

MAJOR Guidance

How you can help prepare your students for higher music education

BY JOSEPH M. PISANO

The journey of becoming a music major is unlike that of all other college applicants. To start down the path of higher education in nearly any field, it's sufficient for a student to show academic excellence. But the one discipline in college that essentially requires you to already be a professional in your field prior to acceptance is . . . music.

Simply put, music majors are already musicians, because they need to be. They have to pass a bar before even being admitted into a program; they must already have achieved a substantial degree of proficiency

in their specific field, whether it be voice, composition, or any type of instrument. Students hoping to be accepted into a school of music need to prepare in a way that goes beyond regular academics, and this preparation takes many different forms.

As a musician, conductor, and professor of music entering his 21st year of teaching at the collegiate level, I've spent a lot of time mentoring, advising, and working with young music majors. And I've learned quite a bit myself in the process, much of which could prove useful to high school teachers hoping to provide some assistance to talented upperclassmen who are mulling their next steps.

EMULATE, PRACTICE, REPEAT

One of the best pieces of advice that I can give any incoming collegiate musician is to start out by modeling your talent after those who've already achieved musical greatness. This is something that all music teachers should keep in mind. Have your students ask themselves: Who is a master trumpet player? Who is a great vocalist? Who are the best drummers? Have your students not only listen

to these musicians but begin to emulate them, to think about *what* makes them great. This advice applies to ensembles as well. Demonstrate the best ones to your students, either live or through audio or video recordings. Consider visiting local universities and colleges for performances. Take advantage of the cultural experiences that surround every school. In order for students to really understand what is possible for a musician, they must be able to see beyond the four walls of their high school rehearsal hall or practice room.

If there's anything you can call a "magic bullet" for becoming a superb musician, it's practice. The second most important thing is repetition. (Did I mention repetition?) If practice and repetition put you on the road to becoming a better player, then *guided* practice and repetition *with intent and purpose* stand at the entrance of the expressway to excellence. Teachers can have a major influence on students in this area by challenging them and focusing them to practice the things that matter. There's no need for your students to keep practicing that lick or motif that





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they've mastered already. They need to push beyond what they're comfortable with to make progress; each failure is simply another foothold that will allow them to climb a little higher the next time.

AUDITION PREP

Exposing students to challenging and acceptable literature for auditions is a necessity, and it should happen sooner rather than later. While most honors ensemble music or solo competition music will be suitable for college auditions, every college's entry requirements vary. Finding out what those requirements are is usually as easy as viewing a website or sending a quick email.

Students should consistently be working toward bettering themselves each time that they practice or perform. In this regard, there's no better tool for assessment than a mirror, and for musicians, the definitive mirror is an audio recording. Unfortunately, many students don't fully take advantage of a great recording tool that's now typically in their pockets: their phones. Teachers, however, can do something about that, supercharging their lessons by not only evaluating their students live in the studio, but also having them perform remote self-evaluations for later discussion.

In the interest of being ready for auditions, I encourage potential music majors to perform in front of people as many times as possible. While the vast majority of auditions are adjudicated by reasonable and fair professors, the process itself may feel a little unnerving. There is no substitute for preparing for this process ahead of time. After the audition is finished, students typically have some time to talk with the professors; this is a great time for showcasing their communication skills and making an impression beyond the music performance.

Being a total musician is more than simply playing someone else's music. Students should also be encouraged to take leadership roles in the music creation process, whether through composing or making creative



choices as some type of ensemble leader. I always encourage my students and potential students to take advantage of every opportunity available to them. And if there aren't many available, I tell them that's the perfect reason for creating some.

BEYOND THE AUDITION

A couple of questions that I hear frequently from aspiring music majors are "What should I prepare for beyond my audition?" and "What should I be working on prior to entering college?" These are well-informed questions; typically, the answers depend both on the type of music major the student will be and the curriculum of the college. General answers could include:

- All students should become versed in as much music theory as they can, and should

start exploring music history.

- All students should begin or continue practicing their aural skills, including solfeggio.
- Being able to play the piano will be a huge asset for any non-keyboard major.
- Private lessons, while not a must, are recommended.
- Percussionists should be able to play a variety of instruments, including mallet instruments and drum set.
- Voice students should make sure that they can read music fluently in both clefs, and start to expose themselves to music sung in foreign languages.
- If you are a saxophonist, don't just stick with alto or tenor; learn to play all ranges of the instrument.
- If you play a specific clef-based instrument, learn how to read and play the others in that clef.
- More modern instrumentalists should not only be able to play by ear, but also be comfortable with written notation.
- Being versed in composition software (Finale, Noteflight, Sibelius, etc.) will be extremely helpful.
- Leadership and communication skills are highly desirable.
- Managing your time effectively will make you a better musician and student.

THE BIG DECISION

So what can you do to help students choose the right college for them? All music teachers already have great resources to tap into, in

the form of their past college professors and local colleges and universities, and they can easily draw from their own collegiate music experiences when providing guidance. Keeping a folder of undergraduate music brochures and making them easily available to your students is a good starting point. In addition, many of the more active college music departments provide free “music major day” experiences to high school students who are looking to explore potential fits and would be more than happy to accommodate your students with other types of visits.

As your students get more serious about the pursuit of a degree in music, they should take the time to build specific criteria in search of a college that fits their personal approach to life. They should look for professors who are active as musicians, educators, or researchers. They should explore each curriculum to make sure that it offers what they’re looking for, and evaluate the quality of the ensembles and students being produced by the college or university. Most colleges keep statistics about their students’ post-graduate careers, and this information can be a great barometer for potential future success. Finally, encourage your students to investigate potential scholarship opportunities and evaluate the total cost of education at each school they’re interested in early on, as this has a huge impact on the overall decision-making process. (To find out more about paying for music college, they may wish to read “Finding the Funding” in this month’s student edition of *In Tune*.)

Remember, every experience that your students have while researching or visiting potential music programs will be unique, and it will be up to them to figure out what opportunity will best suit them. As their music teacher, you have had a profound effect on your students, perhaps without even knowing it. Your input and investment in their further education is simply another way of preserving our love of music for all the musicians of tomorrow. 🎵



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