

Dodging the ‘Curve Ball’ at Orchestra Auditions

I refer to anything unexpected that comes up in an audition as a curve ball. This could be something pertaining to the music you are asked to perform, special requests from the committee, issues with equipment, or conditions in the performance space itself just to name a few. By recognizing some of these possible curve balls ahead of time we can better prepare for them or hopefully avoid them all together. For the purpose of this article we will be focusing only on circumstances that may potentially arise during the actual audition.

Music

Curve balls frequently come in the form of an unexpected excerpt. Committees usually have the freedom to ask any excerpt from any piece on the repertoire list on any round at an audition. It should probably go without saying that everything on the list needs to be audition ready. Just because it isn't a common audition excerpt doesn't mean that it shouldn't be as well prepared as the rest of the list. Guessing which excerpts from which pieces are going to come up on any given audition round is usually a lost cause. If everything isn't completely prepared ahead of time, you are simply setting yourself up for failure.

Secondly, know the entire piece of music rather than just the audition excerpts – even if rehearsal numbers are included on the printed list. If sight reading is included on the list, it could come from the standard repertoire including the music you were asked to prepare. Don't get caught off guard by an unfamiliar excerpt on the other half of a page of music that you've been working on for months or years.

Committees may also have special requests during an audition. Be prepared to demonstrate basic techniques such as a snare drum roll or cymbal crashes on command. Be prepared to perform excerpts again with adjustments to interpretation or tempo or dynamics. Being flexible is crucial. This is precisely why audition committees throw curve balls – to see if you can make adjustments under pressure.

Equipment

Know what you're going to be playing on before you arrive at the audition. If the audition is well run, the audition coordinator will send out a list of instruments to be provided at the audition along with the repertoire list. If a list of instruments is not provided, contact the orchestra and find out exactly what equipment will be provided.

Once you know what type of instruments will be provided at the audition, do your best to practice on the same or similar instruments whenever possible. Performing on a mallet instrument with an unfamiliar bar spacing can spell disaster for your note accuracy. Even if you are lucky enough to have access to a similar instrument to practice on there will always be some differences however subtle between instruments of the same model such as wood grain on xylophones and marimbas, the color or finish of the keys on all mallet instruments, instrument heights, and the condition of the instruments.

The bottom line is that you have to be ready for anything. Practice your mallet excerpts on every mallet instrument you can find. Try practicing xylophone excerpts on

glockenspiel. Practice your glockenspiel excerpts on vibraphone. Loosen a bolt or two on timpani to create some rattling noises so that you get used to playing on instruments that may not be well maintained. Vary the height of your mallet instruments to get familiar with playing on an extremely high or low keyboard. Practice cymbal excerpts with every pair of cymbals you can find. The more things you try, the more things you will be ready for in an audition. Don't let problems with equipment get in your way. Chances are if there is a problem with the equipment on stage, everyone will be dealing with the same curve ball.

Audition Rooms

You can never know what to fully expect walking into an audition room. Even if you've played in that particular room before, there will inevitably be something different about the space for an audition. Finding the instruments positioned differently or in a different order can make a room appear different. The committee could be positioned right in front of the instruments on stage or at the back of the hall. There may or may not be a screen between you and the committee. Other variables include acoustics, lighting, and temperature.

Prepare for the unexpected by practicing and performing in as many different rooms and under as many different conditions as possible especially as you get closer to the audition date. Try playing mock auditions under circumstances that make you uncomfortable. For example, have someone else set up the instruments for you ahead of time so that you won't be familiar with the set up when you walk into the room. Practice in extremely cold or hot rooms. Position the instruments differently every time you practice. Be prepared to play with poor lighting or with a spotlight directly in front of you. Try practicing in a room with distractions such as an open window or extraneous sounds from another room. These are all ways to prepare yourself for the unexpected curve ball when walking into an unfamiliar audition room.

Conclusion

In the end, there is no substitute for experience and maturity. This can only come from years of practice and auditioning. Everyone who has taken their share of auditions has their own horror stories about what went wrong and how they could have avoided the problem. Preparing yourself for as many curve balls as possible ahead of time will lead to a more comfortable and hopefully a more successful audition experience.