

Some Ideas on Selecting a Music Program

The time has come--You've reached the ripe old age of 16 or 17 and it's time to answer that pesky question that someone asked you way back in Kindergarten: "What do *you* want to be when you grow up?" A rather daunting question (one that many of my friends in their thirties and forties still haven't answered!), but one that needs to be addressed before you shuffle off to college.

I'll go ahead and make the assumption, since you're reading this, that you might be considering pursuing a career in music. Congratulations! Being a musician is a wonderful thing. It is a pleasure to wake up in the morning when you can spend the whole day doing something that you LOVE to do. Having said that, it is important for you to realize that you are at a very important crossroad-- your decision of where to pursue your musical education will shape your life for the rest of your days. So, before we decide *where* we're going to go, we might want to think back to the Kindergarten question-- "What *do* I want to be when I grow up?"

Choosing a Degree Program

Most universities and conservatories offer several choices of degree programs for undergraduates. Typically, the two degrees that are most often pursued are the Bachelor of Music Education (B.M.E.) and the Bachelor of Music in Performance. Additionally, some schools will offer specialized programs in Music Therapy, Music Business, or Arts Technology. Another degree option that is less frequently pursued is the Bachelor of Arts in Music, which is essentially a liberal arts degree with a concentration in music. Which degree is right for you? Let's see if we can figure that out.

The Bachelor of Music Education is perhaps the most common undergraduate degree. It is, essentially, what it says it is: a program that will prepare you to teach music. After completing an Education degree from most schools, you will be certified to teach music K-12. (If you wish to teach music at the college level, you will need to pursue a Master's degree and then, most likely, a Doctorate degree.) While pursuing the B.M.E., students are required to complete a thorough course of study in music, to include courses in music theory, music history, keyboard skills, ear-training, instrumental techniques, conducting, and private study of the student's major instrument. Students in the B.M.E. program are also required to perform in large and small university ensembles. In addition to the music courses, students will likely be required to complete coursework relevant to basic principles of education and applications of teaching. The good news for education majors is that they are acquiring a very marketable degree and are almost guaranteed employment after graduating. Mom and Dad love this degree!

The Bachelor of Music in Performance is a degree for those students who wish to pursue a career performing on their major instrument. Acceptance into this program is usually contingent upon passing a highly scrutinized audition for the major professor. Students who are admitted to this degree program should be able to demonstrate not only a highly evolved development on their instrument, but a very strong commitment to their craft. Not unlike professional athletics,

the competition curve for performing jobs is incredibly steep. There are a very large number of highly qualified candidates competing for a very small number of full-time positions. Obviously, there are no guarantees for employment at the completion of this degree and many students will choose to continue their studies in graduate school.

There continues to be some pretty spirited discussion about whether or not students should enroll as performance or education majors if their ultimate goal is to be a performing musician. While some folks feel that the performance degree is “worthless” because it leaves one with a lack of “marketable” skills, others who may have no interest in teaching feel as though they’d be doing a potential disservice to future students by pursuing a “fall-back” career. Both points have their merit. While it is important to pursue one’s dreams with gusto, it is also important to envision a future that includes some sense of career security. It is worth noting at this time that many, if not most, leading orchestral musicians and university professors hold music education degrees. Choosing one program over another will have little or no bearing on the most important factors in your development -- your willingness to work and your desire to realize your potential.

Choosing a School

There are many factors to consider when learning about your potential home for the next four years. Below are some important considerations in selecting a school of music that will be a comfortable fit for you.

Applied Faculty

Who will teach you private lessons on your instrument? What is their background? Do they have substantial performance experience? What is their track record in placing students in teaching and playing positions? Is there any possibility that you might end up studying with a graduate assistant rather than the applied teacher? How is the strength of the other faculty within that area? If you stop to think about it, your applied teacher will be the one constant in your four years of college. You will have more one on one contact with this person than you will with any other faculty member. This person will likely be your biggest fan, your toughest critic and will likely be your musical mentor as your life continues. Consider this aspect of your decision carefully!

Ensembles

How strong are the school’s performing organizations? This question is important on several fronts: it will indicate the strength of the conductors, the strength of the students, and can be a good clue into the *esprit de corps* of the program. It is important that the ensembles are well balanced and that there are enough slots in the ensembles for all of the students. In this digital age, most schools will have compact discs of their performing organizations available for distribution to inquisitive prospects. Ask for these and draw your own conclusions.

Facilities

How are the physical facilities of the music department? Are there an adequate number of practice rooms? How are the performance halls? How are the

rehearsal halls? If you'll be living a distance from the music building, is there adequate storage space for your instrument? Will you be able to have the type of access to the building that you think that you will need? How is the music library? How are the library's holdings for your particular discipline? Is the technology up to speed? Most importantly, is this a place where you can see yourself comfortably spending a vast amount of time everyday?

Financial Considerations

How is the school set up for financial aid and scholarships? Do you need to fill out an extra application for scholarship consideration? What percentage of music students are receiving some form of financial assistance? If you have been offered a scholarship, what is the impact of this award on your bottom line cost of attending that school? Sometimes, even if you receive no scholarship assistance from one school, it may still be less expensive than attending a more expensive school that has made a huge scholarship award. Every school *wants* to offer you a scholarship. Don't become too despondent if your top choice does not come up with an offer. Check your ego at the door and take a good hard look at where you really want to be and whether or not it is financially feasible.

The Vibe

When you have narrowed down your list of schools to two or three be certain to visit those schools on a day when school is in session. Go to a class. Sit in with an ensemble. Take a lesson with the applied teacher. Talk to students and ask them questions. Is there a feeling of optimism? Pride? Apathy? Try to summarize the feeling that you get from being a part of the scene at that school for a day. Can you see an environment conducive to growth? Can you see an environment that is conducive to fun? Read the University newspaper. Drive around the town. While this is a decision that needs to be made based on logic, it is a decision that must also be driven by how you react to what you see and experience.

The Audition

A very important part of the application process for any school of music is the audition. Your audition may be held in front of a committee of faculty or perhaps with only the applied professor. It is very important for you to know that everyone in the room who is listening to you play is pulling for you. You are playing for a bunch of people who have experienced the sweaty palms, the dry mouth and the anxiety of the moment dozens of times. Relax. Breathe deeply. Now, play your best! Here are some things to consider in preparing to present your best product.

1. Before you go to your audition, play for as many people as possible. Play for your teacher, your friends, your parents, anyone who will listen! As far as audition prep goes, there is no substitution for live performance. This will help you to get a grip on your nerves and will make the process seem less intimidating. No one at your audition wants you to feel intimidated. (If you sense that someone there *does* want to intimidate you, you might want to reconsider if you really want to subject yourself to that for four years! Yikes!)
2. Try to arrive on campus a day before you have to play. Travel tends to

make people feel a little funky. Arriving a day ahead of time will allow you to find out where you're going and to get a good night of sleep before you perform. If you are an easy drive from your audition and arriving a day early seems like overkill, just allow plenty of time to get lost and to find parking.

3. Please don't assume that the higher, faster, louder mentality has a whole lot of appeal to your audition committee. They would rather hear a thoughtful, controlled performance of music that you can play well than to hear a shoddy performance of a piece that you think might knock their socks off. Plan your program accordingly. If a school has a prescribed audition program, don't stray from that literature. If there is not a specific list of requirements, it is usually a good idea to prepare two solos of contrasting style that will explicitly demonstrate both your technical and musical abilities. If you are unsure what to play, e-mail the teacher and propose a couple of options. They will point you in the right direction! It is always a good idea to know ahead of time whether or not you will be required to perform any scales. It is not a coincidence that the "luckiest" players are usually the most prepared!
4. Ask questions. If you are asked questions, answer them thoughtfully. There is more to your audition than what comes out of your instrument! The committee wants to learn about you and whether or not you'd be a good fit in the studio and in the department. Be prepared to talk about what you've done in school and what your plans are for the future.
5. Above all else, try to demonstrate that you love music and that you are serious about your pursuit of a musical education. The last thing the world needs is another wishy-washy music major! Enthusiasm turns teachers on and is infectious in the studio! Sell yourself!

Best of luck in your search!