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## *College Scholarship Auditions: Tips from an Insider*

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Scholarship season is upon us! Many graduating high school seniors will soon be hearing from prospective colleges about funding for next year. Having sat on a few of these audition committees myself, I thought it might be useful to share some tips of what makes for a positive audition experience for both the student and committee. Save this article for next year, and share it with your students.

### **BEFORE YOU GO**

- Know that every program is different. Be sure you research the school's audition requirements carefully, with a fine-toothed comb for detail. Have all necessary forms filled out before arriving to the audition, as well as bringing along any additional materials the committee may request (such as scores for the judges, repertoire lists, resumes or programs of concerts you have performed in).
- Ask the school's administrators ahead of time if there are any stipulations dependent upon receiving funding (for instance, a minimum GPA or declaration of a music major). Many schools require students to be music majors to receive funding. This is the time to decide if you're ready to take the plunge!
- Decide before you go to the audition what degree program in music you are most interested in- vocal performance, music education, or general music, music business, etc. In many cases, the committee will bring different expectations to a candidate who says they mostly want to teach music compared to a candidate who is trying for a career in opera.
- Be sure you know if an accompanist will be provided. You may choose to use an accompanist you are familiar with—this strategy works well *provided* they have the necessary skills to really back you up and play with expression and

historical style. At times, going with a new accompanist who is actively studying the piano is a better bet than “Aunt Bessie” who may be a little rusty.

### **THE BIG DAY**

- Arrive early to the audition so you can take time to get a good look around the music building, meet the admissions staff, and find out what room you’ll need to go to.
- Dress nicely. When in doubt, be conservative. Women: avoid shoulderless gowns and/or miniskirts partly because they are not professional, but also because they do not keep you warm, and you may find yourself feeling chilly right before you have to sing. Bring a shawl as a backup. Men: wear dark dress shoes, iron your dress shirts, and be sure not to wear hats indoors.
- When you arrive into the audition room, introduce yourself and your accompanist to the committee. Try to look as poised and confident as possible, no matter how nervous you may really feel! A warm friendly hello sets everyone at ease.
- Bring a capped water bottle in just in case you develop a dry mouth during your audition. It is acceptable to pause briefly between songs to get a quick sip.
- Don’t expect the committee to watch you the whole time you are singing. They will be busy taking notes as well as possibly passing your file around. I like to encourage my students to imagine that the person who is their biggest fan (mom, boyfriend, best friend) is in the back row of the hall. Sing to them.
- Speaking of mom, best friend, or boyfriend: feel free to bring them along, but it is probably best to not bring them inside the audition room. They can listen outside the door. Show the committee your ability to shine on your own.
- While you are singing, try to stay focused on a few simple concepts to help yourself relax. You might try thinking, “Okay, today I plan to try to get a good breath before every new phrase without lifting up my shoulders.” Having a focal point like this can help you feel stronger in the face of normal stage fright.
- If you forget the words, try to keep going. As silly as it may feel, “improvising” your way back into familiar terrain is a better strategy than stopping altogether. A trained accompanist will know how to follow you and help you stay on track.

- If for some unfortunate reason, you have to sing on a “sick voice,” tell the committee that you are feeling under the weather. If the illness has not affected your voice, it’s better to put on a cheery face and forge ahead. Scholarship committees tire easily of singers saying, “I have such a cold today...”, so try to keep complaints to a minimum.
- After you have sung, don’t expect applause, but feel free to gesture to your accompanist and smile a bit. Then head over to the committee in case they have any remaining questions.
- If the school you are interested in has an “interview” portion, be ready to quickly sum up the reasons why you want to be a music major. Be prepared to ask questions about your performance background (what instruments you play and for how long, whether you have received private instruction on your instrument, if you have sung in musical theater or opera productions, if you have participated in All-State or All-Northwest choruses, summer workshops, etc, if you are active in musical leadership roles (as assistant conductor of your high school choir, section leader for a church choir, etc).
- If you are asked how many years you have studied voice, be careful to be accurate in your answer. Sometimes studying voice from a young age isn’t always an asset, because certain habits may have become ingrained already. It is far better to say you have studied a slightly shorter amount of time—and made leaps and bounds—than it is to say you’ve been at it since age 13 with only basic improvement. If you’ve only been studying privately for 6 months, tell the committee, “6 months of private study.” If you’ve been studying since age 14, but not in the summer, and with a variety of teachers, tell them, “4 years on and off but I had a different teacher each year”... don’t feel that you need to inflate the amount of study.

## **MUSICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

- Choose your selections carefully. In most auditions, two or more pieces will be requested. When considering what to sing, aim for variety and pieces that show off your strengths. As a broad generalization, faster pieces tend to work well for openers, and slower pieces work better for the second selection. The reason may be because fast pieces help singers work through their nervousness, by putting their excess energy into the music, and slower pieces tend to demand better breath support and longer phrases, tasks that are easier

to accomplish when you are less nervous. Of course these are only general observations, and you should trust your instincts.

- When in doubt, choose easier music that can be sung very confidently. Mozart's "Queen of the Night" aria can wait. It is far better to be musical, to sing all your lines with beautiful phrasing and sensitive interpretation, than it is to overshoot and choose a piece that is too hard.
- Practice your audition with an audience before scholarship day. Even if you can only round up a few friends or family to listen, it is best to practice performing. The act of standing up in front of people and singing through your music memorized is challenging, and the more experience you can have of how it will feel, the better!
- If you choose a foreign language selection, BE SURE you know EXACTLY how to pronounce each word. Pay special attention to how to SAY the text when you introduce it to the scholarship judges. Sometimes scholarship judges can tell in advance how well you will sing just based on how you pronounce the titles!
- If the selection is an aria from an opera, be sure you know what opera it is from. And of course, be sure you also know the composer's name by heart.
- The old adage "When in doubt, sing out" is never more true than in a scholarship setting. Avoid pieces that ask you to sing quietly for extended passages. The faculty listening to you will be looking for whether you are capable of projecting your voice (of course within healthy parameters). They may use terms like "sing on the breath" or "hook your air to the sound," and the end result is a supported tone that projects well. Show them you know how to sing out.
- By all means, avoid singing "non-classical" material unless the school specifically requests varying styles. In some cases, musical theater selections are acceptable, but in most cases, it is better to stick with classical basics, such as selections from the "26 Italian Songs and Arias," works by Handel, Purcell or Mozart, or art songs by Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, Faure, and contemporary composers. If you are worried about singing classical literature, try singing a tasteful arrangement of a folk melody or hymn.

### **THE NEGOTIATION**

- After your audition, send a brief thank you note to the committee. This can be

as simple as a short email, although a hand-written note is valued more than ever in this digital age.

- In your note, or other correspondence, be sure to tell the committee if you are seriously considering their school. However, it is in your best interest to keep them guessing a little. If you tell them, “I’ll be seeing you in the fall for sure!” they may be less likely to offer you funding, since part of the purpose of the scholarship award is to attract new talent to their school.
- Don’t be afraid to tell the faculty that financial support is essential, if that is the case. Scholarship awards are not always just merit-based, and may factor in financial need.
- When you receive a scholarship fund offer letter, be sure to send it back as soon as possible with your signature! Schools have strict guidelines about when you must reply, or risk losing the assistance.
- Once you know you have been accepted to the program of your choice, consider contacting a voice faculty member to express your desire to work with them the following year. Although schools may not always be able to honor your first choice, faculty will be impressed that you are requesting to work with them, and may be able to move their schedules around to accommodate you. There is no harm in trying!

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