



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG
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AIMING FOR ORCHESTRAL CAREER
From the Perspective of a Viola Player

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Degree Project, Master of Fine Arts in Music,
Symphonic Orchestra Performance
Spring Semester 2013

Degree Project, 30 higher education credits
Master of Fine Arts in Music, Symphonic Orchestra Performance
Academy of Music and Drama, University of Gothenburg
Spring Semester 2013

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Title: Aiming for Orchestral Career. From the Perspective of a Viola Player

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ABSTRACT

This thesis describes how auditions to symphony orchestras are organized, based on the auditioning experiences of the writer and Richard Davis's book *Becoming an Orchestral Musician – A Guide for Aspiring Professionals*. It also contains a diary about the writer's preparation for an audition.

The thesis discusses how to work in an orchestra, in order to help the reader to pass a trial engagement after winning an audition. A few of the most important factors of orchestral playing are being illustrated.

The conclusions emphasize gathering information and experience of auditions and practising the audition pieces well, thus building self-confidence to the level required to win an audition.

Key words:

viola, auditions, orchestra, practicing, trial

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1. Introduction

As I am a violist finishing my studies and starting to apply for jobs, I want to look into the subject of auditioning. I want to figure out what it takes to play a successful audition. I also want to find out what the professional musicians, who sit in the juries, think of auditions. My most important personal task is to recognize my own attitudes towards the subject and become aware of the possible useless fixations I might have about it. Finally I want to learn what the best way to prepare for an audition is.

For this purpose I have read a book Richard Davis: *Becoming an Orchestral Musician*, London: Giles de la Mare, 2004. I want to mirror the author's thoughts of auditions in order to figure out how I think and feel about them. I have shortly interviewed a few members of Finnish orchestras in order to get some information from "the other side". In order to learn how to prepare well for an audition, I have kept diary while I prepared for one audition. I would like to find a good structure for the preparation which I can use in the future with just small corrections.

My point of view is that I am quite new with the viola and have a long history of playing the violin. This is what I have to take into the consideration when I discuss the subject.

2. Auditions

2.1 Facts

Auditions are a way for musicians to apply for a job and for the orchestras to find new members. An audition consists of approximately three rounds of playing for a jury. Mostly the jury asks you to play the first movement of a classical concerto on the first round. Violists have two options to choose the classical concerto from: the viola concerto by C. Stamitz or F. Hoffmeister, both in D major. On the second or third rounds then follows for example the second movement of the classical concerto and first movement of an optional concerto of the 20th century. The optional concerto can be either the concerto for viola by W. Walton or B. Bartok, or Der Schwanendreher by P. Hindemith.

Orchestras also send applicants some orchestral excerpts one to three weeks before the audition day. Some orchestras want to hear the excerpts on all rounds, some only after the first round. The excerpts are small cuts from symphonic repertoire. There could be, for example, ten of those representing different periods of music, different bow styles, slow and fast tempi and so on. With the excerpts the juries can in my opinion easily hear if the player is versatile and masters all the different technical and musical areas of playing.

There is always a screen between the applicant and the jury on the first round. It is according to Wikipedia “to protect the audition

panel from allegations of favouritism or sexism”¹. The screen is then taken away on some stage of the audition.

After each round the jury announces which candidates have passed to the next round. According to my experience only about 30% of the candidates will continue to the second round. If you do not pass the first round, your audition is finished and you will go home.

Here is one example of a job announcement from musicalchairs.org:

Göteborgs Operan: Principal and Co Principal Viola

Audition: Monday- Tuesday February 18- 19. 2013

Compulsory pieces:

- 1st movement with cadenza from one of the following concertos: C. Stamitz, Hoffmeister Viola concerto in D- major*
- 1st movement from one of the following concertos:*
B. Bartok, W. Walton Viola concerto or P. Hindemith: Der Schwanendreher
- J.S. Bach: Sarabande from cellosuite no 1, 2 or 3*
-

Deadline for application January 15. 2013.

For more information please contact:

Orchestra adm Jan Söderberg tel: +46- (0)31- 108099

For application: www.opera.se/vacancies

You can find the excerpts and ensemble audition on our website from January 18.

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Audition> (13th of March, 2013)

In this example there is also an exception to what I have normally seen in the announcements in Northern Europe: The Gothenburg Opera orchestra asks otherwise for standard program but in addition to that they want to hear Sarabande of a solo cello suite by J.S. Bach (arranged for viola). Maybe the reason for a solo piece is that these are two principal jobs and that, I think, they also want to hear solo playing.

The difference between auditions in Finland and Sweden is that in Finland, instead of the optional concerto, they mostly ask for an optional piece with piano accompaniment. This happens in case it is a *tutti* player post, which is opening. The question is which style or difficulty level the piece should be? Some people anyhow go with a concerto, but I have heard from many professionals in Finland that it could as well be a first movement of a big sonata for instance.

So there are many ways and habits how the actual audition is organized: at which stage a certain piece and excerpt is asked to be played, how is the schedule of the day, when do you get the results, when is the screen taken away and so on. Of course you can as applicant call beforehand and ask how the audition is going to be organized, but even the jury members might not know very much about it beforehand.

2.2 Me and auditions

I tried a couple of auditions before I had any orchestral education and was still playing the violin. I did not have the knowledge of how to prepare the excerpts or experience of playing them for a jury and I did not know how one should play the concertos in an audition. I just tried my luck and did not pass the first round. I called for

feedback after one audition and they said that my classical concerto (W.A. Mozart: Violin concerto in A major) had been too slow. That was it.

Then I started studying in SNOA, the Swedish National Orchestra Academy at the University of Gothenburg². During the first year of the master studies I fell in love with the beautiful sound of the viola and changed it as my main instrument. I have not touched the violin since. By the time I finish the master's thesis I have played viola for almost two years. Of course first I had to learn to play the viola and mentally jump to the world of violists. So again during the studies in SNOA I had just a lot to learn and was not really ready for auditions yet. I did not feel confident because I had too much to learn all the time. I did still try out three real auditions and one substitute audition (an audition for substitute work) in the spring of 2012 before my active study time in SNOA ended.

Therefore the auditions are for me something yet unconquered and they feel a bit like an enemy trying to stop me from getting my dream job. I think the biggest thing that worries me about auditions is that there is so much talk about them that you get a totally wrong or overrated negative picture of the auditions already before you have played one. For me the experience was a lot nicer than I had thought based on all the stories I had heard. I do not think it really

² International Master's Programme in Orchestra Performance. In the autumn 2012 the name of the orchestra has been changed to University of Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra.

helps, that many people just scare each other and themselves with the horrible stories of auditions. I still think that everybody does and should experience it by themselves and based on the experience develop themselves to play better and better auditions and finally win one and get a job.

There are still elements, I have to admit, in auditions that make the situation challenging. The order of playing is always decided with a lottery. That forces me to be mentally prepared from the moment the lottery starts and still save some concentration until the late evening. An audition is always one kind of a competition, which consists of many rounds of playing. After each round some of the candidates are sent home and some may continue. In order to win an audition one playing about three rounds and therefore it is a long day of focus, concentration and division of energy. Also the fact that there is always a screen between the player and the jury on some rounds, but no-one knows beforehand when it is going to be taken away, makes me have to be mentally prepared for all the different possibilities. The screen is a curtain or a small wall they have built for example on the stage between the jury and the candidate. So the best skill, I believe, is to be flexible and always prepared to play whenever and in whatever kind of circumstances.

Where does the stiffness and feeling that the audition is different than just playing a concert then come from? I think it is because I want to play well and play on my level. I do also feel pressure, because I would of course like to win the audition and already start working. Mostly it must be, though, because of the “requirements” for passing the first round and the fact that I have not passed it yet. Several musicians have told that the requirements are playing

absolutely in tune, with a stable tempo and exact rhythms. It sounds very simple, but I feel, that when I try to play exactly like that, I just control my playing too much, my muscles become stiff and I get worried of mistakes. On the other hand, when I tried the opposite and went and played music, I just heard very clearly that I was playing out of tune and making other mistakes.

I seem to be worried about the thoughts of the jury: people that would be my colleagues if I won the audition. When I would start working we would be equal, but now I think of them as something so high level that I could never reach it. That thought does not make any sense. Should not I regard myself as a professional level musician already before I sign up for an audition? And do not I in other situations consider myself as one? I do, actually, but as a professional with lacking experience.

I also find it very contradictory, that I normally always like to ask for feedback and improve, but when it comes to auditions, I might be a little afraid that the feedback will be something like: You should start doing something else, or: You will never get a job in the orchestra. It sure is a very natural feeling, but the feedback is only about the performance of that particular day, not about my playing in overall or about me as a person. I have to admit, this makes me sound very insecure despite the fact that I have got very good feedback all the time during my studies.

This is the main factor that in my opinion makes the auditions very different from playing a concert. When I play a concert I feel pressure of the same things: being able to play well. But I think when the audience is there only to listen to good music and they can

also see you, they are much more kind to you. When you play behind the screen, the jury members can only listen and there is nothing to distract them. I feel that I cannot show my whole personality from behind the screen. That I cannot get through to them.

My conclusion is that I first have to convince myself and then I will be able to convince the juries.

2.3 Richard Davis's thoughts and my reflections

Richard Davis is Principal Flute with the BBC Philharmonic and has freelanced as Principal Flute with most of the UK symphony orchestras. Davis is a Senior Lecturer and an orchestral coach at the Royal Northern College of Music. He is also the author of *Becoming an Orchestral Musician - a Guide for Aspiring Professionals*.³

Richard Davis's book was very interesting to read: He shared a lot of practical facts and tips about the life of an orchestral musician and about playing in an orchestra. Throughout the part about auditioning, though, I sensed a funny negative approach to the subject. That is the part of the book that provoked me to think the most and forced me to make up my own mind about auditioning.

Davis for example claims that "one of the biggest hurdles you will encounter when pursuing an orchestral career is the audition. Very few players enjoy the experience. It is an event so harrowing that it

³ <http://www.boltonsymphony.org.uk/profiles/davis/davis.htm> (25th of February, 2013)

can turn the most experienced players into a quivering jelly lump of jelly even before they can get their instrument out of its case”.⁴

Why do some people even speak about the auditions like this? Who does it help? I think there are two kinds of people trying to teach students to prepare for auditions: The supporting ones, like my teachers Johanna and Per, who want to exaggerate the learning process and that the auditions are just a different thing than concerts. The others like Davis seem to want to give a lot of information but in my opinion in a “warning” way. I am sure the both types want to help, but we are not in the end nowadays standing in a line and playing one after each other. Actually one barely gets to hear how the others play. The times I have auditioned I have been very focused on my own preparation and then gone to play only with the pianist. So during the auditions you mostly only see the faces of the other candidates. Of course, if you like you can go and drink coffee with them while you wait.

Richard Davis claims that there is no similarity between the mock auditions at college and the real auditions.⁵ With this comment he only means, though, that one does not conquer one’s nerves for performing by playing mock auditions. Mock audition is an audition arranged as a part of the education. The goal is to arrange a situation most similar to a real audition. Of course as there are many ways to arrange an audition, the mock audition can also be only one kind of an audition.

⁴ Davis, 2004, p. 52

⁵ Davis, 2004, p. 59

I think the mock auditions arranged by SNOA were very instructive and well arranged. They gave me the possibility to learn how to prepare the excerpts in a short time (three weeks) and also to see how it feels to play for a jury consisting of orchestral musicians, with and without the screen. You also get feedback to improve your playing. They even arranged a lottery sometimes, but one helpful experience would still have been to play all the rounds consisting of the classical and optional concerto and all the excerpts. The mock auditions in SNOA consisted of either of one of the concertos or the excerpts.

When I play an audition, a real one or a mock, I must confess that I feel that the jury is there only to judge me and that they are almost gods deciding if I have the skills at all to become a musician. I feel I need to protect myself, and that might be a reason why I find it difficult to totally let go of the control in auditions. Maybe I am protecting myself by not giving everything and thereby at least not totally failing. But is the problem, that I am afraid to fail, or that I am not brave enough to give it all and really try to win? I would say the latter one. I think I still have too much admiration towards the orchestra members and on the other hand I do not appreciate or recognize my own skills enough. My long term task could be to learn how to be in a healthy way proud of what I can.

The first tip that Davis gives is to ask beforehand whether the audition is screened so you can prepare yourself.⁶ To my knowledge at least in Finland the screen is often taken away after the first or second round so that you have to be prepared for both. I think that

⁶ Davis, 2004, p. 60

with the screen you really have to exaggerate the interpretation to get your personality through to the jury. As the jury members also are not able to use their vision they can focus even more to listening to the intonation, rhythms etc.

I am personally more scared of playing in front of a jury than behind a screen. Behind the screen I feel like I was there alone with the pianist even though I might hear there are other people in the room. I anyway would not like to see their faces or hear them make comments and talk to each other.

Davis interviewed Peter Dixon, a principal cellist with the BBC Philharmonic. Dixon points out good sound, rhythms and mastery of the excerpts as the main issues he looked for in a candidate applying for work. He thinks that if a cellist does not play with a good sound it does not matter how good he is. He also considers it a lack of care, if a candidate plays an excerpt at the wrong speed even though the correct tempo was marked in the music. Talking about rhythms Dixon brings out the particular mistake of playing dotted rhythms as triplets. He thinks that because they have got to be team-players they cannot go wandering off on their own.⁷ I have heard this kind of comments while talking about auditions with professionals. It only means that when one gets the excerpts from an orchestra, the solo concertos must be ready, so that one can focus on the excerpts. On those two or three last weeks, when you have got the excerpts from the orchestra, you should get to know them as well as you possibly can. A jury member can really hear if the candidate knows the music beyond his part.

⁷ Davis, 2004, pp. 63- 64

Davis thinks a jury hears within seconds if the candidates are up to the standard, and if they are, it only takes another four minutes to see whether the jury is interested in them for a trial engagement. He also points at a recent survey of business interviews: 90% of decisions as to whether the interviewee would or would not get the job, were made within the first thirty seconds of their entering the room.⁸ It would be very interesting to video my mock auditions and see what I communicate with my body language and playing within the first thirty seconds!

Davis also warns about jury members looking bored when you enter the room. According to him if you do not enjoy your playing, the panel will not either. He says you should not be insulted by that, but instead make it your duty to wake them up! Davis encourages you to be yourself as individual and as player. “Play your heart out and mesmerize them.”⁹ “I always play at auditions as if I was performing in a solo recital,”¹⁰ says Fiona Cross, a freelancer clarinettist Davis interviewed. I think it is a great tip because I believe you always have to convince the jury of your skills so you need to look and act sure as well as play convincingly.

2.4 Professionals’ thoughts of auditions

I interviewed shortly five musicians who work in Finnish orchestras and have a lot of experience of listening to auditions. The interviewees were one concert master, one principal second violin, one principal of violas and two *tutti* viola players. Because of the

⁸ Davis, 2004, p. 63

⁹ Davis, 2004, p. 61

¹⁰ Davis, 2004, p. 61

limited time and convenience of the interviewees we decided to keep the interviews anonymous.

To figure out the very basic essence of the auditions, my question was: *What is important when you want to play a successful audition?* In this case we were talking about the auditions for a *tutti* player's post. I received surprisingly similar answers from all of the interviewees.

The universal answer was that when you play the classical concerto behind the screen on the first round, it is important to play in tune and with good sound and rhythms. In addition to that the playing should be musically interesting, but this is relevant only after the basic three things are accomplished.

The second violin section leader pointed out, that when she listens to people play behind the screen, she notices very easily whose playing she does not like or whose playing annoys her somehow, but it is more difficult to put the players she likes in the rank order. In this orchestra they have a habit of giving points for the candidates. I have learned that in some Finnish orchestra the jury members vote for *yes* or *no* and in some others they give points.

I understood very clearly that the reason the orchestras want to hear the classical concerto on the first round is to separate the best quality, sure and stable playing from the rest. The concert master said, that their orchestra lets only about one third of the applicants play on the second round. He thought that, due to the limited time in auditions, they are only interested to listen to the few best ones more.

With classical concerto, I think, it should be easy for them to separate best players because it is very challenging to keep perfect quality throughout the concerto by Stamitz or Hoffmeister. It is music with a kind of simple and quite cheery melodies, but still full of technical challenges that the piano part does not cover at all. Everything you do or do not manage to do is heard.

The principal of violas told me the same things plus that after the first round they are basically only interested of the orchestral excerpts. Here I must mention that some orchestras do listen to the excerpts already on the first round. This confirmed the fact I have heard many times before that excerpts are the true interest of orchestras and they should be practised perfectly and with same interest as the concertos. One of the *tutti* viola players even gave me a list of the excerpts that are most common in viola auditions in Southern Finland. I just got this list from him, but we did not talk about which parts of the pieces the excerpts are taken from:

- R. Strauss: Don Juan
- J. Brahms: Symphony no. 4
- J. Sibelius: Symphony no. 3 (1st mov., the long spiccato passage)
- F. Mendelssohn: A Midsummer night's dream – Scherzo
- W.A. Mozart: Symphony no. 41 (Jupiter)
- Prokofiev: Symphony no. 1 (The Classical Symphony)

All the viola players said the same thing that the optional piece, which they ask in the auditions in Finland instead of the optional concerto, is asked only to separate the very last candidates from each other if needed.

The principal of violas said, that it does not really matter what the piece is as long as it is played convincingly and with sovereignty. According to him some auditions have been won with the first movement of a big sonata, such as Violin sonata by C. Franck. He also pointed out that it does not help if you play the concerto by B. Bartok, that I think he found most difficult, if it is not convincing.

The impression that I have got from all the interviewees is, that the choice of the optional piece is still a matter of taste and can be crucial. Even though two of them clearly said that you can pick which ever piece as long as you play it well, one still pointed out that if you are playing on the last round a small piece, a romance for instance, and the other one is playing a concerto and you both play well, there is no question about which one wins. The huge difference of the difficulty level between the pieces still exists and will be noticed.

2.5 Conclusions

I believe now that the structure of auditions, as I understood it, is made for the purpose of finding a good new member for the orchestra: It makes sense to first listen to the basic quality of the candidates' playing and choose the best ones out of a big crowd. Then, after there are less than ten candidates left on the second round they test your orchestral skills with the excerpts: weather you play also those well and with a good quality. In addition to that they might ask you to play the slow second movement of the classical concerto in order to hear, in my opinion, still more good sound, phrasing and maybe the possible varieties of vibrato. At the last stage when there are only a couple of candidates left, you may

introduce yourself, show your skills, your creativity and your personality with the piece you have chosen yourself.

After interviewing the musicians I do not believe that there is any great magic or conspiracy theories behind the concept of auditions. It feels like a fair game with using the screen for example. Because of the screen all the candidates will be properly listened to and the orchestras cannot pick only their friends, family members or familiar substitute players to the next rounds. It would be fair, though, that all the candidates could have at least five to ten minutes' time to play already on the first round. It would be human of the jury members to let the candidates relax on the stage a bit and really show their skills. If you are allowed to play for two minutes, as I have experienced in the auditions with a lot of candidates, it tests who can play best the first twenty bars of the classical concerto or who can play best under high pressure. But working in an orchestra does not contain so much pressure in the end, so the situation has, in my opinion, nothing to do with the real working life.

I have heard in everyday conversations from several Finnish musicians, that people do not learn the excerpts well enough for the auditions. Well, why do not they ask some of the excerpts to be played already on the first round so that they could also hear who has taken the audition seriously and has prepared properly? In Finland they mostly still only listen to the classical concerto on the first round. Therefore there are always people who come to try their luck or to get experience of auditioning and have not checked the excerpts at all. There would for sure be people who need just a bit more time than two minutes to relax but have practised the

excerpts, have work experience and would in the end be on the last rounds competing for the win.

The first thing for us musicians still searching for a job is to stop creating these horror images of auditions. The biggest thing that matters in any performance is the attitude. When I next time start auditioning now in the spring of 2013, I will start with a fresh mind. I will practise well and build a good trust on my skills. I will go to the auditions eagerly like a child and experience myself how it feels to audition. This will be my development process and in the end I am sure I will get a job. But no- one else's experience, whether it is good or bad, matters. Knowledge and my own experience only matters.

3. Change of my attitudes towards auditioning

All the talk about auditions brings to my mind words like perfection, control, letting go, annoying, impossible and simple. My feelings regarding auditions are very contradictory. Auditioning does not sound like anything awfully difficult, but there are requirements you absolutely need to fill. Even though the rules are quite simple, it did not feel simple at all, when I actually auditioned. There are so many expectations that I put to myself: getting a job, being able to work in the kind of job that I most want to and also fulfilling the expectations of others. I do not feel anyone is pressuring me or setting expectations, but I want to show that all these years of studying have made me a good player and that I am able to get a job that I want. It is stupid to think of the expectations of others, but I have to admit that the feeling exists.

When I noticed there are all the big thoughts like “fulfilling my dreams” connected to auditioning I tried to turn my thinking to the direction that it is also just a “job interview”. That has helped me to think of auditions in a more reasonable way. It does not change the actual audition situation, but it maybe takes away a bit of the pressure and clears out my head.

I feel however, that it is easier for me to show my personality in real job interviews. I think I still express myself best verbally and get people to understand and like my personality. Is it maybe that I have not found the naturalness in the auditioning situation yet? In order to be able to freely perform the pieces in an audition requires

a lot of practising and performing. When the concertos are well absorbed, it is even possible to add some feeling or spices to them. I do anyhow think that I am so new with viola, that I should not be worried about ever getting a job in an orchestra. After just half a year more practising and absorbing the concertos, there will already be much more experience and sureness in the playing.

Now, after my active study time in SNOA, I have been finishing my master's thesis and freelancing in Finland. I worked for eight weeks of the autumn season 2012 in Jyväskylä Symphony Orchestra and as a part of my studies a couple of weeks in Kuopio Symphony Orchestra. It has been amazing to work in these orchestras and it has changed my attitudes towards auditioning as well.

For the studies in co-operation with Kuopio Symphony Orchestra I auditioned in the spring of 2012 with DVD. The other way to get substitute work with some orchestras is to know someone who recommends you. This was the case with Jyväskylä Symphony Orchestra. I took a couple of private lessons from a viola player of the orchestra in the spring of 2012. She was happy to hear that I was about to move back to Jyväskylä and asked if I would like her to add me to their substitute list.

Again my ability to learn pieces quickly has improved a lot. Also while I have had the chance to play with professionals I have had a lot of time to observe how different techniques they have, how different personalities they are, how they can play perfectly together as a section or sometimes do not seem to find each other. Of course, if this is the case, it happens only on the first day of the rehearsals and they fix it quickly.

There are the funny guys, the precise types and the slightly sloppy ones, all in one orchestra, but they complement each other and create a good atmosphere for the concert together. They are also perfect in multitasking. They play their part and furthermore notice everything that happens around them. They have time to absorb how the section leader and concert master are playing, listen to the others and kindly smile a bit when someone makes a mistake.

The difference between me and them is that they do not seem to get tired of all that. I would call that work experience. They can also play so quietly with a perfect sound, that I have found myself often in trouble trying to do the same.

The change that working in a professional orchestra has made in me is that I have noticed I can do as good job as them. I have now a more realistic picture of the working life and also the auditions. I have been happy to notice that I am on their level even though inexperienced. I have noticed they are human, great and hilarious people, but not gods.

The professionals' humanity has affected most on my attitude towards the auditions. As they are human and nice, there is no reason to be scared of them. And, as the interviews showed, they have a realistic idea of what they want of the applicants in an audition. My idea of the auditions has been unrealistic and overrated. Of course the audition situation is a performance, so I need to be brave and play on a high level. But they only want to get a new member in their group; they do not plan to personally insult anyone or wish me to fail.

4. Playing in orchestra / Passing the trial

After winning an audition you usually first get a trial period of a few months. That is the period when the colleagues actually can test the candidate's orchestral skills. You should show good playing, team-working skills and personality that fits into the orchestra. I have taken here a couple of points that should be taken into consideration while playing in an orchestra: dynamics, blending, accompanying, knowing one's role and intonation.

4.1. Dynamics

This is a very interesting subject and something that conductors have to work with a lot, specifically with a young orchestra. Davis writes about the fact that when the dynamics increase around us, we also easily start playing louder. He says we need experience and discipline to avoid that and a great help is to listen to people closest to us. The contract players of the orchestra probably know how loudly they should play in any particular moment.¹¹

During my period in SNOA there has been some talk about the fact, that when a forte has been marked for some section, the rest of the orchestra easily follows. This is very natural for all the people and I agree that it requires experience to avoid that. As young orchestra musician one should all the time know which dynamics are marked and be aware of which instrument at each time plays the main melody.

¹¹ Davis, 2004, pp. 108- 109

I had the privilege of doing an internship in 2008 with the length of two and a half months, playing with the Cape Philharmonic Orchestra in South- Africa. My desk partner told me the, that you should always match your playing with the one sitting next to you. You should always be able to hear the other one and also match the sound and the style. Therefore I think that the main focus of a string player should always be playing together with the desk partner. In addition to that one should breathe together with the rest of the section, and have an eye on the section leader to check the tempi, interpretation, beginnings and endings, part of the bow he is playing with, vibrato, style of bowing etc.

4.2. Blending, accompanying, knowing one's role

When a musician gets a trial in an orchestra it is crucial to blend in right from the beginning. Davis has interviewed Julian Gregory, who has been a violinist in BBC Philharmonic Orchestra for twenty years. Gregory states how this topic is difficult to learn in a student orchestra, where all the violinists just want to show off. Gregory tells an old joke about a first violin section of a college orchestra consisting of sixteen soloists playing the same thing.¹² I think this is a fact in many student orchestras. In my opinion our academy's student orchestra is an exception because it consists of students studying in master's program for becoming orchestral musicians. We are very motivated to learn how to play well in the orchestra and I am sure we all do often think of the trial while we play. It is a good place to practise how to become a good colleague and a *tutti* player.

¹² Davis, 2004, p. 90

According to Gregory, for example, the sound and the vibrato are things that have to be matched with the section. He says it is important to listen to what people have to say and learn from it quickly. He had been told as a young violinist not to play with such a wide vibrato and to play with more of a veiled sound¹³. I believe what comes to the sound it is important to play with a beautiful sound but not to bring out the most personal colour you have created for your solo playing. The vibrato should be quite small and continuous. Gregory gives an example that if you play an exposed loud passage high up on the E string, you should use a faster bow speed and less pressure than you would as a soloist.¹⁴ As to the blending, I think it is important always to know one's part well enough to be able to follow closely the vibrato and bow division of the section leader.

As an orchestra player you should always be aware of your role in the music. Orchestra playing is ensemble playing and you should be as good an accompanist as a solo player. As a string player one should play the solo parts as section solos with a mutual colour, phrasing and vibrato. But as soon as the solo ends and accompanying part begins one should be following the solo player as in a string quartet. Davis claims that the "accompanist" should allow the soloist the flexibility to use *rubato* and be able to follow the lead line like glue without feeling sticky.¹⁵ We all know how it feels to play with a good and a bad accompanist. In orchestra we should be able to be the good ones to allow the soloist to do a good job.

¹³ Davis, 2004, p.89- 90

¹⁴ Davis, 2004, pp. 89- 90

¹⁵ Davis, 2004, p. 89

Here I would also like to add a point of view that is rarely talked about: the visual aspect in orchestral playing. I do not think anyone underestimates the importance of the stage presence of a soloist. A soloist's stupid mannerism can disturb a listener a lot. On the other hand I would like him to show the characters of music and his changing role in relation to the orchestra with this face and body. But it is as boring to watch an orchestra that looks bored and uninterested. I think most of orchestras I have seen could use more facial expressions to point out their role, characters and the mood of music. It would be great to see a whole cello section sitting up straight while they have a big solo. After their solo they could lay back a bit and pass the solo to the next group or player. This would help the audience to understand who to listen and thus stay interested.

The worst thing you can do as a substitute player or during a trial is to be a so-called "back-desk soloist". According to Davis, playing too loud and so proving ones worth is a common thing to do for a freelancer playing for the first time with an orchestra. The other way to annoy the other players is to play concertos during the breaks.¹⁶ This is the experience of Richard Davis and I myself have heard similar stories. A friend of mine was asked for the first time to substitute in a symphony orchestra. According to her she had made a good job in the rehearsal, but I heard afterwards from another friend, that she had actually made one of the most common mistakes. A violin audition was going to be arranged for a post in the very orchestra, and the girl had mentioned she was planning to

¹⁶ Davis, 2004, p. 110

take part in it. On the rest she actually practised her concerto in the hall. The musicians thought that it was a pitiful attempt to influence the jury in advance and she was never called to substitute again. I am sure she did not mean anything like that, but she simply did not think about how it looked to them.

Davis emphasizes that there are contract players who could be playing as soloists too. They just do not show off in the rehearsals because it is not their job to do so.¹⁷ Many orchestra musicians play for example chamber music concerts in their spare time and especially for string players it is the opportunity to play alone one's part. But when they return to play in the orchestra they are again section players. It would be good to remember one's role in each situation and keep in mind that that is what they are paid for.

4.3. Intonation

Playing in tune is a never ending work in progress for a string player. I do not mean that one would have to work hard to play in tune at all, but instead one has to all the time actively keep one's ears open to every note one plays and question if it is in tune. Of course if one has big problems in playing in tune the reason might be, for example, an incorrect hand position or wrong kind of rehearsing methods. But as soon as one is too occupied with for example reading the notes, one seems to easily close one's ears to intonation.

An Interviewee of Davis, Robert Chasey, who has been a principal second violin for twenty years and latest in Orchestra of the Royal

¹⁷ Davis, 2004, p. 110

Ballet, admits that intonation is his orchestra's number-one requirement.¹⁸ One of Davis' good tips of working with intonation is to always sing in your head as you play. His experience is that it also improves his students' expression and articulation.¹⁹ I also find this strategy the best way to improve intonation. I think you should not only sing the thing you are playing but also to sing the note that you play after a brake or after a big leap. That is the only way to find a note after a leap. I also use this strategy with mentally challenging passages.

Singing is also a way that I have found good for "parking my mind". "Parking your mind" is an expression used by W. Timothy Gallwey in his book *The Inner Game of Tennis*. Gallwey writes that "to still the mind one must learn to put it somewhere. It cannot just be let go; it must be "parked."²⁰ When you sing as you play, you stop the uninterrupted ongoing thinking and inner talk, so that it does not disturb your playing that much. For me it is difficult to play well the double-stop passages. I am so busy thinking of details, that I forget to phrase properly. That brings an uncomfortable feeling in my hands and makes me feel like I could not play the passage. But when I sing the leading melody of the passage I suddenly have a very comfortable flow in my playing and also all the technical problems disappear. In my opinion the reason why singing helps intonation so much is, that it activates the brain from disturbing factors and in that way kind of "opens my ears" so I can hear properly. As Robert

¹⁸ Davis, 2004, p. 156

¹⁹ Davis, 2004, p. 181

²⁰ <http://ebookbrowse.com/w-timothy-gallwey-the-inner-game-of-tennis-pdf-d324341013> (17th of March, 2013)

Chasey says, “you actually have to listen and analyze every single thing you play”.²¹

²¹ Davis, 2004, p. 156

5. Diary of preparation for an audition

5.1 Preparation

In this section I have written about my preparation for an audition, that I played in March 2012 in Sweden, as an experiment, and analyze it in order to learn from the experience and give the readers, who have not yet auditioned, a way to start. To be clear I mention here, that I have two teachers, Johanna and Per, whom both I will mention in this part.

For this audition we got the excerpts three weeks before the audition day. By then the classical concerto, Viola concerto in D major by C. Stamitz, was in such a shape that after I got the excerpts I just practised every day little bits of it and made detailed work with the intonation. The optional concerto, Viola concerto by W. Walton, on the other hand was fresher and it needed still work during the last three weeks. My teacher, Johanna, advised me to decide which parts of it I had to practise every day and then divide the rest into three sections, so that those would also be practised at least every third day. On weekends I could try to reserve time to practise the whole concertos. I tried to follow this plan but I am afraid it turned less organized towards the end.

During these three weeks we had a few group lessons with my colleagues who also were preparing for the audition. We played through the excerpts and concertos and also gave each other some tips. These group lessons were very important parts of my preparation. When I played for my colleagues I noticed very clearly which things were working and which not. There were always

positive surprises with things I did not assume to be good yet, but also things that should have worked, but failed in the performing situation. The performing situation did not affect much excerpts with slow melodies, but especially excerpts with *spiccato* technique, in this case *The Magic Flute* overture by Mozart and *The Midsummer Night's dream* by Mendelssohn (see the list below) seemed to always fail. The *spiccato* was uneven between notes and I could not hold the tempo. Happily to my knowledge these two excerpts are often asked in auditions so they will be played many times and will develop. *The Morning Mood* by Grieg seemed to most difficult concerning intonation and the *Appalachian Spring* was just technically very tricky to play for an audience, because it was fast and the left hand all the time jumping between positions.

During these three weeks I would also play a mock audition with the same excerpts, a gig with a string quartet, an orchestra project as a section leader and a master class with my flute quartet. This all seemed like a huge task, but I decided to take it as an experiment of using my time well. Now that I think about this all, it is not a way to prepare for an audition to do a million things at the same time. Not at least if you are as inexperienced as I was.

We got nine excerpts:

1. A. Copland: *Appalachian Spring* – Ballet for Martha, big number 8 - 14
2. G. Mahler: *Symphony no. 10* – Adagio, bars 1- 15 and 105- 111
3. R. Strauss: *Der Rosenkavalier* – Prelude, bars 1- 22
4. E. Grieg: *Morning Mood* – Allegretto Pastorale, bars 21- 39
5. H. Berlioz: *Nuits d'été* – The Wraith of a Rose, bars 9- 29
6. W. A. Mozart: *The Magic Flute*- Overture, bars 27- 53

7. F. Mendelssohn: Symphony no. 4 – 1st mov, bars 233- 269 and 2nd movement, bars 1- 27
8. J. Brahms: Variations on a theme of Haydn – Variation VII
9. F. Mendelssohn: A Midsummer Night's Dream – Scherzo, bars 70- 93, 135- 254 and 280- 323

I had played numbers 4, 6 and 7 before. As I had one week time for the mock audition I decided to use the mock as one step towards the goal. On the mock audition I played the excerpts that I had not played before, so that I would then have the experience of how it feels to play them in an audition. In addition to that I would get useful feedback from the mock jury. This decision made the first week quite stressful. I had to learn quite tricky excerpts in a short time. I decided to learn them more deeply later and at this point only listen to them and learn to play them well through.

On the Mock audition day I was able to play the excerpts quite well, I think. I thought I played them in the right tempos, played the things marked in the music and the phrasings.

The feedback was very detailed and as such very useful for the preparation after that: *The Appalachian* was still a bit slow and missed the accents that made it interesting; Mahler could still be a bit quieter and the left hand needed to become more certain so that the intonation and phrasing would be convincing; *Rosenkavalier* needed some thinking and deciding how to build the excerpt so that the listener could understand the tempo changes, *agitato* etc; Berlioz was good, the challenge till the real audition day would be to make the intonation perfect; with Brahms I was surprised to hear, that there were some wrong notes. Because of the quick learning

and changes of clef I had continued in some places to read a wrong clef; *Midsummer night's dream* needed some more accents, pianissimo nuances, cheerfulness and thinking of longer lines.

I felt good playing the mock audition, but I was not able to play very freely because the excerpts were not yet as well digested as I would have liked them to be.

Two days after the mock audition began our orchestra project week. After the mock I started also to work with the excerpts that I had already played before. During the eight days of our orchestra project, I managed to practise approximately three hours every day in the afternoons. I tried to use those three hours on orchestra days for practising all the excerpts every day. I only focused on fixing all the possible technical problems and the intonation. In addition to that I practised the concertos as planned.

There were also two days in between the orchestra week without rehearsals. On those days I could only rest and concentrate on the audition. I had the luxury of taking a cup of coffee in the mornings and starting to work with a fresh mind and body. During the orchestra project week I also just read the excerpts a lot. When my body was already very tired of practising I still read the excerpts through before I went to sleep. I also practised them by reading with the metronome or listening to the music.

After the orchestra concert there was six days' time to the actual audition. On the first day I played Walton's concerto with the pianist for the first and only time. It was a good experience but, of course, it would be useful to really practise it in piece together with a pianist. After that I had a viola lesson with Johanna and I played the

excerpts through. According to her I should check the scores and really know all the time what the other instruments were doing in order to keep the tempo and phrasing all the time. She gave me tips how to practise in a very detailed way to for example the *Midsummer Night's Dream* in order to make the *spiccato* work with the change of strings. She also pushed me to play the music instead of trying to play correct. With all the talk of how all the nuances and instructions have to be made very exactly and correct, I have the feeling that I sometimes forget to play music. In the end you should show a bit of your personality and musical opinions also in the excerpts. So after the motivating tips of Johanna, I printed out the parts of scores and studied what the whole orchestra is doing during the excerpts. I also got so inspired that I had some fun playing the excerpts with a recording. Those two together gave me more of the feeling that even though I am playing alone I hear the rest of the music in my head. That helped me to make the excerpts more understandable and musical.

Example: R. Strauss : Der Rosenkavalier - Prelude

Excerpts of R. Strauss' music are tricky to prepare. There are a lot of tempo changes and text in German to clarify the nature of them. First I read all that is written in the music and translate the texts. I do also try to find the score and read it while I listen to a couple of different versions of the music. It is important to know what exactly is happening among the other instruments: Who is playing the solo and who the accompaniment? If I have a solo, who am I playing it with?

After that I play the excerpt through and find out the demanding parts of it. Often there is something that is most difficult in an excerpt. The orchestra has picked out different kind of excerpts to hear different technical or musical aspects. In Strauss I think the challenge is in making it musically whole and understandable as well as making it sound good with only *mf* to *f* nuances and legato lines everywhere.

I write down the necessary fingerings and I often also colour with different colours the nuances in order to clarify those for myself. I have drawn arrows for *accelerando* into the music, because all the markings are written in German with quite long sentences and I therefore don't have time to read those while I play. It is important to count right the short breaks in an excerpt. I have reminded myself in Finnish to count (= laske!) in the end of the second line.

During the weeks I practise both hands separately checking that I play in tune and have a nice feeling in the bow hand with good balance and bow division. Then I concentrate on the phrasing, nuances, accents etc. making the music beautiful and closest to what I think is the right interpretation of the excerpt. I had to for example decide from which tempo to which I end up

between big numbers 1 and 2 as there is an accelerando during that whole part. I also find it very useful to play the excerpts for friends in order to check every now and then in which phase I am at in my preparation.

This is quite rationalized way of practising, but I believe that the orchestras want to hear good technical playing and musical understanding. Candidate's own vision of music can be heard with the concertos.

On the last two days before the audition I practised reasonable hours just making sure things worked, but trying not to tire by muscles too badly. I also did a lot of jogging and relaxed by watching TV and going to a concert. I focused on doing equally much fun stuff and preparation for the actual audition. I do sometimes get even too concentrated, and I do not think it helps me play a relaxed audition.

5.2 The audition

On the audition day I woke up early and went jogging. That is a strategy I have used quite a many times before, when there has been an important concert or audition. Going for a short and slow run helps the blood circulate well and muscles relax. I feel that especially my bow arm works much better if I have jogged in the morning. After the run I made myself ready and took with the breakfast and lunch that I had prepared the previous evening. I made sure that I had two hours time to warm up and check the excerpts and the concerto by Stamitz. I had been told that in this audition the second round would be held only on the next day, so I thought I should concentrate on Stamitz. After the two hours of practising I had an early lunch and went to the concert house for the lottery. I was happy I had prepared well because I got the number one and so I did not have much time to wait for my turn.

I had thought of how long time I should practise in the morning. In case I would have been one of the last ones to play, I would have had hours of just waiting or practising too much in the afternoon. But if I had not practised well in the morning it would have been horrible just to go and play without a proper warm-up. In case I had played later I would just have read some book in order to relax and forget the surroundings.

The lottery was held at 2 p.m. and my turn to play was at about 2.30 p.m. They asked me to play the exposition of the concerto by Stamitz and excerpts by Mendelssohn and Strauss. After I had played I went back to the university, relaxed by chatting with my friends in the cafeteria and after a while started practising for the next rounds. I practised that day for two to three hours the Walton concerto and those excerpts I had not already played on the first round. At 7 p.m. the jury gave the results. I sadly did not pass to the second round.

The second and third rounds were held the next day and, surprisingly, until the end with the screen! I had never heard before that this could be a possibility. If the jury never takes the screen down the candidates will never be able to show their whole personality. It is the hearing image only that the jury can use as they decide who they pick to be their colleague. Well, I guess they wanted to treat the candidates equally.

5.3 Feedback and my conclusions

I called my other teacher, Per, who had sat in the jury for feedback. After the audition the jury members were able to check the list of candidates in the playing order and thus he knew which one I was.

He said that with concerto by Stamitz there had been some problems with the intonation and he would also have liked to hear a stronger and braver interpretation. With the Mendelssohn 4th symphony excerpt there had been some instability, but he had not written down if it was with the tempo, rhythms or what. On the other hand he had really liked the Rosenkavalier excerpt, which I found difficult. He said that I played out the nuances, *agitato* and everything that was printed in the music. Only little minus was that it was a bit out of tune. As this was my first audition I think the feedback was quite good. There was nothing really badly wrong with my playing but I just did not stick out of the crowd.

It is hard for me to say if I agree with the feedback. With Stamitz I had the same feeling afterwards as Per, that it was just nice and neat. It has always been my problem to balance between the control and playing bravely out. On the other hand I was enjoying myself as I played the Stamitz, so nothing should have really disturbed me from playing out. Of the excerpts I do not recall much. It makes sense, though, that because I had put a lot of thought and effort on *Strauss*, it succeeded in the end. *Mendelssohn* was difficult but much clearer so I maybe did not expect it to be so tricky to perform. Maybe, in the end, there still were a lot more extremes in *Strauss* with tempi and nuances, and it was therefore easier to make it interesting. With a *spiccato* excerpt like *Mendelssohn 1st movement*, it is mostly in *pp* or *p* it is not easy to make it interesting.

The task that I gave myself was to go and play with a big smile and enjoy the great acoustics of the hall. I also tried to focus on playing out the music. I must admit, though, that the feeling of doing a lot of nuances and interpretation, which I had while I was playing the

audition, was not really correct. I should even more exaggerate the *fortes* and *pianos* and remember that a concerto must be big and soloistically played.

I would not anyhow worry, because after the audition I have done very good work with my teachers playing out as much as possible and memorizing the feeling in my muscles while doing that. When performing I believe it is better to listen to the muscles and the body than the mental feeling. The feeling in the muscles can be taught during the hours of practising and I think it is quite easy to remember how it should feel during the performance. The mental feeling can be very good or very bad during performance, but I have noticed that there is often big controversy between my feeling and the feedback. Somehow the mind fools me and especially the way I hear my own playing gets worse in a situation like auditioning.

I have tried memorising the feeling in the muscles, when I have for example practised for SNOA orchestra projects where I have had the chance to play single viola solos. If you practise many times how the bow arm should feel right from the start of the solo and how the hands work in sync, the muscles remember it surprisingly well in the actual performance. The mind on the other hand gets very distracted by changes of situation or nervousness.

I think that in overall my preparation for the audition was okay. Because of the lack of experience there should be a lot more time just to prepare technically and mentally for the audition. There should also be a lot of time used for listening and learning the scores of the excerpts etc. Just to practise with the instrument for hours and hours is not as effective. Because I personally cannot

focus 100% for five different projects at the same time, it would be great to be able to clear out the schedule a bit more for the next try.

I will continue to use the techniques of quick learning: printing out the scores and learning what other instruments are doing, listening with the score and with the part, playing with a recording, just reading my own part imagining I was playing and performing the excerpts for example every fifth day to see how it feels to perform them. Planning the practising and following the plan would also be very important to keep the practising effective.

I still need to work with playing out bravely instead of playing it safely in the auditions. People often talk about how in an audition one should play the nuances, rhythms and notes correctly and precisely. But on the other hand, one should somehow be able to step out from the crowd. In the end the one that wins the audition has played a convincing and musical audition. I think that the person they pick has shown good technical skills, good understanding of music and sureness of playing. That kind of person is able to play with the section and use his instincts to interpret the music correctly, but is also able to bring something to add to the section. The jury members vote for you if you play the way they personally like. In this sense it is often a matter of taste, too. It is still a good thing that juries consist of many people, so there are also people with a similar taste in music as yours.

6. Conclusions

The project of getting familiar with auditions and the world of orchestras by reading, interviewing, writing, working in a couple of those and preparing for auditions at the same time has been most interesting for me. Now in the end I am surrounded by information and experience of the subject and somehow it feels as if auditions had become quite an ordinary part of my life now.

I found Richard Davis's book interesting: It gave me a lot of facts about auditions and working life, but as I did not appreciate the authors way of scaring people with the subject, it made me think of the picture many people have of auditions and the need to change that.

While I have written the thesis I have thought a lot of the state of my self- confidence as for auditions. I need to believe in my chances of winning the audition 100% before I play the next one. Otherwise I think it is quite useless to audition at all. During this process I have at least recognized and got rid of the useless and overrated respect for the professionals. I do admire their work and skills, but there is really no need to be afraid of them.

It also helped me a lot to talk with professional musicians about auditions. The orchestra is searching for an employee and therefore the audition is not all about me. Thinking of the bigger picture helps me at least to get the focus out of myself and concentrate on playing the music.

My conclusion is that there are some main factors that at least help you to play a successful audition: experience, knowledge and having

the pieces in a top shape help you to focus on your playing on the audition day. Writing a diary of the process helps you to learn from the previous auditioning, develop and create a system that is effective. To learn the best ways to prepare also helps you to trust the work you have done before the audition day.

And finally, my recipe for a successful audition is:

- practise your concertos well
- learn well the excerpts
- think of the audition day as an adventure: you should have an open mind and be brave, for you cannot possibly know what is going to happen
- believe 100% in yourself and the preparation you have done
- play convincingly and with an attitude
- enjoy

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