

How To Prepare For An Audition

PRIOR TO THE AUDITION

Count rhythms and say note names regularly. Since most musicians win auditions based on their sight-reading skills, educators and musicians alike should spend a great deal of time focusing on sight-reading techniques that work. Many times in my career I have noticed that the best player did not win the audition (the best sight-reader did). Check out the *Sight Reading Manual* offered by Jazz-studies.com to learn effective ways to immediately improve your sight-reading.

The best way to prepare (physically speaking) for playing big band music is to play big band charts. Just because you are practicing 4 hours a day does not mean you are better prepared to play big band charts. The physical demands of playing big band music are extremely unique. Legit etudes, solos, and the like may not help a musician physically prepare whatsoever for the big band demand and, in extreme cases, could actually hinder their performance (For example: Like a lead trumpet player who loses his extreme range because his chops have been practicing light and fluffy legit music all week before the audition).

Count and visualize numbers in your mind. When you are under the stress of an audition it is very easy to lose count of the beat (this is a common problem among young musicians). Your mind has to be trained to keep these numbers in sequence no matter what your ear is hearing, no matter what your eyes are seeing, and no matter what mistakes you are making. So here is my advice: The week before the audition, spend a great deal of time counting numbers in your mind. When you are walking think 1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4; When you are washing dishes think 1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 3; When you are listening to music count the meter of each tune out loud or mentally for the entire album. **These types of mental exercises teach the mind to keep counting in sequence despite all distractions.** In addition, when you are trying to go to sleep, visualize these numbers in sequence and make them huge events in your mind (like big neon lights).

For brass players: Practice looking at a note on a piece of music; sing the pitch out loud; then, play the note on your horn. Jay Saunders taught me this “jazz gem” and, by doing this, it is AMAZING how quickly you can teach your inner ear to accurately hear note entrances.

Listen to recordings. About a week or so before you take an audition you should make it a point to increase your listening to no less than 2 hours a day. By simply having a walkman headset or a mini-disk player you can put in your 2 hours without changing your daily activities (like wearing it when you are walking, on a bus, shopping, etc.). Make sure, when listening, to identify the qualities you like in every section of the recording you are listening to.

***Practice with albums.** In addition to listening to albums, young musicians need to learn how easy it is to practice with albums and therefore exponentially increase your learning curve. You can practice all of your fundamentals with an album. Who cares if you are playing in the same key as the recording. Use the style of the recording to help you rhythmically place any exercises.

If you are a brass player, do not clean your horn right before a concert or audition. For some musicians, by the time they clean their horn, they have so much junk in their horn that removing it actually changes the bore size (very slightly). If you are a lead trumpet player this will mean that you have to work much harder at the high end of your instrument because your bore size is slightly bigger and therefore requires more air. Always give yourself a few weeks to adjust to a cleaned horn (unless you always keep your horn clean).

Diet and Exercise. In order for the brain to function effectively it needs protein and nutrients. If your diet is canned sodas and cigarettes (figuratively speaking), that is not enough to sustain you brain during the mental pressures of an audition. Before an audition try to get in shape and eat well (slightly above your norm).

Unless you are a very experienced player, do not take a gig the night before an audition. Some musicians will disagree strongly on this topic, but from my perspective, if a young musician is going to have one chance at representing his playing abilities in an audition, then they should not take a chance on damaging their chops. For experienced players who are playing totally correctly, they actually greatly benefit from a long night of strong playing (their mind gets comfortable, their chops get set, and their muscle memory strengthens). For young players who are not playing correctly, a night of strong playing can mean swollen chops and newly learned bad habits. **NOTE:** The day before an audition can be an extremely valuable day if musicians approach it correctly. This is the day musicians should spend time counting a lot of rhythms, playing big band charts with other musicians, listening to music and fingering rhythms on their horn, etc. Give up your gig the night before an audition, if possible, and spend the time really focusing on big band elements (Unless, your gig is a big band gig).

Learn a transcribed solo and commit one jazz standard to memory. Many times during the audition process, musicians are asked to play a

prepared piece (if they have one). This is the time to show the director that you can play great when you know the piece. Do not wait until two weeks before jazz band rehearsal to start practicing a transcribed solo. As a jazz musician, always have at least one transcribed solo at your fingertips. NOTE: As a director, when I am auditioning the jazz players, I often ask them if they can play the melody and correct changes to one jazz standard (**from memory**). Many times I am surprised that good jazz players cannot complete this task (many of them think they can, but when you put them to the test, they miss a few chord changes or fudge the melody). Make sure you can always perform a transcribed solo and play a tune from memory (negotiating the chord changes perfectly).

Read *Audition Techniques That Produce Confident Musicians* (this document is for directors and available at Jazz-studies.com). This packet details how to give a jazz audition. When you know what to expect from the audition process you will have a better idea of how to prepare for it.

ON THE DAY OF THE AUDITION

Keep your day ordinary (psychological tip). Many times young musicians stress themselves out leading up to the audition. On the day of the audition, stressed musicians will often change their daily activities so radically that their mind is distracted and, during the audition, their mind is still half occupied with processing all of the urgent and new signals it received throughout the day. So my advice is this: If you normally go golfing in the morning then go golfing; if you normally sit around the house and relax for an hour before you do anything then do that; if you normally go to bed at 2:00am then do that, etc. Try not to alarm your mind and body when preparing for an audition. If you have prepared well for the audition then the only thing left to do is start focusing on how you are going to compete psychologically (which is the ultimate skill in any audition). Understand that brain power is a powerful tool in getting you to perform at your best. Keep your daily activities as normal as possible and your mind will subconsciously feel as if it is in its own mental “backyard.”

Before you audition, do not listen to other players playing their audition. I once knew a jazz player (I won't mention his name) that, during the jazz solo auditions, actually went to the audition room to hear the tunes being played in the audition. He then went home and practiced the tunes before he came to his audition. This

is so lame. Nonetheless, when he went into the audition his jazz playing sounded “stale” because he was trying to play all of these preconceived licks he had worked out. This strategy almost never works because, in a jazz audition, people are listening for CREATIVITY. When jazz soloing, the minute you start planning your solo you do yourself more harm than good. On another occasion, a friend of mine was sitting outside the audition room listening to a great musician take his sight-reading audition. He was so glad that his audition was directly after this musician because he thought he would get to hear what the music sounded like first. When he went into the audition he told me he played twice as many rhythms wrong because the guy playing before him made many rhythmical errors. **Do not listen to other players during a sight-reading audition because, odds are, they are playing some mistakes.**

DURING THE AUDITION

Avoid telling the person who is auditioning you how bad you are and try not to make excuses for yourself regarding your preparation (i.e. My chops feel horrible because I just got back from vacation).

Character, whether you know it or not, plays a role in our mental perception of what we are hearing (For example: Generally, when you like a person, their solos and licks sound that much hipper). Musicians that have low self-esteem about the way they play send mental signals to every musician to question whether “what they heard really sounded good or not.” When you talk badly about yourself, you make musicians question their opinions of your playing (and from this, maybe your playing does NOT sound as good to them as they originally thought). Likewise, many excellent musicians sound great but always negatively speak about their playing. In my opinion, this is a character flaw and, if not addressed, could permanently affect other people’s opinions of you in a negative way. If you think your playing is not good, **KEEP IT TO YOURSELF AND MANY TIMES PEOPLE WILL THINK YOU SOUNDED GREAT.**

Before you play, identify the key signature and finger through the appropriate scale. The moment you see a piece of music you are going to sight-read you should get in the habit of fingering through the scale (or MENTALLY fingering through the scale). Get the key signature thoroughly in your mind and under your fingers: Because, “missing the key signature” is almost unforgivable and is the first sign of a novice musician. HINT: Many times when I have walked into a room to take an audition I can see the key signature on the first piece of

music. If I can't see the key signature, by the time the person places the first piece of music on the stand and says a few words, I have taken immediate notice to the key signature, have fingered through the scale, and am looking at the Roadmap and rhythms.

Make sure you rhythmically decipher the first couple of bars of rhythms.

In order to give yourself a fighting chance, you have to get off to a good start. Once you rhythmically decipher the first couple of bars, you should search for any RHYTHMIC ANOMOLIES (rhythms that look complicated) and count them in your mind.

Make sure you know what style of music you are playing before you play anything. This is important because if the style says Latin and you start swinging your eighth notes really hard, you have already "missed the boat."

DO NOT STOP PLAYING WHEN YOU MAKE MISTAKES. This is probably one of the most important tips in this document. If you do stop playing when you make a mistake, it sends a signal to the director that, not only are you have reading problems, but you also don't know how to get back on track when you make mistakes. Directors take this skill very seriously so it is critical that you try your very best to always keep going no matter what mistakes you make. This will improve your audition results.

Try to stay in control of your breathing. When practicing at home, I always try to breathe in time with the selection of music I am working on. This radically helps the stability of my air stream and reminds me to count (even when I stop playing). It also relaxes my breathing and relaxes my body.

Make sure your posture is centered. Keep your balance placed squarely in the center of your body (practice this way at home so that it becomes habit before your audition). Centering the balance of your body can also help stabilize your air stream (you will need this extra help because during an audition you are slightly nervous and your breathing can get shallow or erratic). By centering your body you will automatically increase your odds of breathing correctly.

No matter what happens on one piece of music, refocus for the next music selection. "Shake off" any insecure thoughts and zero in on the music. Remember to stay relaxed and keep your breathing normal. Shortness of breath (also known as shallow breathing) is a very common problem among musicians during an audition, so always try to maintain control of nice full and relaxed breath.

If you should happen to do very poorly on your audition then always remember this fact: If you keep practicing, you will sound like you improved twice as much to anyone that heard you play poorly. This is huge because you now appear to have a tremendous aptitude for learning.