

The SFYSA Guide To Audition Preparation

by Karles McQuade, rev. July 2015

WHAT IS A SUCCESSFUL AUDITION?

A successful audition is about being able to play as well in front of a judge as you do in the comfort and safety of your own home; a successful audition is *not* about luck or talent. The skill of playing for others as beautifully as you play for yourself is challenging but achievable. It comes down to having your material excellently prepared long before the audition date, and trusting in the skills you've cultivated and in the effort you've invested to bring your material to such a high level. You can achieve this level of skill with thoughtful practice and the guidance of a competent and dedicated teacher.

TRUST YOURSELF

To trust yourself means you have worked sufficiently hard to *know* (not “think” or “believe”) what you can do at will. Like anything that requires trust, you must have good evidence that trusting yourself is a smart investment, and the only way to provide yourself with good evidence is to practice until you *own* your audition material. Ideally, *practice until you don't know how to make a mistake*. Such a statement isn't crazy. Isn't *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star* a ridiculously easy piece to play? It became easy because of all the practice you did to get to it, and then beyond it. Your audition material, in principle, is no different.

“DO YOUR BEST”

People will tell you, “Do your best!” But what is “your best”? In principle, your best is whatever performance gets you into the orchestra you're aiming for. This means telling somebody to do their best is hollow advice, because that person is already aiming for the required level of performance. Telling somebody to do their best is like telling a race-car driver, “Win the race!” Wasn't that his goal when he started his engine?

A better, more meaningful definition of “your best” comes from one of my teachers, Dan Brandt. Dan said: “Your best is your average.” What he meant is this: in an audition, your performance only reflects a fraction of your real skill. If you are nervous, under-prepared, playing a different or new instrument, having a bad day, not used to the acoustics in the space, etc., you are not going to give the judges a sample of your greatest work. This fractional display of skill is a real thing, and happens to everybody; you can compensate for it by over-preparing.

OVER-PREPARE

In the music world, over-preparing simply means: *prepare your material in such a way that your audition is not the most intense experience in which you perform your material*. You can do this by creating audition-like conditions in your daily practice. Nervousness, for example, is a very common audition experience. What happens to your body when you experience nervousness? Palms get sweaty, stomachs get butterflies, hands get shaky, hearts race, you may get dizzy or a headache, you may feel nauseous, you may panic, you may have memory problems, or you may even have memory problems.¹ To combat these symptoms, simulate them in your daily practice so that you can get used to performing in spite of them. See the table below.

¹ It would seem that asking somebody out for a date is not that different from an audition, neurophysiologically speaking. Indeed, asking somebody out is itself an audition of sorts.

Problem	Over-Preparation Simulation
Memory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen to recordings multiple times daily. • Sit down with manuscript paper and write out your prepared piece, including bowings, dynamics, articulations, etc. • Play your piece and simultaneously answer simple questions your friends ask you (How old are you? Where were you born? Etc.). • Play your piece while singing a different one. • Play your piece while blasting metal from the 1980s. • Sing your piece daily. • Wake yourself up at 3:00 AM and play your piece. • Play your piece backwards. • Have siblings try and distract you while you're playing.
Nervousness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raise your heartrate and get sweaty by going for a run, then return and immediately start playing your piece. The body undergoes similar changes with aerobic exercise as it does with nervousness. • Buy a busking licence and play your material in public for complete strangers. You may also make a few bucks in the process. • Have a friend randomly sound an airhorn while you're playing; take care to not damage your hearing. • Hold mock auditions with your teacher or family.
Playing Too Fast	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work your piece up to the necessary audition tempo, then work 12 or so metronome notches beyond. If you can play your piece well when playing overly fast, you will have some protection against panicking.

MEMORIZE YOUR PIECE

Playing from memory provides very good evidence that you can trust yourself. It says that you've worked hard enough and smart enough that you truly *own* your piece. To aid in memorization, listen daily to recordings of your piece, as performed by the best artists.

DEVELOP YOUR SCALES

Scale preparation is really between you and your teacher. However, here are some basic things to bear in mind when preparing your scales:

- Know and be able say the correct and complete names of all your prepared scales
- Know and be able to say the names of all the notes in your prepared scales
- Your tone should be beautiful and projecting (that is, loud, clear, and pretty)
- Turn off your vibrato
- Take a tempo that is medium, and do not speed up or slow down
- Do not start over
- Breathe before you begin

SIGHT-READING

Please see “The SFYSA Guide to Sight-Reading,” included on this webpage. That document is a mere 2 pages, so it's well worth taking the time to read it.

MENTAL PREPARATION AND EXPECTATIONS

If you've chosen the right scales, memorized your piece, prepared your excerpts, done volumes of sight-reading training, and over-prepared your material, then you have good reason to expect to be successful. There is nothing wrong, snobby, or jinxy with thinking you're well-prepared if that truly is the case. Having said this, you do want to consider how you might feel, and what your options might be, if you are not accepted into the orchestra you're aiming for. Discuss this contingency with your teacher and your parents.

TWO WEEKS PRIOR

By this time, your audition material should be performance ready, including whatever kind of mental preparation you need as well. You should be able to play your material in front of a judge and be successful by this date. Begin monitoring your sleep and eating habits so you know how your body behaves when you're nervous, and what it needs to feel calm and fresh.

THE DAY BEFORE

Don't do anything stupid, adventurous, or weird. Be nice to people, so they are nice to you, so you don't have the mental burdens of conflict to distract you. Make sure you get enough sleep, food, water, etc.

THE DAY OF

Make sure you have enough time to be *truly awake* before your audition. If your audition is in the morning, get up a little earlier than usual.

Make sure you know exactly where and when your audition is, and arrive 20 to 60 minutes beforehand. Arriving late and feeling rushed will ruin months of smart preparation.

Spend those 20 to 60 minutes playing your instrument. You want to be fully warm and have your brain in “music mode” long before you actually play for the judges. Your teacher can help you with effective warm-up techniques.

When it's your turn, say hello to the judges and enjoy your sound!