

PREPARING TO MAJOR IN MUSIC IN COLLEGE

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This article is the result of a clinic given at a recent Iowa Band Masters' Association Convention, by a number of Iowa members of the National Association of College Wind and Percussion Instructors, of which I am currently serving as Iowa chair. It speaks from many years of accumulated experience in receiving freshmen in various stages of preparation. It is written directly to prospective music majors—if you like its contents, feel free to give a copy of the material directly to your high school students, or to band directors. If it helps even one student get a head start on their preparation, it will have been worth the effort for us.

A quick word to new or prospective directors: be sure that each of your students is given a chance to express their interest in music as a career. I have talked to a number of directors who have been surprised that one of their students had contacted a university about majoring in music, but for some reason had not talked to their high school director. They may not be your best performers. Prospective majors should also be aware of the great variety of careers in music in addition to teaching. Let your ensemble know that if anyone is interested in exploring careers in music, you will counsel them.

IF YOU'RE THINKING OF MAJORING IN MUSIC

A. Researching Prospective Schools

1. Consider your long range goals. Which school will best prepare you to achieve them? Which has the best teachers for your goals? The best students for you to play with in ensembles? The best chance to play as an undergraduate? The most challenging opportunities? The most appropriate degree programs, equipment, facilities? The most successful placement of graduates in jobs and graduate schools? Examine the basis on which you'd choose a school to see how each college would serve your career.

2. Remember, however, that you don't have to make final career decisions at this time. *All* freshman music majors at each school study pretty much exactly the same basic music courses.

3. Attend Honor Bands and Summer Music Camps at the schools you are considering, to get acquainted.

4. Arrange to have a lesson with the teacher of your instrument at each school, to help you evaluate which teacher would help you most. Prepare a list of questions, and ask them. The teachers are there for you.

5. Attend classes and ensemble rehearsals at each school. Attend recitals of majors on your instrument, as well as classes, recitals or masterclasses conducted by the teacher of your instrument.

6. Talk with students majoring in music at each school; talk especially with those majoring in your instrument. The major teacher can furnish you a list of student telephone numbers. Call them! These are the people who can tell you what life is really like as a music major at that college, from a student's viewpoint. Talk with your

band director. He or she knows a lot more than you think they do!

B. Getting Your Performance Skills in Shape

1. Get to an expert on your instrument immediately for a checkup on the basics—this means honest evaluation of mouthpiece placement and embouchure, breath control, posture, finger dexterity, range flexibility, rhythm, intonation, etc. These are far more important than trying to play the hardest music you can find “higher, louder and faster.”

2. Arrange to take regular lessons immediately with the best teacher on your instrument who is available to you. If there are none, find the best musician. You might call a university instructor for advice as to who may be available in your area.

3. Do every competition you can—solo, All-State, etc. Do it, however, for the chance to test yourself musically. Remember that when you get to college, neither your instructor nor anyone else may know, *and they won't care*, if you made All-state, etc. What matters is only if you play well, work hard, and show a desire to be a good musician.

4. Work on your sight-reading and low register—terribly neglected by high school students.

C. The Application Procedure

1. First of all, check *early* to be sure that the courses you are taking make you eligible for your choice of school. See your guidance counselor about this. And get good grades—you'll need them to get in.

2. Apply *early* to each school you are considering—at least by January of your senior year, preferably before Christmas. Make sure that band directors, guidance counselors, etc., get your forms in on time.

3. Be organized—find out application and audition dates and requirements for each school. Keep information about each school in a separate folder. Read and follow application and audition materials carefully, and don't lose them. Follow directions and deadlines *exactly*.

D. Entrance and Scholarship Auditions

1. Try if at all possible to do your audition on one of the days scheduled for auditions. Your scholarship chances will be much better. Check to be sure that you're doing qualified audition material.

2. Get lessons on your audition material. You're potentially dealing with a lot of money here, it's probably the most important audition you will ever take until professional or graduate school auditions.

3. “Higher, louder and faster” doesn't count nearly as much as tone and musicality.

4. Dress well and have your instrument in tip-top shape.

5. Get a good night's sleep before the auditions. Do whatever helps you feel calm and alert. Believe in yourself. Smile, be friendly, act intelligently.

E. Theory and Ear Training Skills

This area, *not* your instrument, is what will make or break you as a freshman music major. We can't emphasize enough that once you're in school, theory and above all *ear training* will be your greatest challenge. Develop a mature attitude about this, and start polishing your skills now.

1. Theory

- a. Get used to writing music on paper, and learn both bass and treble clefs.
- b. Learn your intervals, up and down. This is the biggest single obstacle to getting through undergraduate theory. Master the following exercise, on every pitch: Say out loud, as a drill: "G# (et. al): half step up—G#-A, half step down—G#-G natural (use most common enharmonic equivalents), whole step up—G#-A#, whole step down—G#-F#, minor 3rd up—G#-B, minor 3rd down—G#-F," etc., up through major sevenths.
- c. Learn to write the major and harmonic and melodic minor scales, and major and minor arpeggios.
- d. Learn to spell the four qualities of triads.

2. Aural (ear) training

- a. Begin to learn to recognize and sing intervals, both up and down, notes played separately and together. Make use of melodies associated with different intervals (e.g., "Here Come The Bride" for a perfect 4th).

3. Start to learn to use your voice—you can't be a good director or teach well without some vocal skills.

4. Sight-Singing. Realize that you will use sight-singing all your life, in lessons and on the podium. Each college does some things differently in terms of "naming" the notes (or "*solfége*"). Find out what your college does, and ask your director to help get you started in that system.

Some schools use a "fixed *do*, most use a movable *do*. Some may use different methods of rhythmic *solfége*.

5. Keyboard. The more keyboard skills you have, the better off you'll be in every area of music. Get started, from wherever you are.

Studying Your Instrument

1. Get lists of major study materials, and start getting familiar with them. All-State material is only a start. Most specialists have repertoire lists or courses of study.

2. Begin collecting music for your instrument. It's a lifetime task, and no band director is going to loan you everything anymore.

3. Begin to develop a characteristic mainstream tone quality.

4. This necessitates listening to live performances and good recordings—lots of them. Start your own recording collection. Find out what are the ten or twelve major solo pieces for your instrument, and get to know them well, even if you can't play them yet.

5. Write to your prospective teacher for a recommended recording list for your instruments.

6. Break away from AM radio and start exploring your area's great classical FM stations.

7. Don't be worried about starting from where you are, esp. if you have been

playing a "subsidiary" instrument such as bass clarinet. Hard work will catch up.

8. When you get to college, you will probably begin by sitting in lower chairs in ensembles, even though you have been 1st chair in high school. Manage your ego, learn from those above you, and use this as an opportunity to work on your low register. Make and keep friends with your fellow players—they may be your professional colleagues later in life.

9. Realize that no teacher is going to give you everything—You are in charge of your own education! A major freshman problem is bad practice room habits. Organize your time and efforts.

G. The Music Library

1. Many of your musical problems can be solved at the library, but most freshmen are intimidated. Learn to use the general and specific music references for your studies, and learn how to get more information and to ask for help—librarians are your friends.

H. General

1. The world's masterpieces of music are generally not able to be played in high school bands. Get to know our greatest literature. Best advice—get a good book on music appreciation, preferably with recordings—and enjoy it during the summer.

2. When in doubt, talk to somebody. Any teacher will be glad to help you. Don't be afraid to ask questions, even ones you think may be thought stupid or elementary. They're not. We want you to succeed!

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Gail Warnaar

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