

Jess Wyatt gives her opinion on audition pieces and preparation

It is always difficult to know what to play in an audition. Obviously one wants to showcase one's strengths, but often the prescribed pieces are either limiting technically or musically, or (in the case of the excerpts) so challenging that you wish you had never signed up in the first place! One thing is certain: you must choose pieces that you are extra comfortable with, as the atmosphere of an audition can be one of the most high-pressure and daunting experiences of your musical career.

Most of the time, you will not have that much choice in what to play. Most orchestral auditions will ask you to play the first movement of a classical concerto, which for violists leaves us with the grand total of two: either Stamitz D Major or Hoffmeister D Major, neither of which is the most interesting of concertos, and they sound oddly similar at key points (almost as if the composers were looking over each other's shoulders!) You will also have to play orchestral excerpts, which are selected by the group and sent over to you a few weeks before the audition. Finally, you may be allowed to choose one piece for yourself – and often players will choose either the first movement of the Walton Concerto (or Bartok if they are feeling brave) or some unaccompanied Bach.

With the own choice piece, don't choose a horrendously difficult piece that you don't know well just to impress the panel. They will be much more impressed with a less challenging piece played well, than a messy performance of a piece that is too ambitious. Also, don't choose something that is difficult to put together with piano, as you will only have five minutes with the pianist before the audition.

With orchestral excerpts, there are definitely things to do before the audition to maximise your chances of performing well. You must listen to the orchestral pieces and find the place that the excerpt is taken from, preferably a few different recordings (this is very easy with Youtube and Spotify) so that you can hear the context and tempo of the excerpt and any specific details like articulation, phrasing etc. Be exacting in your practice about every detail of the music including exaggerating dynamics as much as possible. Be prepared to play the excerpt at the correct tempo in the audition but also to respond to any tempo or articulation suggestions from the panel – it doesn't mean you are playing it wrong, they just want to see how you respond to instructions.

Choosing unaccompanied Bach for an audition is a tricky subject – I have been advised by a teacher not to do so as there are so many different interpretations that there will be someone who disagrees with yours. However, it is a perfectly valid choice for an audition and as long as you can justify your interpretation and are completely happy with your performance, then of course play some Bach. If your performance is musical, stylish and you choose a piece which is technically demanding (for example, a Prelude from the Cello Suites) then this is just as good a choice as a concerto movement.

Jess Wyatt

22 April 2016