

Audition Tips

Introduction

After winning the Principal Trumpet position with the Lyric Opera of Chicago, many of my friends and colleagues asked me to share my experience and strategies preparing and executing the audition process. Five years later I auditioned and won the Assistant Principal Trumpet job at the Grant Park Music Festival Orchestra. This is an updated version of the paper I wrote in 2012. I feel obligated to give a caveat. There is nothing new to my method. I only did the things that I was told by teachers, friends, and other players. Of course I have read a few books on the subject, perhaps not specifically about the audition process, but books that I have found useful none the less. I will list those print resources at the end. So, please forgive me if you've heard it all before. The one area that it is more revelatory to me in my preparation is the use of meditation. This is not by any means new, but in my practice I can speak with a little more authority to its benefits in preparing and performing an audition. I have found it to be essential in my trumpet practice, in managing emotional and ego related "byproducts" during the time before the audition, and of course in the actual hyper intense minutes of the audition.

Placebo Effect

One of the main reasons for my success is that I believe whole heartedly in my strategy. So the first recommendation that I have is to create a system that you believe in. If something I say in this paper doesn't seem like it would be helpful to you, it probably isn't. However you choose to tackle this process make it your own and be convinced that it is a path that can lead to winning.

Contents

- I will start with the reading of the ad in the paper and making a decision on what to do about it.
- The next section deals with formulating a plan of attack. Here I will share my individual plan. Of course, this is very personal and is dependent on many factors.
- Following the planning phase comes practice. I will give some thoughts on my practice and preparation method.
- Hand in hand with physical preparation comes mental preparation. Here I will share some ideas on meditation and a little self hypnosis. I will also point you towards a few books and internet resources.
- One strategy which I have completely underestimated in the past is enlisting the positive support of friends, colleagues and loved ones.
- This section deals with those last couple of weeks before the audition.

- This is a discussion of emotional issues that crop up as the pressure cooker threatens to boil over.
- Lastly, here are a few thoughts about the actual audition. By following a plan that you believe in, I've found the audition itself not to be that big of a deal. Easy to say, right?

Hey honey, there's an opening in the ...

You see the ad. Desire floods into your awareness. "Wouldn't that be cool if ...?"

To win the job avoid these common pit falls: "I'll take the audition for practice." This is a cop-out. Wouldn't you rather win? Or how about this one: "I just want to advance." Really? don't you want to win? Auditions are good practice and yes it's rewarding and feels good to advance. All I'm saying is if you want to practice at taking auditions you might as well practice to win. If you just want to advance, what do you do when you do advance? Do you play a final round or do you tell the committee that you were just kidding. If you decide to take it as far as you can, make a decision to "intend" to win. Make a promise to yourself that you will do what it takes, within reason. This is the mind-set you should adopt.

Of course, most jobs will have dozens of candidates if not well over a hundred. Only one can win. And we all know they don't have to pick anybody. A great trumpeter (David Hickman) once said, "The best player does not necessarily win the job, it's the best prepared player who wins." Adopt the mind-set that you will be the best prepared. Also adopt the mind-set that by the time the audition actually occurs that you will be so prepared that your bad day will be better than everyone else's good day. Be so well prepared that even if the committee has someone picked out ahead of time (of course this never really happens, *cough*) you will be so prepared that the committee will have to give second thoughts about not giving you the job. Establishing a killer mind-set is crucial. This is what generates the type of work required to close the deal.

That job is MINE!

Preparation should be tackled from many directions at once. The most obvious is practicing your instrument. But other techniques used concurrently with practice are almost as important. Think about those couple of days before the BIG day? You probably make an effort to get plenty of rest, eat healthy, and generally take care of your body. You may do some positive affirmations, or try a little self hypnosis. Start adopting these habits now if you haven't already.

Attend to your spiritual health as well. True confession. I have had self centered, ego driven, negative thoughts that I regret. I am also not above engaging in the occasional gossip. A spiritual life provides a mechanism for dealing with regret that I believe gets in the way of genuine improvement. Performing music is a spiritual endeavor, practice spiritually.

Make a decision to avoid self deprecating self talk. Practice room rants are not only useless, they create mental obstacles to beautiful, joyful music making. Evaluating is different from judging. Judging is a declaration of guilt or innocence. Detached evaluation is where the gold is.

A reading list is also helpful. There are good books on performance anxiety, meditation, practicing, spirituality, you name it. Take the opportunity that an audition brings to improve your self. If you don't win THIS audition, you will still have something to show for it plus you will be well on your way towards winning the next one.

Practice, practice, practice

This is what I do, your plan of course will vary. I get up and warm-up with some breathing exercises and a couple of stretches to start. In the early days of audition preparation my warm-up was quite long. And truthfully it was more than a warm-up. I wanted to push myself with regards to tone quality, range and endurance. A final round may consist of more than one round and you may also do some ensemble playing at the end. The focus of this part of the practice day is also for technical maintenance, but most importantly it is about playing with a relaxed, beautiful tone quality that will make your listeners melt into their chairs. The other primary purpose of all this is to manage your airstream so that you can create relaxed, gorgeous melodic lines. The slow practice of these elements encourage a beautiful sound and a gorgeous line even on the most technically demanding passages.

When it comes to practicing the excerpts make sure you know what the tempo range for each passage is. I have practiced things too fast that should be slower and vice versa. Listen to a variety of recordings and take note of the difference in details between them. Take notice of the overall context and style of the excerpt. To stand apart from the herd, style is of paramount importance; just as important as tone and line. You may have noticed I did not mention "playing the right notes." Your "warm-up" and initial practice of the excerpts should take care of the notes. In my experience most technical difficulties come down to air management and blowing through the melodic line. When it comes time to play the audition don't worry about the notes. By that time you will probably be playing note perfect most of the time. Guess what. You will not play note perfect on the audition. It's not likely anyway. Those who do usually sacrifice their concentration and focus away from playing beautiful music. They will not advance! Paraphrasing a great hornist "if a player doesn't have a good sound and doesn't play musically, I don't want to play with him." He continued (paraphrasing) "I don't care about missed notes, I don't even care if it's not perfectly in tune." For me this was a liberating idea. I will go on to say that my last audition wasn't note perfect; not the prelim, nor the final. I believe that If you play like a robot, the committee will count your errors like a robot. If you play beautifully, bringing the music to life, a committee is more likely to give you a pass on a couple of clams.

One other thought about practice. Do not be a slave to routine. listen to what your body and mind is telling you. Mix it up. Don't stick with the same scales every day. Be creative. To a certain extent you can use the challenging aspects of the excerpt list to guide your "warm-up." Be creative in how you tackle difficulties with the excerpt list from the start. It is counter-productive to barrel through licks that you can't play. Take it to the woodshed immediately. A great book for pumping creative life into your practice is Madeline Bruser's book, *The Art of Practice*.

OM

One reason I meditate is to increase my ability to concentrate. Meditation strengthens the concentration "muscle".

1. It enables me to slow down and really, **really**, pay attention to my practice.
2. It enables me to direct my mind where I want it to go, not where **it** wants to go. This is very important in cultivating the ability to project your musical vision on the passage you are playing. And
3. Meditation enables me to stretch my ears throughout the room that I am playing in so that I can tune in to my sound, the collective sound of my colleagues, and how it all fits together (fingers crossed) beautifully.

You can meditate! Everyone can! Don't think that you can't! All meditation requires is that you sit still and concentrate, even if in the beginning it's just a second or two. You will get better with a little daily practice.

Here is an easily understood yet difficult to perfect meditation exercise. Begin by sitting comfortably either with your legs crossed, or seated in a straight back chair. cushions are acceptable and even recommended if seated with crossed legs. It is definitely more comfortable if you can get your butt off the ground 6-8 inches. Take a few deep breaths and begin to relax, taking notice of any tension you are holding throughout your body. Slowly take notice of each limb, your torso, back, neck, and finally your scalp and face. Breathing through your nose, bring your attention to your belly as it rises and falls saying mentally "rise" as your belly rises and "fall" as your belly falls. Soon you will discover you have been thinking for past five minutes about your favorite sports team or Netflix. This is fine and natural. Don't beat yourself up. Gently return to the breath: "rise...fall". Start by trying this for 5-10 minutes working up to 1/2 hour.

The greatest help that I have noticed as a product of meditation is that I am more able to listen to myself play with a more detached awareness. I can observe when things go poorly and rather than beat myself up, I can take a moment and contemplate what happened and possibly even design a way to improve it. Meditation practice also allows you to observe negative thoughts as they arise and give you the ability to not entertain them.

This is the gist of it. As you practice this technique and become more skillful you can try to observe the thoughts as they arise. Try this with emotions that crop up as well. This observing of emotions is particularly useful as the audition looms closer and closer. Observe the physical sensations and performance anxiety symptoms that inevitably arise as your thoughts drift to the audition. Once you notice the symptoms, observe them, study them. In my experience those symptoms generally disappear. This technique is handy when practicing mock auditions. You can bring your attention to the symptoms when the mock audition gets a little “too real,” and you get a little anxious.

Another technique is the use of positive affirmations. These are short phrases of your own design to encourage the type of behavior you wish to exhibit. By sinking into a light hypnotic state and repeating a few (2-4) phrases, these suggestions will begin to worm their way into your sub-conscious, and your fully alert state as well. I will repeat my affirmations in hypnosis but also while driving or during some other mundane activity. Google “self-hypnosis” for some simple instructions on how to achieve the “alpha state.” Also, the book *performance Power* by Irmtraud Tarr Kruger has many exercises along these lines.

Team!

Al Capone knew the value of teamwork (see *The Untouchables*.) I’m convinced that I still underestimate the importance that teamwork plays in preparing for an audition. Family support is helpful, but if your spouse is not a musician it may be difficult for them to relate to what is entailed in taking an audition, especially one that you are intent on winning. I recommend that you seek out knowledgeable friends and colleagues to listen to you play. I played for six different colleagues, one of which was my wife, an extremely talented cellist. I played for her many times. I played for one of my other colleagues twice. Each and every time I played for them I learned something new that helped me close in on the competition.

In addition to playing for friends and colleagues, If you can afford the time and money, it is great to take some lessons with someone whose experience and expertise you value. In my case, the repertoire was not familiar to me, so taking a lesson with someone who is an expert in that specialty was crucial.

It’s also good to talk to someone about what’s going on in your head during this time of preparation. Sticking your neck out, devoting your time and energy with no guarantee of success is draining emotionally, at least it was for me. I would go through ups and downs. One minute feeling that I can’t lose; the next minute feeling that I’m an impostor that does not deserve to win. Talking this stuff out with a trusted friend or loved one is good therapy and also a good way to continue to close in on the competition.

Last Days

The excerpts are well prepared and your almost ready to go. One technique shared with me that I have found helpful is to number the excerpts and number some little scraps of paper. As you start performing mock auditions put the scraps in a box or a hat and pull the scraps out one by one and play that excerpt. Make sure you have a way to keep track of what you've done so you cover all your bases. I recommend doing a lot of mock auditions, both alone and for friends and colleagues. After each mock audition take a moment to address spots that could be improved upon.

Within a week or so I recommend tapering off on the practice so as to "guarantee" strong chops on audition day. I did hard day-easy day with my hard day getting easier as the audition gets closer. I still tried to play all the excerpt material and take mock auditions, I just rested more often and used fewer excerpts during the mock auditions.

I'm not stressed, YOU'RE STRESSED!

This is not that big of a deal, but you should recognize and have a way of dealing with the intensity of emotions as the big day looms. I feel that the intensity of the preparation and desire to win is proportional to the anxiety that can occur just before the trip. I would tell myself things like: "you don't have to win this one," "all you have to do is play your best, the rest is not up to you," "have fun, they'll probably hire someone. It might as well be you."

Go to a movie, read a book, hang with friends, enjoy life. I believe this goes a long way to showing up at the audition with the right attitude.

Audition Day

By now you are as ready as you can be. Try and treat the audition like any other day in the practice room. Avoid foods that are too salty, get there a day early and get a good nights sleep. Keep the warm-up just like at home. I actually did an abbreviated warm-up spread out over a slightly longer period of time.

At the venue bring with you a calm and kind attitude. Try and avoid a competitive attitude. The committee does not want to hire a "winner" they want a musician that plays beautifully and is pleasant to be around. I believe that the attitude that you carry is sensed by others. This attitude is helpful in presenting the most appropriate and beautiful performance of the excerpt list that you are able to accomplish. That is all that needs to be done, and all that can be done. Play the excerpts the way the composer intended them to be played and do it as gracefully and beautifully as possible. Nothing else in

the room matters. In this sense the prelim, the semi, and the finals are no different. You have one goal: play the passages as beautifully as possible. You need not be concerned with anything else.

Win or lose, the journey has been worthwhile. If you win congratulations. Don't let it go to your head like I did. If you lose, you are a huge step closer to winning the next one. I know it's tough to think this way, but win or lose it's still a win.

Resources

Meditation

Dhammatalks.org

Audiodharma.org

These are Buddhist sites with lots of free resources including a free course in vipassana meditation as well as many guided meditations..

Podcast

zencast — This is a companion to the lectures and classes found at audiodharma.org

Books

The Art of Practice "A Guide to Making Music from the Heart" by Madeline Bruser

Performance Power "Transforming Stress into Creative Energy" by Dr. Irmtraud Tarr Kruger

The Sweet Spot in Time by John Jerome

Method Books

The Breathing Gym by Sam Pilafian and Patrick Sheridan

The Brass Gym by Sam Pilafian and Patrick Sheridan

Warm-Ups and Studies for Trumpet "or other brass instruments" by James Stamp

Special Studies for Trumpet by John Daniel

The Complete Shuebruk Lip Trainers for Trumpet by Richard Shuebruk

Lip Flexibilities by Bai Lin