

## **Judgment Day**

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Every year band rooms across the nation are filled with anticipation for the upcoming honor band audition or solo and ensemble competition. Through careful preparation students can make these stressful moments more manageable and successful.

### *Setting Goals*

Before beginning any sort of audition preparation it is important to set appropriate goals. Setting goals will help to create a sense of purpose in students' preparation, and also create a means of evaluating the success of an audition. I usually try to spend a few minutes discussing these goals with students at the very beginning of the audition preparation process. It is important these goals reflect the students own feelings so that they believe that achieving these goals is in their own best interest.

The specific goals that you set should reflect what will best enable your student to be successful in the long term. To this end, "winning" is never an appropriate goal. I make it a point early on to explain to my students that you can do very well and not win, or play very poorly yet still come out on top. Because "winning" has more to do with outside factors it cannot be used to create a sense of purpose or to gauge success.

It is usually best to have some sort of general musical goal and some sort of preparation timeline goal for each student. General musical goals could be to: always maintain a beautiful sound, to ensure all dynamics and articulations are clear, or to always maintain concentration. Obviously, the more advanced a student becomes the more specific a musical goal they will require. A preparation timeline is a good way to set incremental goals. Make a calendar with specific goals by certain dates. I find that physically writing out a timeline can often help students structure their practice time leading up to the audition. Make sure that the schedule you set is front heavy so that the student will be sure to have adequate review time in the final days leading up to the audition.

### *Musical Considerations for Auditions*

Musical preparation for an audition is by necessity different than for a concert. Generally speaking the more stressful an event the more repetition it takes to secure a positive result. Under pressure students generally perform to the same level as their practice. In other words, if a student plays a passage ten times and manages to play the passage perfectly eight times, one should expect an 80% chance that the passage will be done correctly in an audition situation. Too often students will do something correctly only once after having played it incorrectly hundreds of times and then wonder why they were not able to execute the passage under pressure.

When you're working with students try to imagine what comments the judges will make. Most judges tend to be looking at four broad categories:

1. Articulation: both in quality and speed
2. Intonation: both with others and as an individual
3. Rhythm: accurate rhythms, steady and appropriate tempi



#### 4. Character: lots and lots of character to create interest

These areas are universally accepted and far less subjective than other concerns. When you speak to your students use these categories to suggest strengths and weaknesses. This will help guide their thinking so that they will begin to think in terms of these four categories. Also have students evaluate their own performance in each of these categories, both in terms of strengths and weaknesses.

Try to phrase all comments and criticism in a positive way when you are working with students. Ask students to "maintain a steady pulse" instead of "not to rush". By phrasing things this way you highlight the solution to the problem so that students instantly have a direction to follow. This will help students' confidence during the audition because they will know what they need to do to perform at their best.

#### *Stage Fright*

Whenever the subject of auditions comes up inevitably the discussion turns to stage fright. What causes stage fright and how can you help your students overcome it? There are many causes of stage fright including: a fear of failure, poor preparation, inadequate positive repetition, and persistent negative thoughts. Stage fright is not a terminal condition; it is merely another obstacle one must work to overcome.

Without a doubt, the best way to become more at ease in an audition situation is to experience as many auditions as possible. One way to gain this valuable audition experience is to have a "mock audition". If you have multiple students participating in the same audition get them all together and have them take turns playing for each other. Then after everyone has played have the group make observations about what they have heard. Otherwise, have your student bring a few friends to observe the mock audition. Even if the people observing the mock auditions do not make comments, the experience of performing under pressure will be invaluable for your student.

In the weeks leading up to an audition have your students simulate the stage fright they will likely encounter. After playing a normal warm-up have your student put their audition music on their stand ready to play. Then have them engage in some sort of physical activity to increase their heart rate, such as running in place for a few minutes. Once it is clear that the student is slightly out of breath have them sit down and mentally prepare to play for 10-12 seconds. I usually will ask students to concentrate on slowing down their breathing and thinking about the audition they must now play. After this short time has passed have the student play the entire audition once through. It will no doubt be more difficult than usual-- this is intended. After going through this exercise with a student I will tell them that they should incorporate this exercise into their own practice at home at the end of each practice session every day.

#### *Mental Preparation*

The value of mental preparation for an audition should not be underestimated. When using our minds to imagine an audition we can develop habitual success from always practicing perfection without the possibility of failure.

Have students set aside a few moments each day to practice imagining the audition. Although this can be at any time of the day, it usually most effective in the moments right before going to sleep at night. In the moments before we fall sleep our mind is at its most relaxed and suggestions are easily accepted by into our subconscious.

Ask your student to visualize every conceivable detail of the upcoming audition. Have them visualize what they will be wearing, what they will do when they are waiting to play, the size of the room they will play in, and what they will play as a warm-up. The more detailed the visualization, the more useful it will be to the student. By using their imagination this way students can create a sense of familiarity for a foreign situation.

### *Presentation at the Audition*

Anytime those adjudicating an audition can see the candidates, visual presentation must be considered. Applicants should look clean, and should be neatly dressed in a comfortable yet professional way. Be sure to remind your students that appropriate clothing for an audition is not the same as that for the prom. When in doubt dressing on the conservative side is usually best.

Likewise the way students carry themselves at the audition should be polite and courteous. Students should concern themselves only with their own audition, and not worry about what others might be doing. Students should be especially courteous to those running the audition. These people are often volunteers who have made this opportunity possible. Besides, you never know when one of these people might have some sort of input in the audition process.

Occasionally, events like solo and ensemble competition allow a small audience to observe the audition. Anytime there is an audience that is applauding a performance all performers must bow at the conclusion just as they would for an ordinary concert. Explain to your students when they must bow and rehearse their bows with them. It is also critical that you make it clear to students that not bowing is a rude gesture to the audience and is unacceptable.

When rehearsing a bow with a student have them go outside of the room and then come in as if coming into a real performance. Once they enter the room they should stand and face the audience with their feet together making eye contact for a brief moment. Then they should bend at the waist with their head falling towards the floor for two or three seconds before standing up tall, making eye contact again and quickly leaving the stage. Be sure that students' eyes are looking down towards the floor when they bow and not out towards the audience.



When entering any sort of competition space students should try to play without any undue delay. Judges begin to form opinions from the moment the audition begins, not the moment music begins. However, do take whatever time is necessary to ensure a successful audition. Students should realize that this is their audition and they should make sure it counts.

### *Final Thoughts*

In the end the judges will come back with results from the audition. Hopefully these results show your student at the top. However, always remember that what the judges decide is not an indicator of success. Look back at the goals you set with your student and assess if the audition was successful. But don't forget to also look at what could be done differently to improve for the next big audition.

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