

Applying and Auditioning for College As a Music Major

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Can I Earn a Living in Music?

Parents and teachers alike worry that it is difficult to earn a living in music. While it is true that some of the music disciplines are competitive, there are plenty of opportunities for careers. Aside from classical performance and music education, there is a wide variety of interesting occupations. Some of these careers include jazz and commercial performance, musical theater, recording engineer or producer, arts management, commercial writing, classical composition (usually teamed with a college teaching job), retail music business, music manufacturing, instrument building and repair, college teaching, musicology—and a variety of technology-based careers that I don't claim to understand. The point is the possibilities seem endless.

If you have a passion for music and don't know what you would do without it...go for it.

Developing Skills

As soon as you start thinking about a career in music, have your teachers help you to identify important skills that will be needed, and help you to develop them. These skills should be developed to the highest possible level and should significantly exceed the skill levels of the average student who will not be pursuing a professional music career. Even if you do not intend to pursue performance, you will be asked to perform as part of an entrance evaluation. It is important, therefore, to be well prepared. The most common problem with entrance auditions is that skills are unevenly developed. Students can move their fingers quickly, but may lack evenness and rhythmic control. Tones are good in the middle of the range, but may be poor elsewhere. The student often has difficulty playing the instrument in tune with itself.

It's safe to say that most colleges are looking for students who demonstrate good basic fundamentals and show no evidence of any major problem. Having to overhaul an embouchure, teach basic rhythm or develop basic finger technique can take up the better part of two years of study.

Learn how to organize your practice. We all practice better if we know what we plan to achieve in each practice session and have a strategy for accomplishing that plan. Learn how to organize your materials, how to use a metronome and how to use repetition. Know what to listen for as you make corrections. Most of all, learn what it means to work until things are exactly right. Two or three hours of practice a day for prospective music students is not too much.

It can be a big help to know a little about music theory. Know how the piano keyboard is laid out, understand how common scales and modes are constructed, be able to sing and recognize basic intervals, and know how chords are formed. If at all possible, it is great to study a year or two of piano before coming to college.

All students, but especially students who will study jazz, should have some sense of improvisation and some experience trying it. People planning to pursue music education not only should be excellent performers, but also need experience in jazz, musical theater and athletic bands. Music education majors must be excellent musicians. It's a foolish concept that if you aren't good enough to play, you teach.

Work with a good professional private teacher. A private teacher who really knows the instrument, has a solid pedagogy and understands the repertoire can be an enormous help. Such a person may also know who the recognized college teachers are and may be able to help you make important contacts.

Students wishing to major in recording or technology should have excellent skills in math, science and computers—and they must have good ears. No one listens quite the same way as a good recording engineer, editor or producer. They seem to hear balance, intonation, clarity, background sounds, inflection and color in unique ways. Learn to listen carefully.

One thing you should not do is buy a new instrument without consulting the teacher you will be working with in college. Most studio teachers have strong preferences as to quality of the instrument and accessories like mouthpieces, saxophone necks, flute head joints and so on. Wait until arriving on campus and conferring with the new teacher before investing in a new instrument.

What Activities Can Help?

Give a senior recital. Playing in front of people is a great experience. Create printed programs, write program notes and hire an accompanist. Learn how to bow, how to enter and leave the stage, how to acknowledge the accompanist and how to generally conform to performance etiquette. This recital can include pieces that will be used for college entrance auditions or for seating auditions in the fall.

Find ways to play chamber music and to perform with area youth orchestras, bands or jazz bands. Prospective music educators might conduct basketball band, conduct clarinet choir or brass ensemble, write marching charts or make arrangements for band. Music education students would be well served by having experience working in the music library, helping with uniform distribution, copying parts using notation programs, or helping with tour arrangements and fund-raising projects.

If you are interested in composition, ask your director if you could write a piece for the band, orchestra or chamber groups—and ask if it can be performed. People interested in sound engineering can help with recording concerts and should learn about video recording. Perhaps some experience with the theater department sound crew would be in order.

Entrance Audition Tips

When taking an entrance audition, you must know what is expected in the specific audition for the school to which you are applying. What solos, études, scales or excerpts are required? Play the audition for teachers and friends many times before going to the college audition.

Be sure you know the deadlines for application to the school, and especially application for financial aid. Equally important is that you meet those deadlines. Most schools cannot process your materials if they are not complete. Schools with a lot of applications will not process your materials if they are late.

Learn the names of the studio teachers and ensemble conductors at the school where you are auditioning—it helps if you know who you will be playing for.

Be on time and to dress up for the audition. Be clean, well groomed, polite and well spoken. If you are asked questions, answer them. There is usually a time outside of the audition for you to ask questions about the school. Don't hesitate to ask about anything you want to know. You are auditioning the school too.

What Are College Music Faculty Looking For?

College faculty members want to know that their students can play well and can be taught. No one expects freshmen to come in as finished products, but they want to know that they can graduate as a finished product. They look for evidence that a student is mature, relates well with peers, has a good work ethic and has self-confidence without “attitude” or undue arrogance. There must be a musical intelligence. This is difficult to define, but it is a “feel” for, and an intuitive understanding of, music and style.

Music education students should have good writing skills and a certain ease with people. Jazz students should be conversant with a variety of styles and important performers. A school of music is a complex social structure and there must be a good institutional fit among its faculty and students for it to be successful.

Students in high school are rewarded for above-average talent, their potential for becoming good musicians, their loyalty to the school music program and the regard we have for them because they are “good kids” and good students. One of the most difficult transitions for new college music students is to deal with the reality that they are expected to have talent and they are expected to develop their potential. They have a relatively short time to become competitive in the adult world. This transition can be difficult for young musicians, but students whose musical skills are well prepared in high school, who have a good work ethic and who love music will have a much easier time.

Materials in this hand-out are based on Dr. DeRoche's article, “Your College-Bound Music Students Need and Deserve Some Special Preparation,” that appeared in the Fall 2003 edition of The Leblanc Bell.