

Preparing for All-State String Auditions

Suggestions by John Thomson, Associate Professor, violin/viola, USD

My advice is, never do tomorrow what you can do today. Procrastination is the thief of time. Collar him!

Mr. Micawber in *David Copperfield*, by Charles Dickens

Begin preparation ASAP!

When we prepare for an audition like All-State Orchestra, Mr. Micawber's advice is very pertinent. The music is generally announced on the South Dakota High School Activities Association web page (<http://www.sdhsaa.com>) in the spring. Yet many people do not begin to prepare for the October auditions until returning to school in the fall.

As soon as the music is available, try to track it down. It is also a good idea to get a fine recording of the pieces – this can be inspiring and can help speed up becoming familiar with the repertoire. Your teacher will probably be able to help you with this.

The amount and difficulty of the music may at first seem overwhelming. It can be a lot more comfortable to put off practicing it, than trying to get through this mountainous stack of notes. While it is important to begin immediately, realistic goals should be set. There is nothing wrong with playing through the entire audition music for fun, but don't expect it to sound good right away!

Set yourself goals

Set yourself challenging but sensible goals. Put a time period on your plan for achieving these goals. For instance, you might give yourself one week to learn one page or a difficult section from each of the orchestra pieces. The first day may be rough (and maybe the second also!), but by the middle of the week, you will probably see some progress. Difficult sections progress well if you practice small parts of them repeatedly over and over. The important thing to remember is that you must do this practice every day. As Suzuki said, "You need not practice every day – only on the days you eat." Each day we build on the progress of the previous day. Just as an athlete has to work out every day to build (and maintain) muscle-tone and strength, so must we "work out" daily to hone our skills. Imagine – doing 50 push-ups on one day will do nothing for you (except perhaps give you some sore muscles!) whereas doing 50 push-ups every day for six months will bring increased strength and some great pectoral muscles. Every student will have different strengths, so it will take some longer than others to reach goals – the time period you set yourself to achieve the goals should be one that suits you and your personal strengths/weaknesses. Do your very best to meet your goals, but accept that some things are difficult and take more time than others. I remember the violinist Ruggiero Ricci saying to me, "Young man. The violin certainly will teach you

patience!" Your teacher can help planning realistic goals and a time frame for achieving them.

Make a similar plan with the Bach solo, étude, and scale. Start learning them immediately, but understand it may take some time to perfect them. If you have an opportunity to perform the Bach in public, use this performance as a chance to work the solo up as perfectly as possible. Churches often are often happy to have Bach played in services. Rest homes also provide an audience that is happy to have some young people drop by and share some time and music with them. The music of Bach can often also be used for other competitions, auditions, and contests. As with the orchestra repertoire, set goals – time periods by which you hope to have sections of your Bach and the étude learned.

Be creative with your scale!

Work hard on your scale. ALL the great performers seem to agree on the benefits of practicing scales. Work on the "three Ts" so important for string players – tune (intonation), tone, & time. When you have the scale well-learned at the performance speed, have some fun practicing it at different speeds, with different bow strokes, and using different rhythms. Violinists can get plenty of ideas for this by using the scale book by Ivan Galamian and Frederick Newman, **Contemporary Violin Technique**.

Play musically from the beginning

Remember that the judge who hears you in October is looking not only for right notes, but also for exciting musical performances. Dynamics should be practised as soon as possible rather than added later. Try to make the music sound meaningful. Even études can sound exciting – in fact, many were performed in recitals in bygone eras. The great violinists Jascha Heifetz, Mischa Elman, Carl Flesch, Oskar Shumsky, and Steven Staryk, to name a few even recorded études. Playing your étude musically not only gives you a better chance at having the judge remember you favorably, but it is also more fun for you. A good point to remember, especially for the orchestra repertoire, is whenever possible to practice with the correct bow stroke, and in the correct part of the bow, even when practicing under speed. Obviously, in the beginning we need to practice fast sections much slower than the final tempo (and for intonation we should do some slow practice every day.) When practicing under tempo, try to keep the bowing style as close as possible to what it should be at the final tempo. This will mean you have not practised any incorrect bowing habits that need to be unlearned and corrected.

Remember – the most important person to compete against is you!

What does that mean? Well – we all want to succeed in our auditions. That means getting into All-State, or perhaps even making a certain chair. It can be devastating not to reach your target. Remember the fable about a man who was told he had treasure buried on his farm? He went out and dug two feet deep everywhere – no treasure. He went back and dug five feet deep everywhere – still no treasure. So in disgust, he gave up and planted his crops. Next year his harvest was ten times better than his neighbors because of his work tilling his soil. Suddenly he realized what the treasure was. His hard work had yielded riches after all. While it is good to get into the orchestra, the practice you do on All-State music, and the improvement you make on your instrument are worth more than anything else. Keep a view of the big picture. If you did not make it this year, the improvement you have made is significant, and makes succeeding next time more likely. As Galamian said, “The day after you fail at an audition, you are no worse a player than the day before it.” (He would add that the day after you succeed you are no better than the day before! Either way, we must keep on working steadily.) Compete against yourself daily, and try to surpass what you believe you are capable of!

John Thomson has taught violin and viola at the University of South Dakota since 1994. During this time, he has prepared numerous students for All-State and conducted the SD Honors Orchestra.

In order to help students prepare for All-State, the Rawlins Piano Trio of the University of South Dakota will be available to visit school programs over the summer, and to perform concerts for the community. For information, please contact Dr. John Thomson at (605)677-5725, email: jathomso@usd.edu