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Bass Forum

The Right Word(s) at the Right Time

I think that, as teachers, we all can recall moments of epiphany when a word, phrase, image, analogy, parable, or some other linguistic form that we uttered to our students clicked with them, and "they got it!"

by Lawrence Hurst

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Chamber Music Forum

Chamber Music: It's Your Move

Playing chamber music is one of life's great pleasures. The literature is wonderful, of course. But there also is the joy that comes with shared experience.

by Sharan Leventhal

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Music Degrees: Everything You Need to Know from Application to Graduation

Part One – The Application Process

Music degrees are different than the typical undergraduate degree. To begin with, they require a great deal of specialized instruction; in order to graduate within four years, music students must begin major coursework in their first semester on campus.

by Hillary Herndon

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The National Core Music Standards and Conceptual Understanding of Playing Skills

This article will acquaint readers with the content of the new National Core Music Standards (NCMS). Its more specific aim is to provide bowed string instrument teachers with a theoretical framework for the interpretation of the standard labeled *Performing*, as the new standards seem to be proposing a distinct, conceptual view on what music students need to know when it comes to performing a piece of music.

by Dijana Ihas

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Violin Forum

The Suzuki Method and Beyond for the Advancing Violin Student

This is an interview with Julia Salerno, Eastern Washington University: Lecturer of Violin and Viola, Walla Walla Suzuki Institute: Co-Director and Violin and Viola Teacher.

by Danae Witter

Music Degrees



Everything You Need to Know from Application to Graduation Part 1 (Part 1 of a 3-part series)

by Hillary Herndon

Part One – The Application Process

Music degrees are different than the typical undergraduate degree. To begin with, they require a great deal of specialized instruction; in order to graduate within four years, music students must begin major coursework in their first semester on campus. While their peers will change majors multiple times, music students will decide on their major prior to even applying to college. Music degrees also require an additional element to the typical undergraduate application: the audition.

Parents of music students often feel they don't understand this specialty degree well enough to adequately navigate the admissions and audition process. This article is the first in a three-part series to provide insights into music degrees for string

students and their families. In this first segment, questions about the application process are examined, including when to start looking at schools, how to determine which degree program is right for you, and what you should look for in a music school. The second installment will focus on auditions, and the third will offer advice on how to make the most of college once admitted and enrolled.

Notable string teachers from a variety of institutions and specialties have contributed their advice to this series. The teachers represented include pre-college teachers who regularly prepare students for college auditions, as well as collegiate string teachers from multiple institutions. Please visit astaweb.com for the complete questionnaire used in writing this article and full responses from each participating teacher.

Contributors include:

Kathryn Dey, Viola Instructor, South Carolina Governor's School for the Arts and Humanities

James Dunham, Professor of Viola, Shepherd School of Music, Rice University

Natasha Farny, Associate Professor of Cello, SUNY Fredonia

Lin He, Associate Professor of Violin, Louisiana State University

Sidney King, Assistant Professor of Double Bass, University of Louisville

Christine Rutledge, Professor of Viola, University of Iowa

Nicolette Solomon, Executive Director, Suzuki Institute of Dallas

James VanDemark, Professor of Double Bass, Eastman School of Music

This article is by no means exhaustive, and readers are strongly encouraged to ask questions of their private teachers and to reach out for advice from professionals in their specialty of interest.

Timeline

Music students often are surprised by how early they should begin thinking about college. In order to understand why, it is helpful to work backwards through the audition and preparation process. Admittance to music school is dependent upon both a successful application and audition. Applications are typically due in the fall of the senior year of high school, and auditions occur in early spring (late January - March.) Preparation for these auditions then should begin by the summer before senior year. As each school has its own audition repertoire, students need to be fairly certain of where they plan to apply by the end of their junior year. For this reason, most teachers recommend students start considering college options as early as possible.

"Students should start looking at music schools of any persuasion by their junior year in high school, at the latest. There are often -- but not always -- so many complications in making an informed decision about school, that the earlier one begins the investigation the better. The earlier a student can go to schools, take tours, meet students and, particularly, take a lesson and converse with the prospective teacher, the better."

- James VanDemark

"It's never too soon to start investigating degree programs, teachers, and schools. Visiting colleges, meeting prospective faculty, talking with peers about their thoughts, etc. can start as early as sophomore year -- especially since students may change their minds as they begin to gather information. Certainly by the middle of junior year students should have a clear idea of their intended degree, a list of schools that interest them and then begin focused research and visits. Visits should start spring semester of junior year and ideally take place when school is in session. Summer visits are just nice opportunities to look at buildings and give very little information about the faculty and student body. Performance orientated music students need to move sooner on all this than

some of the other degree candidates in order to begin meeting studio teachers and identifying matches that are positive."

- Kathryn Dey

"The pre-application starts, psychologically, years before the actual application. Start building up performance programs from a few years before application. Discussions and conversations about this career path should take place every few months in lessons, and attending relevant summer schools will help guide the student."

- Nicolette Solomon

"Serious students (and their teachers) often begin thinking about this during early high school years so that summer programs can be chosen to meet and work with potential teachers. Campus visits often begin in the spring of junior year, although fall of senior year works, too."

- James Dunham

Degree options

There are a variety of degree options available to string students, including the Bachelors of Music Degrees in Performance, Music Education, Sacred Studies, Theory and Composition; Bachelors of Arts degrees with specialties in Applied Music or Music and Culture, and minors in music. Some schools will offer all of these degree programs, while others might offer fewer. In addition to these degree choices, students should consider what type of institution they are interested in. Music conservatories, state universities, and liberal arts schools all have slightly different course requirements.

Most institutions will include the program requirements for each degree program on their website. Spend some time looking through these to understand what is expected of students at each school. Academic grades and standardized test scores are weighted differently in the admissions process for state universities and conservatories. Conservatories might not request SAT scores, but many state schools will have minimum score and grade levels that cannot be worked around for even the most talented student. Students should make an honest assessment of their strengths and weaknesses as a student to determine what type of school and degree program they can excel in.

"I feel the first thing students should do is identify their strengths and interests as people and musicians. This helps them to think about what degree program will best fit them and help them grow in healthy ways to reach their goals. Students considering music as a career also need to make sure they have a clear and realistic picture of the current music industry so they can be prepared to participate in it upon graduation. Obviously a teacher or mentor can be very helpful at this stage. I require all my 'intended music degree students' to meet with me in the middle of junior year with their parents to talk about all of this. That way everyone is on the same page as the process begins."

- Kathryn Dey

"Students considering a performance degree need to understand the importance of personal practice time in their schedules as

well as the competitive nature of this career direction. I feel that students considering Music Ed degrees should feel strongly motivated to be teachers and not just be looking for a safe way to get a job in music. A Bachelor of Arts degree in music can be a good path for many students who want to keep options open. This can give them the opportunity to put forth a maximum effort with their work on performance while having a minor in another subject. Some students consider a double degree, in music and something else (engineering, biology, etc.). This can work for some individuals, but I generally feel that success in music requires such a commitment of time and energy that it may not be a good idea to split up their efforts."

- Sidney King

"Students should talk to professionals in all fields to get an idea of what that type of career is like and if possible spend time 'shadowing' these professionals for a day. I think that it is important for students to take a realistic view of what the job possibilities in each profession are. Pursuing a performance degree is, of course, not realistic for anyone, even at the most elite conservatories. But getting a performance degree doesn't necessarily have to lead to an orchestral or solo career. Like any liberal arts degree, a student will get a lot of exposure to many facets of music (performance, musicology, theory, education, etc.).

Universities and conservatories offer a very different type of education. Students should be realistic about what the differences in curricula are. And each type of institution will appeal to a particular type of student, too. If a student isn't really sure about the type of degree or area of specialization they want to pursue, they should make sure that they pick a school that offers the degrees they might want to pursue, should they change their mind along the way."

- Christine Rutledge

Where to apply

Once students have narrowed down what type of school and degree program they are interested in, it is time to look at specific schools. Private teachers, orchestra directors, and professionals in the field of interest are valuable resources to help point you in the right direction. Items to consider include the success of recent graduates, ensemble and performance opportunities, strengths of each program, facilities, the courses offered, and cost. The single most important factor stressed by all of the contributors to this article is the studio teacher.

No matter the degree pursued, music students will develop a close relationship with their studio teacher. As an undergraduate, students will spend at least one hour per week for four years with this teacher in private lessons and countless additional hours in studio classes. Students need to trust their studio teacher implicitly and believe that the teacher can help them develop into the type of musician they wish to become. It is strongly recommended that students have a trial lesson with the teacher at each school they are considering applying to. Students should go prepared with questions to ask about the program and ask to speak with current and former students for their perspectives on the strengths and weaknesses of the school.

"The teacher is all important, in my opinion. There are wonderful schools with wonderful programs, but the teacher/student chemistry is where it begins, and, from there, all the rest of the program comes into focus. Of course, there is no one solution, which is why there are many fine teachers at many schools! Even having a single lesson during a campus visit can be all important."

- James Dunham

"In general, the most important factor in selecting a college is the rapport that can be developed with the private teacher, regardless of which particular music degree is pursued. The private teacher serves as a mentor, counselor, role model, professional contact, and even surrogate parent. The teacher creates an atmosphere that is conducive to growth and creates a sense of community in the studio. I feel that it is a good idea for students to seek the advice of their private teachers and school directors. It is important to consider the success of students coming out of the private studios of the various institutions. Often, students can contact the applied teacher at a school and ask for a list of the accomplishments of recent graduates of the studio. I also feel that it is a good idea to consider the recent history of a particular studio and not just base decisions on a long-standing reputation that might be based on other elements of the school."

- Sidney King

"This is a potentially very close four-year relationship (yes, one can always transfer!), and it's important that the chemistry is right between teacher and student, regardless of the outside reputation of either the music school or the intended teacher. At this 'two-way audition' lesson (ideally held months before the actual audition), it's wise for the student to have some prepared questions for the teacher and to be ready to answer some questions as well. It's very important that the student and family carefully read the bio of the teacher and the story of the intended school, and to know how to read what is real and what is hype -- a 'prominent player' is probably not the same as one who has appeared with the New York Philharmonic and the Boston Symphony, for example. Music schools have a frighteningly similar pitch -- check out the track record of placement of graduates. I believe it's also important that a school can offer some 'real world' classes to its graduates to help develop entrepreneurial skills."

- James VanDemark

"Once students have identified what they want to study, they need to look for institutions that offer those programs and are recognized for having quality programs. At that point, I ask students to make a list of colleges putting them into three categories: 1. Dream School, 2. Good School I Can Get Into, and 3. School Needed In Case of Emergency. Students and their families also need to have an open and honest conversation about how finances will play a role in deciding on a school. If there will be financial constraints on attending college, then students need to make sure they choose schools they are interested in BUT that will be possible for them to afford."

- Kathryn Dey

Cost concerns

As tuition costs continue to rise, the price of education is a concern for most families. State schools are generally the lowest cost option for resident students, but often remain expensive for out-of-state students. Some universities have out-of-state tuition waivers, effectively giving students in-state tuition rates. High tuition private schools sometimes have large scholarships to offer, making the final out-of-pocket cost more in line with an in-state school. In a trial lesson, speak with the professor to find out what scholarships they have to offer and if you'd be a candidate for any award money.

"Tuition has risen over the past decade at an unprecedented rate and schools are usually not able to make financial offers that can cover the full cost of tuition. I try to advise students and their families to avoid student loans as much as possible. I know that this is unrealistic, however. But accruing student debt as an undergraduate will really put them in a difficult financial position for graduate school. And student loan debt is not forgivable if you declare bankruptcy. Many organizations can help alleviate student loan debt, such as Americorps, Jobcorps, inner-city teaching, and other post-college volunteering programs. In-state tuition at most universities is still the best financial choice for most students. Establishing in-state status is an option if a student can plan ahead and be willing to take an extra year to establish residency. Students and their families should be very proactive about finding every financial aid opportunity available to them. Many of these opportunities will not be mentioned by schools, or may even be unknown to them. Every small award (talent or academic) can add up to some serious money."

- Christine Rutledge

"Have an open conversation about what the family can/is prepared to do while keeping in mind that music is a specialty field. Families who have no prior experience with the music business need to understand that music students cannot always get a degree at their backyard university -- perhaps that school does not offer a Music Education degree or does not have accreditation, or doesn't have an oboe teacher on faculty. So pursuing this specialty field might require certain sacrifices that a business student would not have to make."

- Kathryn Dey

"Often, state schools are the most economical option, but private schools and conservatories can be generous with scholarship. Strong test scores and GPA numbers are definitely an asset, especially at universities."

A very important factor is the GPA and test scores of a student. Many universities have a level at which automatic scholarship awards kick in for students that demonstrate academic excellence in this way. Often these awards are given in addition to merit-based music scholarships based on the level of performance."

- Sidney King

"Sometimes the finest teachers are also teaching at schools that are not necessarily the most expensive! Look carefully at each program to see. And, of course, it doesn't hurt to practice 'well' (not 'HARD') and earn scholarships! There are also many local organizations that recognize and reward talented students by offering grants and scholarships. Explore your community and its resources!"

- James Dunham

Final thoughts on applications

"Research, visit websites, get printed and recorded materials from schools, attend conferences and master classes, go to summer camps where you can study with a teacher you are interested in studying with at college."

- Christine Rutledge

"Remember that YOU are going to college -- not your private teacher, your parents or the concertmaster of your youth orchestra that you really admire and look up to. YOU need to make sure YOUR research and decisions consistently reflect YOUR goals. Be willing to revise your list as you go through the process. Make notes. Stay organized. Keep asking questions of yourself."

- Kathryn Dey

Above all, students considering music degrees need to start looking into schools early. But also be honest with yourself and your family about your strengths and weaknesses, interests, and financial limitations. Ask advice from musicians you admire, even if you don't know them personally. Attend workshops, festivals, and master classes to find teachers that inspire you. Research the schools you are considering and take note of the audition requirements at each school. Speak with your private teacher about your goals and come up with a plan to prepare you for auditions -- even if the auditions are two years away. Preparation is the key to success!

In the next article in this series, we will delve into the audition—how to prepare and what impresses an audition panel.



Hillary Herndon is associate professor at the University of Tennessee and is founder of the annual Viola Celebration. She is on the faculties of the Viola Winter Intensive and the Montecito International Summer Music Festival.

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Music Degrees - Everything You Need to Know from Application to Graduation

Part 2 (of a 3-part series) – Auditions

Navigating the college audition and admissions process is often fraught with anxiety for music students and their parents.

by Hillary Herndon

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Now You See It, Now You Don't: Participatory Stratification in Public School Orchestras

String music education in the United States is traditionally plagued by low student enrollment and high attrition rates. Exacerbating the crisis is a fundamental paradigm, which at best accepts inequality of opportunity, and at worst encourages it.

by Angela Ammerman

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Guitar Forum: GarageBand Tutorial for Guitar Instructors

Contemporary guitar instructors can find musical assistance from their computers that will function well whether teaching privately or in a classroom.

by Bill Purse

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The Modern Harpist: Plays Well with Others

Today's harpists must be well-rounded and acquire proficiency in many areas of performing.

by Gretchen Van Hoesen

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Want to Learn More About Fiddle Styles, Jazz Strings and Rock?

Eclectic styles music in its many forms is taught at music camps throughout the USA and Canada during the summer. It's not too early to begin planning to learn a new style of music to teach your students.

by Renata Bratt and contributors: Jason Anick, Edgar Gabriel, Sheronna McMahon, and Duane Padilla

Music Degrees - Everything You Need to Know from Application to Graduation

Part Two (of a three-part series) – Auditions

by Hillary Herndon

Navigating the college audition and admissions process is often fraught with anxiety for music students and their parents. The decisions and preparation involved can seem overwhelming and families often find it difficult to find answers to their questions. Whenever there are “question and answer” sessions with faculty at music events, the most common questions are regarding the admissions process.

This article is the second in a three-part series to provide insights into music degrees for string students and their families. In the first segment, the application process was examined. This installment will explore auditions—how to prepare, what to do in an audition, and common mistakes to avoid. The final segment will offer advice on how to make the most of college once admitted and enrolled.

Notable string teachers from a variety of institutions and specialties have contributed their advice to this series. The teachers represented include pre-college teachers who regularly prepare students for college auditions, as well as collegiate string teachers from multiple institutions. Please visit astaweb.com for the complete questionnaire used in writing this article and full responses from each participating teacher. Contributors include: **Kathryn Dey**, Viola Instructor, South Carolina Governor’s School for the Arts and Humanities; **James Dunham**, Professor of Viola, Shepherd School of Music, Rice University; **Natasha Farny**, Associate Professor of Cello, SUNY Fredonia; **Lin He**, Associate Professor of Violin, Louisiana State University; **Sidney King**, Assistant Professor of Double Bass, University of Louisville; **Christine Rutledge**, Professor of Viola, University of Iowa; **Nicolette Solomon**, Executive Director, Suzuki Institute of Dallas; **James VanDemark**, Professor of Double Bass, Eastman School of Music.

This article is by no means exhaustive, and readers are strongly encouraged to ask questions of their private teachers and to reach out for advice from professionals in their specialty of interest.

Audition Repertoire

Once a student has finalized which schools they will audition for, the audition preparation begins. Look up the audition requirements on each school’s website and speak with your private teacher about what pieces would best show your individual strengths at an audition.

I feel that audition material should be selected that will best demonstrate who the student is as a player and most accurately show the level of musicianship attained. Typically, the repertoire should demonstrate a diversity of style (baroque, classical, romantic, etc.) and should show elements of technique

and lyricism. Contrasting movements of a concerto and unaccompanied Bach are very often successful works to present. For some instruments (e.g., double bass) orchestral excerpts can be a valuable part of an audition. Also, if a student has a uniquely individual aspect to his or her performance (eclectic playing or perhaps a self-composed work), it can be valuable in demonstrating all the assets and musical personality of the student.

—Sidney King

Choose works that really show you at your best and best represent the level that you are playing at. If you are not studying a school’s required repertoire, contact the major professor (or have your teacher contact them) to see if you might be able to make substitutions; usually you can. What you should definitely NOT do is try to play repertoire that you are not ready to play. This will impress no one.

—Christine Rutledge

Play what you know best, not what is newest. Many times students think they should “show off” their newest repertoire, which is often still “marinating.” Older rep has had a chance to settle and come back with more depth and understanding. In addition, too often, students arrive with works that are simply beyond their limits. Sadly, in this case, it is the teachers that I fault for giving students inappropriate repertoire for their current abilities.

—James Dunham

Audition Preparation Tips

Thorough preparation is required for successful auditions. It is best to begin learning the repertoire early so that there is plenty of time for slow, consistent practice using critical listening skills. Speak with your teacher about how to be the most efficient in your practice time. Make sure to practice performing and auditioning as well—you will feel more comfortable in your college auditions if you’ve been through the experience before. There are many wonderful books on these topics, including *Practice for Artistic Success* by Burton Kaplan, *The Musician’s Way* by Gerald Klickstein, and *Performance Success* by Don Greene. It is recommended that students read these books well in advance of their auditions so as to implement the strategies in the preparation plan.

We are athletes in our own way, and like athletes, we must train gradually and well. The goal is to arrive with our personal best ready to demonstrate. Personal pacing is so important, so know yourself. Plan preparation so that at the time of the audition, you are at the “top of the arc” in its performance!

—James Dunham

Practice! Perform your audition repertoire as often as you can. Record yourself and then listen while following a score. Make sure that intonation, rhythm, and tone quality are as strong as they can possibly be. Don't play a tempo that is too fast for you, even if it is slower than you think it should be. Don't overplay—keep your tone quality clean and clear. Be aware of style.

—Christine Rutledge

Try to use the weekly private lesson as a performance opportunity, and a few weeks before the audition, take time to play the repertoire for a few people. Focusing on a daily goal (intonation, shifting, rhythm, etc.) can be helpful.

—Lin He

Start building up performance programs from a few years before application and perform at every opportunity—retirement homes, concerts, and even small and larger competitions.

—Nicolette Solomon

Obviously practice thoughtfully and frequently so everything is in a great place for the big events! Plan ahead so that the auditions themselves are not the first time you present your program. Use competitions when possible to test drive your repertoire—ideally in the early fall. I also recommend performance candidates take an introductory lesson with their top choice teacher in the fall and work on their audition repertoire together. At the end of this lesson, students should ask the teacher what improvements they would like to see at the audition.

—Kathryn Dey

Students should ensure that they have carefully prepared ALL of the required material. It's astonishing to see students who think they can play half the required material [at an audition]. I recommend that students, with their private teacher, tape a mock audition before the actual audition to hear (and see) what might happen.

—James VanDemark

How to Impress at the Audition

Consider the audition as an interview; the faculty want to hear how you play and determine if you will be a good fit at their school and for an individual studio. Playing with a good sound, quality intonation, and musicality are important, but faculty members also are looking for students who present themselves in a professional manner, are organized, have a good attitude, are respectful, and have a desire to learn. No teacher wants to sign up for four years with a student who will be disrespectful, believes they already know everything, or shows signs that they will have difficulty navigating a college environment.

The audition also is an opportunity for students to interact with the faculty and ask their own questions. Asking thoughtful questions about the program (especially if the answers aren't readily found on the school's website) demonstrates self-assurance, inquisitiveness, and a serious interest in the program. These are qualities schools are looking for in their students, so speak up!

I am impressed with a student's poise in the audition situation. This is always evident in the musical presentation and the general carriage of the student on stage. Often, audition committees

will talk with the student to ask questions about goals, previous experience, etc. This also gives an opportunity for the student to communicate character and personality. I am particularly struck by a student who has already contacted me and gotten familiar with me and what my studio chemistry is about; someone who is very focused on a goal and determined to take advantage of the resources at hand to get there.

—Sidney King

Come in well prepared, dressed respectfully, with conviction and self-confidence! Be prepared to introduce yourself and to meet the committee members. Have your music in good condition and in an order where you can find each work without fumbling. Most people I know allow you to start with your choice, but then might ask for pieces in a different order. If it's a new/unfamiliar piece, bring a copy for the committee. Not required, but a nice touch! I think a musical point of view is invaluable. A fine technique is, of course, very important, but I have heard many very "correct" players who really don't offer a musical concept. In tune and in time is not the point. (Don't get me wrong, good intonation and rhythm are vital, but not the only things, by far!) Also, if the student has taken a lesson with me, I am very interested in their willingness to hear suggestions, and their ability to understand and apply concepts.

—James Dunham

Common Audition Mistakes

There are several common mistakes students make in auditions. Nicolette Solomon warns students to stay focused no matter what distractions may occur in the audition room. The audition panel will often have a file that contains the student's transcript, recommendation letters, and writing samples. In order to view this pertinent information, the faculty will need to pass it amongst themselves or have quiet discussions to share information on the student. They will need to take notes on each student auditioning—this could be by writing on a paper comment form or by typing a digital version. It is important to stay focused and engaged through these distractions. Realize that these "noises" will be occurring from the faculty for every student and are not a reflection on your playing. Consider having several mock auditions prior to your college auditions where your family or friends try to distract you.

Professor Farny recommends that students remain open to new ideas and avoid becoming defensive in an audition. Make eye contact with the faculty and have confidence—don't assume that the faculty will not like what they hear.

Kathryn Dey describes the most common mistake students make at auditions as "being obsessed with performance perfection in order to impress a committee. I think that most quality studio teachers are looking for open learners—not perfect performing robots. Students should share their musical gifts with the committee, and also show they are good and interesting human beings who will contribute to the studio and school environment positively. Students should do this in a way that feels natural to them."

Final Thoughts on Auditions

Below are some tips from our contributors to keep in mind before an audition.

Be physically healthy when you get to college auditions, as the stress is the great unknown. Play your whole audition rep for as many people possible before the big day. Listen to many recordings of your pieces so you do not get bogged down by your own thoughts.

—Nicolette Solomon

Think of the audition as a performance, not a selection/elimination process. Part of the audition preparation should include formal performances of the repertoire so the student can tap into performing vibes when standing under fluorescent lights in a far-away city with strangers sitting at a table writing. Auditions rarely feel like performances, however, they will probably NEVER feel like a concert if you don't ever play it that way.

—Kathryn Dey

At the audition, give yourself ample time to arrive at the site and be early enough to warm up. Do not be in a hurry to start the selections.

—Lin He

Tour the school, meet current students, and always ask them many questions! I like to tell prospective students that I will tell them what I want them to know. The current students will tell applicants what they want to know!

—James Dunham

The best college auditions are the result of years of careful practice and performance experience. Start taking private lessons early. Professor Natasha Farny recommends starting private lessons by ninth grade at the latest. Learn how to practice well, and strive to improve both technically and musically. Look for performance opportunities in your community that allow you to become more comfortable in a solo performance. When the time comes to prepare specific repertoire for your college audition, make sure to find the best audition repertoire for you with your teacher. Don't feel pressured to play a more difficult piece than your teacher recommends—it is better to play an easier repertoire well than a difficult repertoire poorly. Practice the audition experience by setting up mock auditions with gentle distractions. Practice starting and stopping your repertoire—it is not likely you will be able to play all of your repertoire in an audition. The committee might ask you to start at the development of a movement, or skip to the cadenza in your concerto. Stay calm, be pleasant and confident. If you make a mistake, forget about it and move on. Ask questions of your committee to show you are interested in their school. Finally, try to relax and demonstrate what you love about playing music!



Hillary Herndon is associate professor at the University of Tennessee and is founder of the annual Viola Celebration. She is on the faculties of the Viola Winter Intensive and the Montecito International Summer Music Festival.



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Music Degrees: Everything You Need to Know from Application to Graduation

Part Three (of a 3-part series) – Making the Most of Music School

Hillary Herndon

Studying music in college is a wonderful endeavor, but the process of getting there can be challenging. Research needs to be done on possible schools, teachers, and programs. Audition preparation takes years of study and private lessons. The process of applying to school can be so overwhelming that students might not take the time to think about what they should do once they arrive in college. This series of articles is written to help music students and their families prepare for an undergraduate degree in music.

In the first and second articles, the admission and audition processes were examined. In this installment, notable string teachers share their advice to help prepare college bound music students to make the most of their education. The teachers represented include pre-college teachers who regularly prepare students for college music degrees and collegiate string teachers from multiple institutions. Please visit astaweb.com for the complete questionnaire used in writing this article and full responses from each participating teacher. Contributors include: Kathryn Dey, Viola Instructor, South Carolina Governor's School for the Arts and Humanities; James Dunham, Professor of Viola, Shepherd School of Music, Rice University; Natasha Farny, Associate Professor of Cello, SUNY Fredonia; Lin He, Associate Professor of Violin, Louisiana State University; Sidney King, Assistant Professor of Double Bass, University of Louisville; Christine Rutledge, Professor of Viola, University of Iowa; Nicolette Solomon, Executive Director, Suzuki Institute of Dallas; James VanDemark, Professor of Double Bass, Eastman School of Music.

This article is by no means exhaustive and readers are strongly encouraged to ask questions of their private teachers and to reach out for advice from professionals in their specialty of interest.

Take Responsibility for Your Education

One of the biggest hurdles a student must overcome when moving to the college environment is learning to take responsibility for his/her own education. The most successful students are those that actively seek opportunities to learn without waiting for a teacher to assign an activity. Students with this mindset will find abundant resources on their college campuses.

Be an active participant in your own education. Don't expect your professors to "give" you an education; you are equally responsible in the learning process. Practice regularly—practice orchestra and chamber music parts. Ask questions and meet with professors regularly. Have realistic goals and workloads. Attend recitals, concerts, lectures, and symposia as much as possible. There are so many other opportunities to learn, especially at universities!

—Christine Rutledge

[College is] a rare opportunity to be around people (faculty and students) who are passionate about what they do. You can learn from everyone—be open to that possibility.

—Kathryn Dey

Attend Events and Make Connections

A typical music school will have several guest master classes each week. Plan to attend and participate in these classes even if the classes are not on your instrument. You might be surprised by how much you learn!

It is also important to attend recitals of your peers and faculty and to engage with ALL of your faculty members, not just your studio teacher. You will learn more and also gain a possible reference. Make friends and be nice to your peers as you will likely work with several of your classmates at some point in your future. Treat everyone well.

You will want to be engaged with the larger academic community at your school and stay aware of what events are happening on your campus so you can take advantage of the rare opportunity to meet and hear success stories from a variety of disciplines.

Attend as many events as possible! It's tempting to get locked away in the practice room and miss many opportunities to learn from the concerts of your peers and the faculty. Take chamber music and orchestral preparation seriously! Both are filled with incredible music, and learning to play this as well as your solo rep is a gigantic step in your training! Be engaged at the school level—get to know people, dare to interact, really participate. It's a rare opportunity and, once missed, won't come up again in the same way! Study your academic classes well too, both in music and in electives. It's an amazing world we live in, and a fine musician is also a well-rounded and intelligent person!

—James Dunham

Love music with your whole heart, that includes not only the weekly lesson on your applied instrument, but also chamber music, orchestral repertoire, operas, ballet, music theory and history, and even jazz music. Make friends during the college years. They are your future friends, colleagues, chamber music partners, stand partners in the orchestra, and maybe, if you are lucky, your wife or husband!

—Lin He

Working While in College

Given the current high cost of tuition, it is not uncommon for students to need to work while attending school. For music students, maintaining their practice routine, school work, and a job can be a challenge.

Ideally, we would love for all students to be able to focus solely on their learning during the collegiate years. The reality is that for many students and their families this is a luxury beyond their means. Most schools have some kind of work/study plan which allows students to earn some income doing something that is related to what they do: orchestral library work, music library work, backstage operations, coaching in the prep department, etc. Care must be taken that nothing interferes with their main work of lessons, ensembles, and academic classes. This is still school, and time to focus is a luxury!

—James Dunham

Realize that college is only four years and will never be repeated. This is the time to learn, not to make money. If working is absolutely necessary, find a job that will be beneficial in addition to the money gained, and which encourages your learning; either a desk job where you can multi-task by doing your homework, or one that involves music—taking tickets for a concert, teaching music to kids, working in a music library, etc.

—Natasha Farny

For most students this is unavoidable. It is possible to work and still be a good student, but it will require some sacrifice such as

forgoing social and other extracurricular activities. If a student needs to work, they should consider taking some credits during summer sessions or at a community college. This will give their school year schedules some more wiggle room and not take away from practice time. Find a job that is in your field such as gigging, music library, research assistant, etc. Find employment that offers a better hourly wage such as campus bus driver, parking lot attendant, fitness coach, test reader, babysitting, or a day care worker. Each campus has its own set of job possibilities.

—Christine Rutledge

A Balancing Act

Even without a job in the picture, balancing course work, rehearsals, practice, extra-curricular activities, and time for personal health can be a challenge. Successful students learn how to manage their time early in their academic careers. They make plans for their schedules and stick to them. It is important to realize that the most improvement comes from consistent practice rather than one or two long practice sessions/week. You should make a practice routine for yourself and stick to it. Mental and physical health are important as well—take care of yourself by finding down time with friends and make sure to exercise and eat well.

College is a very demanding experience in terms of staying on task, setting goals and priorities, and meeting requirements and deadlines. Often, students are swallowed up with these demands and look forward to the day they finish college and can move on into the professional world, only to find that the pace and level of responsibility is even more intense. One of the most important skills to develop in college is personal time management! Often a particular routine can be helpful. For instance, set aside specific time slots for practicing and do it at the same time each day. In some cases, I have students actually draw up a weekly practice routine for the entire semester. The class schedule itself is not very flexible. So it is important to learn where the open times are. Look ahead at significant course assignments and get a head start on writing drafts, research, etc. The old tradition of "pulling the all nighter" has been around forever, but it is stressful, both mentally and physically and does not promote optimal musical or academic performance. Find a way to order your life to accomplish what is required and desired while still enjoying life.

—Sidney King

Prioritize, plan, and then execute. Remember that not everyone gets the opportunity to live in the first world and attend college to study music—it's a privilege and needs care and attention like any important project.

—Kathryn Dey

Sleep eight hours, don't procrastinate but work a little each day on a big project, schedule your practice into every day.

—Natasha Farny

I encourage body awareness—yoga, tai chi, swimming, etc.—as well as practicing. Mental practice is also very important, as is allowing personal time. Even Benjamin Franklin scheduled some relaxation time into his day and he accomplished a lot! Above all: know yourself. What are your tolerances, physical limits,

concentration limits? Be aware and set a reasonable schedule suited to yourself.

—James Dunham

Make the Most of Your Practice

Given all there is to do while in music school, most students will never feel that there is “enough” time to practice. It is therefore essential that students learn how to make the most of the practice time they do have early in their studies. Incoming students should ask their professors for advice on how to practice most efficiently. Often this includes time away from the instrument—learning the rhythm and pitches at the keyboard first before trying out new fingerings might seem like an unnecessary detour, but can eliminate hours of practicing in the long run. Skills such as memorization and tricky passagework can be “mentally practiced” while outside the practice room—while riding the bus or waiting for your laundry to dry, for example.

Schedule practice sessions just as you would any other class. Have a practice ‘buddy’ and keep each other on task. Take notes at each lesson or record your lesson so that you have a clear idea of what the goals are for your next lesson. Keep a practice log (record practice times, goals, accomplishments, questions for the next lesson, and frustrations). Use a good metronome and implement the practice techniques that your teacher has given you (rhythm exercises, technical studies, etc.). Practice regularly and don’t cram at the last minute, even if this means practicing for several short sessions throughout the day. Plot out the practice session and make time to get to as many of your goals as possible. Stick to the plan! Realize that small goals and progress are as important, or more important, than “aha” moments. Realize that frustration will lead to improvement and awareness. So don’t get discouraged, but rather be encouraged by your problems and enjoy working through them. Take breaks. Listen to recordings while following the score. This is practicing, too. Stay fed and hydrated. Keep the TV on if you are getting bored or feel unmotivated. Vary sitting and standing. Take time to sight read some new music. Take a day off a week as a reward for good practicing throughout the week. And then do something fun on that day or just veg out.

—Christine Rutledge

I encourage students to have a structure to each practice session. For example, begin with scales, then bowing exercises, etudes, and technical studies. Then move on to solos and orchestral passages. Spend a specific amount of time with each item so that time is distributed to each proportionately. And understand that the quality of the practice is more important than mere quantity of time spent. A good rule of thumb is to always accomplish one thing each session that won’t have to be relearned the next day.

—Sidney King

Practice with and without the instrument. When away from the instrument (for instance, when traveling) study the score. Know the harmonic structure. With the instrument, know the time limits you have and plan the time so that you hit every piece and improve the hardest parts. Can you play it from memory in your mind, away from the instrument?

—Natasha Farny

Summer Music Festivals

Summer festivals are a rare opportunity to be immersed in music without academic demands overshadowing practice time. It is not uncommon for students to grow more on their instruments in a summer than they did in one entire semester at school. Students might believe that they can take advantage of a free summer to practice intensely on their own at home, but there is more to a summer festival than simply practicing. At a summer festival, you’ll meet new peers from all over the country. Their enthusiasm, combined with the regular lessons, chamber music, and performance opportunities create a rich learning environment that is very different from your comfortable room at home.

Over time there is a marked divergence in playing abilities between those students who attend summer festivals regularly and those who opt out. It puts those that attend festivals at an advantage for graduate auditions and job placement. For these reasons, students are encouraged to think of summer study as part of their collegiate education.

I feel that summer study is absolutely essential, especially for performance majors, but also strongly recommended for all music majors. This is an opportunity to focus primarily on performance skills without the added responsibility of academic performance. In fact, I feel that this can be the most productive time of the year for students to develop their personal musicianship, and in such a highly competitive field, an opportunity not to be missed.

—Sidney King

[Summer festivals are] very important and very useful! I believe in the academic schedule, which includes coursework in many areas of history, theory, and other elective subjects. But in summer festivals, it is possible to concentrate very deeply on the instrument, performance in ensembles of all sizes, and a different kind of focus. Would this work year round? No. But alternating the two programs is very enlightening and gives a great range of knowledge. Also, at festivals, you have the opportunity to meet and work with other teachers (i.e., thinking about your next school!) and to see and hear great soloists, chamber artists, and conductors.

—James Dunham

[Summer study is] very nourishing for students. Summer study gives them a fresh take on themselves, they have to interact and deliver in a short period of time, and friendships are established with like-minded people. Networking is more important now than ever.

—Nicolette Solomon

What NOT to do in Music School

Just as important as what to do in music school is what not to do. There are some common pitfalls that music students make in college. Learn from others’ mistakes! What are the most common “mistakes” students make in their college career that you should avoid?

Music is a pursuit that requires our best energy and creativity. Success is not guaranteed by merely meeting requirements. All too often, music students fall into the trap of only working hard

enough to pass, rather than striving to be the absolute best that they can be and attaining their fullest potential.

—Sidney King

Not practicing enough and not getting the most from their teacher that they could have. A teacher can only give as much as they get. Partying too much. Sleeping too much. Not establishing strong relationships with professors and colleagues.

—Christine Rutledge

Simply going through the motions musically and academically. Being more involved with relationships (friends and/or romances) than with learning.

—Kathryn Dey

[Students] do not quite comprehend how big the world is out there and how valuable this "luxury" time of study is.

—Nicolette Solomon

Final Thoughts on Making the Most of Music School

This four-year period is the "Golden period" of your life, think carefully, and seek advice about how to spend it intelligently.

—Lin He

A life in music is one of the most wonderful journeys one can experience. But there are no guarantees. The world needs musicians to express the human experience in ways only music can convey. Music can transport listeners to places they cannot go by themselves and it communicates as a truly universal language. Musicians are special people. Make yourselves indispensable to your communities by sharing your gifts. In this way, I feel we all have the best chance for a successful and happy life in music.

—Sidney King

Transfer is not a bad word. If you choose to attend a school that is NOT what you expected and is not working after you get there, then you should be open to investigating a change and start exploring that immediately. While ideally students choose a great college and stay there until graduation, life is not always what we expect and staying in a program that is not a good fit is definitely a bad thing.

—Kathryn Dey

College is not overrated. It is an essential "journey". Nurture relationships between professors and peers and work harder than you think is necessary. And above all, keep healthy in body and mind.

—Nicolette Solomon

For those students preparing to start music degrees in the fall, congratulations. You have an exciting and wonderful world awaiting you. Yes, there will be challenges, but there also will be memories that you will carry with you through your life, lasting friendships, and hopefully a musical foundation to support your dreams. Remember that the challenges are part of the journey and will ultimately allow you to grow as both a performer and a person. Take the advice from this article with you and don't

hesitate to reach out and ask for help from your professors. We want you to succeed!



Hillary Herndon is associate professor at the University of Tennessee and is founder of the annual Viola Celebration. She is on the faculties of the Viola Winter Intensive and the Montecito International Summer Music Festival.

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