



Playing the system

Orchestral auditions throw up a number of significant challenges and can vary greatly from ensemble to ensemble. **Gavin Dixon** reports from a new residential programme in the UK, which attempts to address some of the issues

There's more to orchestral auditions than learning some excerpts and one movement of a Mozart concerto. The format is standard, and the repertoire familiar, but jury expectations are notoriously difficult to predict.

Preparation is key, which is why a new event was launched in August of this year to help string players negotiate these difficult tests of musicianship. Audition Perform was a six-day residential course, held at the University of Chichester, UK covering every aspect of the process, from CVs to trial periods, and with some useful pointers, too, for exam and competition preparation.

The scheme was the brainchild of Nicole Wilson, a former first violin in the London Symphony Orchestra and section leader with English National Opera, and of Gary Levinson, senior principal associate concertmaster of the Dallas Symphony. 'I had been approached by lots of people who wanted help with

auditions,' explained Wilson, 'people who had practised really hard, done all the right things, and yet when it came to the audition, they just couldn't get through. Having sat on many job audition panels, I've seen the same mistakes come up time and again. Auditioning is a skill; there are many aspects that are really quite simple but crucial.'

Wilson and Levinson devised a friendly and inclusive format for the course. 'We wanted to have open discussions about what jury panels are looking for,' said Wilson, 'not just the music, but also how a candidate is as a player and as a person. All the lessons here were open, because we wanted everybody else to be able to draw on the teachers' advice. If you are able to watch somebody else, of a similar level to you and in the same repertoire, it is really helpful, to have those conversations in a non-competitive environment.'

ALL PHOTOS STEVE BINGHAM

All of the students in this first year were enrolled in or had recently completed conservatoire degrees, and the course was designed to build on their professional training. ‘Conservatoires deal with audition preparation, but they have so much to fit in to their schedules,’ said Wilson. ‘So it was great to work like this intensively, concentrating on nothing but job auditions and competition preparation.’

As well as Levinson, the faculty included Robert deMaine, principal cello of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Juan-Miguel Hernandez, professor of viola at the Royal Academy of Music, and Clio Gould, former leader of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. A range of audition situations were covered, with sessions on concertmaster and lead chair auditions and on chamber music auditions. There were also seminars on related performance issues: one from Katherine Butler of London Hand Therapy on avoiding injury, and another from Mike Cunningham on performance psychology.

Cunningham gave useful advice on preparing for auditions. He suggested that, rather than trying to second-guess what a jury is looking for, it is much more constructive to prepare a performance that is true to your own musical personality. Confidence is an important factor, and, as Cunningham pointed out, we tend to take our existing abilities for granted when trying to improve. He advocates an approach that looks to the bigger picture – the flow of the music should always be more important than the quest for perfection or the elimination of every minor mistake.

A common theme in the seminars was the need to show your enthusiasm for orchestral playing. As Gould said, ‘You don’t need to say goodbye to the other sides of your playing – solo work, chamber music – but you do need to convince the panel that you are passionate about playing in the orchestra.’ That begins with your CV. A one-page CV is ideal, said deMaine, and should ideally include some references. More importantly, though, it should focus on your orchestral experience, so that whoever reads it immediately sees your focus on orchestral work.

What are audition panels looking for? Cunningham pointed out that different panel members will be looking for different things, so there is no point in trying to tailor your style. Wilson added, ‘Whoever the panel is, it is going to be a mixture of people, so trying to please just one person is never going to get you the job.’ But some trends are apparent in jury panels’ thinking. In the past, candidates might have been tested on their sightreading skills, but this is less of a priority today. Stylistic flexibility is a more important issue, and deMaine said, ‘I like to see someone who can shift their style on a dime.’

The issue of experience is more complex, but is not necessarily an obstacle for younger players. ‘You can often hear if someone is a fresh, raw talent, or if they are more seasoned,’ said Gould. ‘Sometimes it is great to have someone with relevant experience. If you are auditioning for a numbered or a principal job, it is good to find somebody who has done something similar.’ But that is not the end of the story, and Gould added, ‘It can work the other way as well. Sometimes orchestras are looking for >



An orchestral excerpts class with LA Philharmonic principal cello Robert deMaine



DeMaine steadies a student's posture

'IT IS EASY TO FEEL THAT THE JURY ARE THE ENEMY, BUT IT IS THE ABSOLUTE OPPOSITE. THEY WANT YOU TO DO WELL' – VIOLINIST CLIO GOULD



Clio Gould: 'Love your excerpts and make sure they are as well prepared as your concerto'

new talent; they are looking for the next rising star. So that can be a positive advantage. It just depends on the mood of the orchestra.'

Technique is important, of course, but it is also worth remembering that audition panels are usually looking for a style of playing as much as a level of technical competence. Gould recommended doing some research on the orchestra to get an idea of the sort of player they are looking for. Ruth Crouch, assistant leader of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra (SCO), made a guest appearance on one discussion panel. She said that the SCO would expect to see some knowledge of historically informed practice from applicants, which would be less of a priority for symphony orchestras.

It is also important to remember that juries are never overtly hostile. As Gould said, 'It is easy to feel that the jury are the enemy, but it is the absolute opposite. They want you to do well. They have a situation [a vacancy] that needs to be resolved; their hope is always that you can help them.'

One of the most important aspects of the audition process is mastering the orchestral excerpts. A recurring message was that the excerpts need to be well prepared. 'It is not an add-on,' said Gould. 'It is very much an integral part of the audition.' Sometimes, the music will come from the orchestra with fingering and bowing marks (this happens less often in America, where candidates are usually expected to source the parts themselves). So should you follow the markings scrupulously? The feeling of the panel was that you should use your best judgement and not feel bound to any pencilled-in markings. However, be ready for the jury to request fingering changes; they will be curious to see if you are adaptable.

'Love your excerpts,' said Gould, and make sure they are as well prepared as your concerto. Another tip from deMaine: know the context. If you have a cello excerpt, and it is accompanying a woodwind solo or an ensemble, know what those instruments are. The panel will be able to hear from your playing if you know the context, and they might even ask, so be prepared.

It might seem like a lot of work to learn excerpts, but it is excellent preparation for orchestral life. A lot of the music you will be expected to play in an orchestra is tough. 'I can't think of anything I've played that is as hard as playing a Mahler symphony,' shared Gould. So learning excerpts can give you a head start. 'When you get a job, that's only the beginning,' she continued. 'You will soon have to learn large amounts of music very fast. That is why learning excerpts is useful, because they are the most difficult bits. Learning them early gets them into your system, allowing you to grow with them.'

Fortunately, the repertoire that comes up at auditions is predictable. Gould explained that if the panel sets ten excerpts for a violin audition, they will usually choose to hear three on the day – most often the Mendelssohn Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the first page of Strauss's *Don Juan* and something quiet for contrast. Other popular choices are the outer movements of Prokofiev's 'Classical' Symphony, the Overture to Smetana's *The Bartered Bride* and the Finale of Mozart Symphony no.39.

Gould offered some advice on these: The Mendelssohn is all about delicacy, control and facility. So too the Prokofiev and >



Left to right A mock audition panel featuring deMaine, Levinson, Hernandez and RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra concertmaster Helena Wood

‘THE STRAUSS DON JUAN IS EXTREMELY VIRTUOSIC, GUTSY AND BOLD. MOST JURORS WANT TO HEAR YOU POWER THROUGH THIS, TO PLAY LIKE A SOLOIST. THERE IS NO NEED TO WORRY ABOUT BLENDING’ – CLIO GOULD

Mozart, but there are some specific challenges to both. Prokofiev gives a lot of articulation markings, so here panels are looking for attention to detail, as well as the facility to play the passage at the correct tempo. The Mozart 39th Symphony Finale is full of awkward string-crossings (‘note spaghetti’ according to Gould), so it is about playing these difficult passages with absolute precision. The Strauss *Don Juan* is completely different. The music here is extremely virtuosic, gutsy and bold. Most jurors want to hear you power through this, to play like a soloist. It is the one excerpt where there is no need to worry about blending.

DeMaine also pointed out that Richard Strauss makes regular appearances in viola and cello auditions as well – if you are going for a principal cello position, you will almost certainly play *Don Quixote*. So all string players need to master the harmonically wayward chromatic lines in the Strauss tone poems; they will come up time and again.



Hernandez coaches a viola student



A session on auditioning for a chamber music job

A concerto movement is usually a requirement, and in violin auditions the Mozart concertos are most often requested. ‘A Mozart concerto is fantastic for giving a clear precis of where the player is,’ said Gould. ‘There is nowhere to hide. A lot of their tendencies are immediately shown – good and bad – so it is a very efficient way to hear a complete player. Often, a player will choose a Romantic concerto as well. In these, it is nice to hear them play on their home turf, to relax and feel they are in their comfort zone.’

Sadly, the audition is not the end of the story. Having passed the audition process, a candidate will usually be engaged for a trial period with the orchestra, and this is seen as the real test of their suitability. Gould thinks that the culture needs to change around trials in UK orchestras. There is often a feeling from the orchestra that the pressure is now off, and that they can just rotate the trialists, sometimes up to ten players, almost indefinitely. This can be very difficult for trialists, who have to put life decisions – house moves and so on – on hold, without knowing when final decisions will be made.

Gould believes that mental preparation is key. ‘It can be quite mystifying,’ she said. ‘People don’t necessarily learn how they are progressing. It is all a bit smoke and mirrors.’ But her message was that it is the same for everybody. ‘You might feel in the dark, but you are not alone. It is not unique; it is a universal experience.’

So what of the future for Audition Perform? For this first course, Wilson was very grateful to the European String Teachers Association (ESTA) and its chief executive officer, Philip Aird, for hosting the event, which took place in parallel with the ESTA annual conference. Many string teachers at the conference took an interest, as they are often coaching students through the audition process, so there was constructive synergy here. For future events, Wilson envisages taking the conference to the students at their conservatoires or music colleges. ‘We have had interest from several universities,’ she said. ‘This would minimise the cost to the students, because this year it was a very big sacrifice for them, some coming from very far afield.’

But Wilson is keen to maintain the format, with open lessons and a low teacher-to-student ratio: ‘We want them to build up strong relationships, so that teachers and students can always speak frankly. We don’t want this to just be like any other music course or masterclass. We really want the teachers to take the students on a journey over the week they are with us.’ ●