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TOP **10** TIPS

for Nailing Your Audition

Are you looking to join an orchestra, become part of an ensemble, earn a performance gig, or attend a competitive arts school? Preparing for auditions is a challenging part of every musician's journey, but there are plenty of resources available to help you achieve your goals. In this guide, Interlochen Arts Academy violin instructors Ara Sarkissian and Tina Qu share the skills they've learned while auditioning for positions in the world's most competitive orchestras. With the help of their top 10 tips, you'll master the mental game, polish your technique, and dazzle the judges with your skills.



TOP 10 TIPS FOR NAILING YOUR AUDITION

- 1. Select appropriate repertoire**
- 2. Create a detailed practice schedule**
- 3. Sharpen your technique**
- 4. Pay attention to expression**
- 5. Set up mock auditions**
- 6. Remember that adjudicators want you to succeed**
- 7. Warm up correctly**
- 8. Keep it in perspective**
- 9. Move on from any mistakes**
- 10. Remember why you're auditioning**



1

Select appropriate repertoire

Audition guidelines will direct you to prepare certain pieces of repertoire. You might be tempted to select the most difficult pieces you can possibly play, but that's not always the best approach.

“I have seen many cases over the years where people chose difficult repertoire that was far beyond their ability,” says Tina Qu. “Doing that guarantees a negative experience in preparing for your audition. I would suggest selecting appropriate repertoire at your comfort level.”

It might be better to play a familiar piece perfectly as opposed to selecting a new piece that's too advanced for you and making mistakes.

2

Create a detailed practice schedule



After you've chosen your music, begin developing a long-term practice plan. Ara Sarkissian advises students to write out a detailed schedule.

“Start planning your practice schedule months or weeks ahead of the deadline and work with your teacher to make progress towards a successful audition,” he says.

Once you have a schedule, have a friend, family member, or teacher serve as an accountability partner to help you stay on track. Planning ahead can take you a long way towards a winning audition experience.



3

Sharpen your technique

Even though you'll likely want to spend a lot of time perfecting your audition pieces, it's important to not lose sight of the fundamentals. Make sure your technique is in excellent shape before auditions. Qu urges her students to practice scales every single day.

“Where do you get good intonation? It's from scales. That's really a fundamental thing for anyone to do. Jascha Heifetz, for instance, was considered the king of the violin. He practiced scales for half of his entire practice time during the day. If Heifetz was doing that, we don't have any excuse for overlooking the importance of the scale.”



4

Pay attention to expression

Technical accuracy is incredibly important in an audition, but don't forget to focus on artful and accurate expression. Judges want to see that you know the style of a composition's particular time period. If not, you run the risk of showing that you need more time to grow as a musician.

“If someone has not demonstrated such a difference in the style, then that’s a message to the judges that they probably do not understand the style of the periods and the composers,” says Qu.

Play all of your pieces with nuance and attention to their history. The judges will take notice, and you'll be that much closer to reaching your audition goals.



5

Set up mock auditions

The best way to overcome stage fright is to get yourself used to the feeling of being under pressure.

“I think the one thing that students need to be doing more of is getting themselves into those kinds of intimidating situations, so that it desensitizes the nervous system,” says Sarkissian.

Often, the audition environment is very different from where you’re used to practicing. Plus, you’re being watched and evaluated based on your performance. See if you can replicate this experience by setting up a mock audition.

“Practice in front of friends and family. Perform in studio and master classes,” Sarkissian advises.

Qu agrees. “Get used to having an audience, whether it’s one person or 1,000 people. That kind of practice is a must.” She also suggests finding opportunities to play in front of your church or school.

As much as possible, make your mock auditions realistic. This may involve dressing as you would for an audition, setting a time limit, playing your pieces in a different sequence, or having your practice audience ask you questions. The more mock auditions you do, the more prepared you’ll be for the real thing.

6

Remember that adjudicators want you to succeed



It's easy to go into auditions with a “me vs. them” mentality. Some students become overly competitive, focused on winning over the judges and beating out all the competition. Sarkissian advises a more grounded perspective.

“The best advice I ever received before an audition is to remember that the people sitting across the room from you really want you to do well.”

Believing that your judges want to see you succeed can help you perform better and interact with them in a more positive way.



Warm up correctly

Some musicians like to play their pieces through quickly to burn off any nervous energy before an audition, but Sarkissian says that a slower approach is best for most.

“Disciplining yourself to be more slow, careful, and thoughtful about your warm up gets rid of a lot of that nervousness,” he says.

Instead of playing your audition pieces right before you go on, you may want to consider going through them mentally. Visualize the music and imagine how you want it to sound. Think about how each note feels. That way, when the time comes, you’ll be ready to get in the flow.

“Most of it is a mental game. If you’re thinking through the piece, and you know where your trouble spots are, it’s more calming than vigorously practicing last-minute runs before you’re supposed to go on,” says Sarkissian.

Whatever you do, make sure it’s something you’re used to doing. Find a routine that works for you well in advance and do that on audition day.



8

Keep it in perspective

It's vital to realize you can't really "cheat" while preparing for an audition. If you win the audition, it'll be because you played to your highest potential—not because you memorized the judges' individual preferences on style, fingerings, or other miscellaneous things.

“Try not to game the system. What I mean by that is don't try to play in a way you think they want to hear. There's no real way for you to play, or to interpret a piece of music, that everybody will agree on, so it's best to be true to your beliefs and ideas,” Sarkissian advises.

Some aspects of the process will always be outside of your control, but that's okay. Instead of worrying about failure or success, just stay focused on doing your personal best. Sarkissian reminds students to keep a balanced perspective.

“The truth is that you can play your absolute best and it's sometimes not what they want to hear,” he says.

Forget about the outcome for a while and do your best to enjoy the process. Your audition will go more smoothly if you can relax and stay in the moment.



9

Move on from any mistakes

The worst just happened. You were playing a challenging section and your mind went blank for a minute. What should you do if you make a mistake? Qu advises her students to recover as smoothly as possible and choose not to focus on what happened.

“It’s easy to make a mistake when you’re in a performance. You have to be very strong mentally to quickly adjust. Don’t dwell on the mistake—just refocus and keep going,” says Qu.

You can’t change what’s already past, after all. And just because you make a mistake once doesn’t mean it will happen again. Your ability to recover from mistakes will improve as you put in more practice time.

“The more performance practice you do, the more you’ll discover yourself—under what circumstances you get nervous. You’ll also learn how slowly or quickly you can adjust and recenter yourself. The bottom line is that the show must go on.”

So, if you happen to mess up a difficult section, let it go. Keep on playing, and maybe your recovery will impress the judges.



10

Remember why you're auditioning

Throughout all the hard work you'll put in while preparing for auditions, it's important to stay connected to your *why*. Why do you love playing your instrument? Consider yourself lucky that you get to practice your chosen art form. Remembering the big picture in this way can help your audition go more smoothly.

“I believe that anytime you're performing for another person, you are there to reveal something about yourself, your interpretation, and the way that you want the music to impact them,” says Sarkissian. “When the storytelling component is missing in an audition, it's actually easier for listeners to reduce your performance to the technical aspects, which isn't ideal and can lead to you being ‘graded’ rather than heard.”

Instead of thinking of the audition as a test of your abilities, Sarkissian recommends that students remember it's another chance to connect with an audience.

“I think of an audition the way I think of a performance—that it's a gift from you to the listener.”

Keep these tips in mind as you prepare for your music audition, and you'll be well on your way to success.



About the Instructors



ARA SARKISSIAN is an instructor of violin at Interlochen Arts Academy. He has distinguished himself as an experienced teacher and mentor for aspiring young artists who seek acceptance to competitive conservatories and universities. His students have garnered acceptances into top conservatories and universities such as New England Conservatory, The Juilliard School, Eastman School of Music, Manhattan School of Music, Cleveland Institute of Music, San Francisco Conservatory of Music, and numerous others. As a performer and advocate of contemporary music, Sarkissian has collaborated with esteemed composers from Pierre Boulez to Frederic Rzewski. Sarkissian received his Bachelor and Master of Music degrees in Violin Performance with academic honors from New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, Massachusetts.



TINA CHANG QU is an instructor of violin at Interlochen Arts Academy. Prior to Interlochen, she taught at Colburn Community School and East Los Angeles College as well as Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts. As a soloist, she has appeared with the LA Philharmonic, National Orchestral of China, Liao Ning State Opera Orchestra, Philadelphia Chamber Orchestra, American Youth Symphony, Los Angeles Virtuosi Chamber Orchestra, Claremont Symphony, and St. Matthew Chamber Orchestra. Qu has collaborated with many top-class artists and conductors such as Simon Rattle, Andre Previn, and Wolfgang Sawallisch. She completed her undergraduate studies at Curtis Institute of Music and holds a Master of Music from The Juilliard School; she also holds an artist diploma from the University of Southern California.



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