

ENCOURAGING A CONSISTENT APPROACH TO AUDITIONS

Matthew Geiger

He began by putting his right foot at the center of the free throw line; this aligned his shooting hand with the rim. Then, he would wipe his hands dry on his socks. The referee would hand him the ball, and if he could not see the logo, he would spin the ball around until he could. Then -- as if all in one motion -- he would dribble three times, take a deep breath, and shoot. Kyle Macy's free throw routine became iconic, and led him to the current record for the highest free throw percentage in Kentucky Basketball history. Much like in basketball, where the shooter has to block out the noise of the crowd and not succumb to the pressure of the big shot, a musical performer must also find ways to overcome nerves and stress to play his or her best. All of the preparation in the practice room can fade away if nerves and stage fright get in the way. There are tons of auditions that your students will have to go through as they venture through their musical journeys, from chair placement and drumline to all-state and college auditions. From an early age, students can create a consistent approach that will lead to success throughout their lives. This leads us to the question, what are some things that you can teach your students so that they can prepare their very own percussion pre-shot routine?

The Preparation

Let me first begin by detailing my own pre-shot routine as a demonstration. The first thing I do, even before entering an audition room, is ensure that I have all my mallets, sticks, towels and necessary instruments ready to bring into the room. As the doors open, I go in and set up every instrument in the room to the proper location and correct height if possible. The height and angle of a snare drum stand, for example, is easy to adjust, and failure to prepare the drum can result in a very poor performance, regardless of practice and planning. My mallets and sticks are placed on black towels and music stands near the instruments so they are easily exchanged. Once the room is completely setup, I go to the first instrument. If I am given the opportunity to choose an instrument to start, instead of saying it does not matter, I will try to take control of the pace of the audition by choosing the instrument with which I feel most comfortable for that particular audition. For snare drum as an example, I will then turn the snares on and place the sticks in my hands the same

way every time, with the *Innovative Percussion* logo covered by my thumb. With my hands relaxed to my side, I will begin to get the tempo of the first piece in my head -- usually through a favorite 90's alternative rock song or Rush tune -- then I will use that tempo to sing the first few bars in my head. Finally, I bring my sticks up, take a deep breath in and out, relax my body, and count myself in. With the last beat, I cue myself with a breath and natural prep to start. All of this preparation can be divided into three main categories:

- The Setup
- The Stress
- The Start

Take care of business before focusing on the performance. This logistical tip alludes to the setup of the room, the height of the instruments, and the placement of the mallets, sticks and music. If your students make sure the room is set up the way they planned, then the only thing they need to do when they enter performance mode is perform. This also includes having things ready outside of the audition room. If the student is bringing the school's tambourine or snare drum, be certain that the instruments are fully prepared and ready to be played. These small, seemingly insignificant steps are all major factors in alleviating some of the stress of an audition.

Stress is a difficult aspect of all auditions, but students can learn to work with their nerves and the pressure. In terms of the preparation, the stress can hit its highest right before the first note. This is why a consistent approach to the first note helps control and counter some nervousness. The use of popular music or songs the student enjoys can be great ways to find tempos, as well as relax the student into a comfortable and familiar place. For example, *Tom Sawyer* is around 88 bpm, which provides me that specific tempo as well as a smile in remembrance of a great band. Also, it is important for the student to wait to start until he or she is ready. Sometimes nerves and sweat kick in while holding the sticks before beginning, and the student will force the first notes without thinking just to get it over with. This creates a perpetual sense of trying to regain composure, instead of a much-more-desired composed and prepared start that could happen with just a few deep breaths and wiping the sweat off the percussionist's hands.

With the mental preparation complete, all that the student must plan and practice is how to begin the piece. Here it might be useful to sing the first few bars of the piece, or the most rhythmically active section. By ensuring the tempo is comfortable for the beginning or the densest phrases, the entire piece can start positively. Adrenaline can wreak havoc on an audition day, and that can make the performer start much faster than anticipated. Staying relaxed and establishing the pulse before beginning is a way to fight that adrenaline. Once the tempo is established and the pulse is felt throughout the body,

students should take a breath to cue themselves to begin the solo, just as they would in a large ensemble with a conductor. Percussionists have a unique opportunity to mirror a conducting baton, especially with snare drum sticks. The prep of a baton can be demonstrated and imitated by your percussion students to practice breathing before they play -- a crucial element to performance yet often overlooked for percussionists.

The combination of these three challenges, the setup, the stress and the start, allows an auditionee to practice the moments leading up to the performance. With consistent practice, the student will become more comfortable and therefore far more successful with the audition process. Kyle Macy's setup placed his body in the exact location he needed and also confirmed the ball was rotated properly, he dried his hands on his socks to help calm his nerves, and then before starting the shot, he always dribbled three times and took a deep breath. Swish.

The Audition Environment

In college basketball -- like most athletics -- the home team has a distinct advantage. As the crowd roars, the away team feels disparaged and the home squad encouraged. So which environment should your students expect in their auditions? For anyone who has ever taken an audition, he or she knows the isolation inherent in playing alone. Auditionees often assume the role of the visitors, walking into a crowd against them, when in reality everyone wants each student to succeed. As a director, it is important to instill this perspective to give your students courage in an audition environment. There are a few other environmental factors that your students can control to experience a positive audition day:

- Be on time
- Understand the schedule and structure of the audition
- Concentrate on success

The first two points seem to go hand in hand. It is very important for students to understand the expectations of each audition, both in the schedules they receive as well as the material to be prepared. Emphasizing punctuality allows the student to begin the audition process on the right foot. This will allow for a much calmer and more enjoyable experience for the students. However, they should be aware that if they are running behind schedule, they should avoid letting delays affect the mental preparations. They should also be prepared for additional unexpected time. Often auditions become delayed and students are given extra time that they had not planned. Teach students skills to maintain mental focus and physical preparedness. Two quick examples would be: when given an extra ten minutes before an all-state audition, one could walk through the setup period once more to practice the feeling of walking into a room of fans and

supporters, and when given time before an audition or performance in colder weather, it is important for percussionists to continue to move their fingers and wrists for circulation as well as to remain relaxed and warmed-up.

The great game of golf can be used to illustrate the third point above. Harbour Town Golf Links in South Carolina is home to the scenic and iconic lighthouse. Hole 18 on the golf course features an excessively long par 4 with trees to the right, ocean to the left, and the lighthouse stretching beyond the green. As you scan from the tee box, you see these hazards and the beautiful green fairway in front of you. Your thoughts begin as you plan the drive, "Go straight, don't go in the water, don't go in the water, don't go in the water". You watch as your brand new Titleist Pro V1 hooks left and proceeds to splash into the water. If your students focus on the myriad of possibilities that could go wrong when they start the audition, inevitably one of those will come true. Instead, teach them to think about all the things that will go well when they enter the room. To return to the original allegory, Kyle Macy's free-throw routine always incorporated drying his hands on his socks, which had a far greater purpose than just getting rid of the sweat. This allowed him to focus despite the thousands of distractions and to get into his own world, the world where he could fixate on the shot going through the basket.

The Pressure

The third and final portion of the audition preparation deals in helping students handle the pressure and nerves in the audition. There have been several things mentioned previously that can help diminish anxiety, but here is a final bit of advice for your students as they get closer to an audition day.

Pressure and stress are often augmented when a student is in an unfamiliar situation or is underprepared. The latter rests mainly on the student's practice time and repertoire, yet dealing with an unfamiliar situation can be rehearsed and repeated. The best way to practice handling an unfamiliar situation is to try to get the student to recreate the event while practicing. Students should pretend they are performing a live audition in front of an audience, doing full run-throughs including changing instruments. With percussion auditions, most include two or more instruments and sometimes an instrument change within the music. Have your students practice switching instruments within the musical phrase so that the tempo, pulse and feel never get lost while moving and changing mallets. Another way students can prepare is to practice these full run-throughs in front of other students or directors. The more often students can perform under pressure -- even friendly pressure -- the quicker they will become acclimated to audition environments and improve their abilities to control nerves to perform with confidence.

Consistency is key. All the musical preparation in the world can go awry if students are not prepared for the actual day of the audition. It is important to note that preparing mentally and logistically for the audition day will get the student calmly and confidently to

the instruments, but the musical preparation will take it from there. Even with a refined pre-shot routine, Kyle Macy would never have broken and held the free throw percentage record without endless hours in the gym. With proper practice, percussionists can take control of their auditions and come out with a confident, comfortable, enjoyable, and successful performance. •

Dedicated to a versatile musical approach, Matthew Geiger hopes to continue to champion both new and canonic works through continued study, performance, teaching, and research. His recent performances have focused on solo vibraphone, commissioning new vibraphone works, performing as a soloist in Inner Mongolia, performing alongside Yousif Sheronick at PASIC as well as being named the winner of the 2013 PASIC Solo Vibraphone Competition. He has recorded for the Naxos label, including performing as percussionist and timpanist on the Grammy nominated recording of Darius Milhaud's "L'Orestie". Currently, Matthew is a visiting instructor of jazz and percussion at Morehead State University while also pursuing a Doctorate in percussion performance at the University of Kentucky. He received his Master's degree in percussion performance at the University of Michigan. He proudly endorses Innovative Percussion, Inc.