

Preparing for an All-State Audition: Outline for success

By Dr. Michael Varner

When preparing for an audition many players become frustrated by making some basic errors that could easily be avoided. Here are some suggestions and thoughts to consider as you prepare for the audition.

First and foremost, you should definitely contact a private teacher to help you in your preparation. Throughout your preparation, really focus on making your practice relaxed and enjoyable – keeping the musicality foremost in your mind!

Overall Practice suggestions

1. Study with a reputable instructor. If one is not available through your school, contact the percussion instructor of local colleges to see if there might be available teachers who would be willing to work with you.
2. Set a regular rehearsal time and establish a learning goal for each rehearsal.
3. Practice systematically making sure all notes and rhythms are accurate. Focus on details.
4. Listen carefully to the sounds you are making to develop the most efficient stroke and best sound quality. Record yourself often!
5. Keep details of sticking, beating areas, roll base and phrasing consistent by notating them clearly in your music.
6. Use a metronome. Perfect the piece at slow tempo and increase methodically.
7. Avoid repeatedly playing through the piece. After each run-through, take time to do an honest self-analysis of the positives and the weakness' in your performance.
8. Listen and analyze recordings of the piece. If it is a transcription, listen to the original instrument performing it.
9. Make sure the dynamics and phrasing are accurate from the first day of rehearsal.
10. Stay very focused during your rehearsal avoiding any distractions.
11. Maintain a consistent standard of excellence between your daily practice and your performance.

Timeline and rehearsal strategy

Three months before:

1. Acquire the music and any study guides prepared by the contest
2. Get an overall idea of the piece by playing through it slowly
3. Be patient: don't play the piece while repeatedly making mistakes
4. Go over the rules and instructions. Make sure your entry form and fee are turned in and accepted
5. Check the contest website for "errata" in the piece you are performing
6. Research online to find out information about the piece

7. Begin systematic rehearsal of the pieces with a qualified teacher. With your instructors, help honestly identify your technical challenges and set an efficient plan to improve them
8. Focus on basic techniques of stroke and rebound listening carefully to the sound you are producing
9. Decide on the best sticking, roll base, phrasing, and write them in
10. Practice daily using a metronome. Start at a very slow tempo and work individual phrases. Repeat individual phrases over and over to develop consistent interpretation
11. Make a practice record keeping track of the tempo you are currently using and other details of your rehearsal. Advance the tempo in small increments, making sure that your note accuracy is perfect before advancing to the next tempo
12. Memorize the piece, focus on individual phrases first, building into larger segments
13. Use a mirror to check hand positions, stroke, technique, mallet height

Two months before:

1. Listen to recordings of others performing the piece (if it was written for another instrument (i.e. violin, check recordings of that also). Compare their interpretation to yours adjusting as necessary
2. Study stylistic interpretations of other works from the time period
3. Even though the work is memorized return to the page and make sure you are playing all the details as marked. Often memory “slips” such as wrong dynamics, wrong rhythms, and wrong notes can creep in.
4. While continuing to perfect individual phrases, start to incorporate them into larger segments.
5. At least once per rehearsal perform the piece straight through without stopping
6. Attend any local clinics on the preparation of the music

One month before:

1. Decide whether you will use the contest instrument or your own
2. Find out about the performance site and choose sticks appropriate to the site
3. Have your piece prepared to final tempo with all nuances, dynamics, ornaments in place
4. Video tape yourself performing and carefully analyze it
5. Contact local professionals such as college instructors, recognized high school directors, and orchestral professionals. Set up lessons with them to get their valuable input
6. Devote time to playing the piece straight through three or four times consecutively to develop stamina both mentally and physically

7. While still reviewing the piece with a metronome focus on making the piece as musical as possible. Metronomic work develops good rhythmic consistency but you want the performance to be flowing and artistic

Two weeks before:

1. Continue your regular practice routine, but devote more time to “performance” of the entire work.
2. Begin daily mental run-throughs of the piece visualizing the actual audition

One week before:

1. Perform in front of as many people as possible
2. Perform the work “cold” with little or no warmup to check consistency

Night before the performance:

1. Have what you will wear chosen and set out. Dress appropriately for a performance
2. Have your mallets and instruments cleaned up and ready to go
3. “Visualize” what the performance will be like, remembering positive past experiences, and anticipating the performance
4. get a good nights rest!

Day of the performance:

1. Arrive early and report in to the contest organizers
2. Unload equipment and find a warm-up spot that is secluded if possible away from the other performers
3. Focus yourself. Don’t chat with friends, don’t listen to the interpretation of other performers
4. Under no circumstances change any of your interpretations at this point!
5. Use your daily rehearsal strategy to slowly warm up. Do not warm up longer than usual
6. Use your metronome to review your target tempo. “Nerves” can make you perform faster than planned
7. Don’t endlessly repeat the piece
8. Block out all distractions and ‘visualize” how positive your performance will be: enjoy the moment you’ve worked so hard for
9. Before the performance do about a minutes worth of simple physical exercises. You want your body energized and your mind relaxed
10. Be at the performance room at least 5 minutes before your assigned time
11. Before performing look around the room to “get comfortable.” Think positive!
12. Pause and take a few deep breaths mentally “playing” the first phrase before you make a sound
13. Afterward honestly focus on what could have been improved upon, while also focusing on the positives of the performance. Avoid berating yourself and always find a positive.

Daily rehearsal schedule (assuming one hour on the piece)

Before beginning identify the goals for the rehearsal such as tempo goals, learning Goals and write them down in your practice diary. Use appropriate stretching exercises to make sure muscles are focused and ready. Turn off you cell phone and make any necessary preparations so you are not disturbed for the next hour. Prepare to focus clearly on the music

- 10 minutes: Warmup focusing on general basics and relaxed hand movement
- 30 minutes: Introduce new sections or phrases. Establish a starting metronome tempo that allows perfect accuracy. Work on memorizing the section
- 10 minutes Practice and review previously learned sections or phrases, advancing the tempo in small increments appropriate to the performance date
- 10 minutes Practice “performing.” Play the piece straight through as much as possible at least 4 times. Record yourself and take time to evaluate the positives and the negatives of the performances. Perform as often as possible for other people so they can offer positive criticism and so that you get used to the anxiety performing in public can sometimes cause.

Before leaving: review what you wrote in your practice diary to evaluate whether you achieved your goals. Make detailed notes about the tempi you are using and write down suggested goals for your next rehearsal.

By utilizing some of these suggestions your preparation will be much more relaxing and enjoyable. Practice should be a rewarding and agreeable experience. Remember the ultimate purpose of participating in such an event is to develop your technique and musicality, not to win trophies or medals! Good luck!