in the interest of fairness and to dispel any biases that may rear there very ugly heads. No one is shown any sort of preferential treatment or favoritism. We speak very matter-of-factly and concisely so as to show little or no emotion. Not because we don't like you!

In a few cases, I was nearly overwhelmed with the urge to offer some encouragement. "Hey...they want to hear it again, that's a GOOD thing! That chipped note meant NOTHING....forget it and move on! Take a chance, really GO for this crescendo. Ah, yes, big and proud!!! Keep that going. Are we having FUN with this yet? Do you like the trombone? If a Martian landed right here, right now, would he report to his superiors that he observed you having FUN? Or would he say you were wrestling a shiny serpent and not enjoying it in the LEAST!?!?!"

One committee member remarked that everyone was so tentative, it was uncomfortable listening to them trying to avoid mistakes, rather than trying to make music and have some fun with it. _No one stepped onto stage with the attitude that "I know how this thing works and how it's supposed to sound....now LISTEN TO ME!". In at least one case, probably more, this attitude would have swayed the jury and won the job....no question about it. This person could really play- it was obvious to us. But do we want someone in the section that doesn't play out with confidence? We want to go to work everyday and play with people that LOVE what they're doing! On a merely practical level, do you know how hard it is to play in tune with a meek player? OK, enough about the "attitude thing". Be aware, however, that this can make ALL THE DIFFERENCE IN THE GALAXY! Ask Michael Jordan! Play like you love it and let the chips fall where they may!

Perhaps what most shocked us, other than the ubiquitous timidness, was the lack of preparation. The prepared excerpts should be just that- PREPARED. A chipped note or two (not many more than two, though) is forgivable if the rhythm, style, and articulation are on the money. Don't confuse musicality with bad rhythm. On a Rochut etude, for example, don't be so free with the time that all sense of meter is lost. "Middle of the road" interpretations are probably better suited for an audition. We can't tell whether you're being incredibly inspired or you can't count! Don't make us choose! Don't make up articulations...play what's written._Ah, yes,

articulation. Tonguing is our bread and butter. We needed to find a player with crisp, clean, "sound-up-front" attacks. Surprisingly, the vast majority of candidates had scattered and un-centered, almost "tubby" approaches to tonguing. This prompted one committee member to wonder aloud whether the "bigger is better" craze that's running amok in our ranks is causing unforeseen problems.

Without exception, the finalists at our audition had big, round sounds. This was due in no small part to their huge mouthpieces (and probably WIDE open lead-pipes). On the big excerpts, they were great, although none played a big enough forte for our liking. However, on the more delicate and nimble excerpts which called for light, fast tonguing, all precision was lost. Perhaps this is not due to equipment, but rather a lack of concerted practice in this aspect of performance. I have my suspicions, though. I have eaves-dropped on enough "shop-talk" to know that young players today are looking for the biggest stuff they can find. This is all well and good if the embouchure is highly developed and strong enough to maintain some dexterity. But this is often not the case.

The last part of the audition process was sight-reading. We put up a rather fast march, a jazz ballad, and a bravura excerpt with some rhythmic challenges. What I noticed right away was the fact that on the fast scalar passages in the march, players had difficulty playing fast scales in tune. These should be done every day and "tossed off" when encountered in music. Recognizing scalar and triadic patterns and knowing them like the back of your hand is probably the best preparation for sight reading. When it came time for the ballad, only one player really changed styles. The notes were pretty simple and the rhythm not too complex. We were wanting to hear a real stylistic change from all that had come before. Versatility and adaptability were the reasons for putting this excerpt on the stand. Perhaps a moment of thought before jumping in would have helped. I know the next time I encounter sight-reading on an audition I will think to myself (after quickly scanning the key signature, dynamics, etc.), "what are they hoping to hear on this one....other than right notes and rhythms?".

The last excerpt revealed that sight-reading rhythms is indeed a tough task. Err on the side of caution and proceed slowly (within reason, of course!). They can always ask you to play it again a little bit faster. Sub-divide in your head like CRAZY! Again, this can be worked on every day of our playing lives....make it a HABIT! Other than that, I suggest sight-reading a wide variety of stuff on a regular basis. Etude books, solos, transcriptions, anything and everything you can get your hands on! Libraries are great places to start, or ask your teacher to "unload" some piles of music on you. It can be a lot of fun to fly through stacks of music at one sitting, not stopping to correct mistakes. Liberating, in fact.

In summary, then, I guess my most significant observation and most valuable lesson learned was this: we play 'cause we like to play. If people like to listen to us....GREAT. If they don't.....their problem! If we play because we love it, this wonderful energy comes out the bell....chipped notes and all! People are drawn to this energy. It's infectious, contagious, and self-propelling. An audition is just another chance to play...of which there is a finite number in our lifetimes. Share your joy with others and show them how much you love your horn. I predict success with this approach. You may or may not win the job, but that might be beside the point. You will have communicated something of value to a fellow human being and you'll both be the better for it.

OK....now for the sad news. As you may have guessed, we were unable to find a suitable candidate on this day. Judging from their resumes alone, we certainly could have chosen a competent player. I happen to side with those that say the audition process is bogus and flawed. Is it fair that we judge a person's competence on the basis of one afternoon's performance....or one week's....or one month's? Of course not! In the final analysis, though, this happens to be the most democratic and impartial (not to mention cost-effective) way of choosing a player. Hopefully, a better system will soon be incorporated. Until that day, learn from these observations, and continue to go about your business of making great music every time you pick up the horn. Best of luck and keep smilin'....there are worse ways to spend your days than playing a trombone, no?

