McMASTER MUSIC EDUCATION NOTEBOOK

PREPARING A UNIVERSITY AUDITION

University auditions normally include two or more tests that are intended to evaluate the musical background and accomplishment of prospective music students. At McMaster, we administer three tests: performance, theory and ear-training.

PERFORMANCE:

(Specific requirements may vary among universities and from instrument-to-instrument. Contact all universities where you intend to audition and request detailed information on requirements).

1) Selecting Repertoire: Refer to the information provided by the universities and select pieces that will fulfill all the requirements specified. (At McMaster we require 2-3 pieces, approximately 20 minutes of music, in different styles, and including one work from the 20th or 21st centuries. Pieces chosen should be at Royal Conservatory of Music - Toronto (RCM) Grade 8 level or higher). Select your pieces early. You want lots of time to prepare.

2) Accompanists: At McMaster we do not require accompanists for auditions (except for singers), but for performers other than keyboardists or guitarists the accompaniment is an essential part of the music and will make your preparation much more interesting. Finding an accompanist may not be difficult. Ask your teacher, classmates, parents, etc. Many students, teachers, parents, etc. play piano and may have accompanying experience. Most universities will also refer you to a professional accompanist, but... you must request this well in advance, you will have to pay the accompanist ($25-40/hour), and you will have limited time to work with him/her. At McMaster, we do require singers to have accompanists. If needed, we will be happy to provide you with a list of professional accompanists in our area.

3) Preparation: Start early. The best defense against nervousness is the confidence that you know the music thoroughly. When learning notes/rhythms, notice what passages are difficult for you (fast technique, high/low notes, etc.). Isolate these passages, and practice them slowly, but rhythmically, until you can perform them perfectly. Gradually speed them up, always adhering to the notated rhythm. (A good rule-of-thumb - if you can perform it 10 times in succession without mistakes, you know it). Then address:
   a) Tempo: May be obvious if the work has a metronome marking, but speed is often only generally indicated (Allegro, Andante, etc.). Consult with your teacher for advice on an appropriate tempo. Your fastest tempo is determined by how quickly you can accurately perform the most difficult passage in the piece. You should also perform every piece all the way through with a metronome at least once.
   b) Dynamics: Easy to prepare, but often overlooked. May need to be exaggerated (especially to the quiet side) to be effective.
   c) Articulations and expression marks: Attend to these carefully. They are often an indicator of thorough vs superficial preparation.
   d) Expressiveness/interpretation: The ultimate goal of all preparation. Ask yourself what excites you about this music and try to communicate that excitement to a listener. If you are enthusiastic, listeners will be also.

Well before your first audition date, play for everyone who will listen to you - friends, classmates, parents, your pet, ... Practice performing all pieces all the way through without stopping. Keep going even if something goes wrong. You need to know the music well enough to recover from problems, even when nervous.

4) Miscellaneous:
   a) The first time you perform with an accompanist is always surprising. Remember you are the leader, and play with confidence.
   b) If a piece has a long introduction, interlude or ending for your accompanist alone, feel free to cut these passages to a few bars. The auditioner(s) is (are) there to hear you, not your accompanist.
   c) Most auditioners will not want to hear repeats. If you specifically want to play repeats, you should inform the auditioner(s).
d) Auditioners may want a copy of the music. Some universities require you to provide an auditioner's copy.
e) Memorization - Some universities require memorization, especially for pianists. It is always a good idea to memorize the first few phrases of each piece. This adds to your assurance and prevents mistakes near the beginning that may contribute to nervousness.
f) Present yourself confidently. If you have prepared well, you will play well.

THEORY:

McMaster’s theory test is approximately equivalent to Advanced (Grade 2) Rudiments of the RCM. It comprises a series of questions that test a student’s knowledge of intervals, interval inversions, and interval names; of major and minor scales; of elementary cadences; of time signatures; of technical terms in music (Allegro, Piu Mosso, etc.); of transposition of keys and key signatures; and of the chords that belong to any given key. In addition, we test the ability to detect errors and correct them in a passage of music.

Preparing for the theory test is primarily a matter of doing appropriate written exercises and having them checked for errors. Your teacher will be able to suggest exercise books that will provide the most helpful tasks.

a) You may also wish to consult the Frederick Harris Music Co. Web-site for books specifically recommended for the preparation of RCM theory exams: www.frederickharrismusic.com. Click on “RCM Publications, Musicanship”. Many of these books are especially useful because they provide answer keys to the exercises in them.

b) It is also possible to purchase sample RCM exams. Call the RCM Examinations Office at 905-501-9553.

c) At McMaster we waive our theory audition for anyone who has completed the RCM Advanced (Grade 2) - Rudiments exam within the past two years and has achieved a grade of at least 80% (first class honours). You will need to provide us with a copy of your grade statement.

EAR-TRAINING:

The McMaster ear-training audition tests students’ ability to recognize intervals up to the octave; to recognize major and minor triads in root position and first inversion; to differentiate various types of seventh chords such as the dominant and diminished seventh; and to accurately perform a rhythm as indicated in standard musical notation. This material is approximately equivalent to the ear-training required in RCM Grade 8 exams on any instrument or voice.

Preparation for this test involves careful practice in a context where you can learn from your mistakes.

a) Work with a partner using piano, guitar or other keyboard. Test chords and intervals in various ranges. Intervals need to be practiced both above and below a given note.

b) Check the Frederick Harris Music Co. Web-site (see above) for materials designed to help you develop your ear-training. Many of these books consist of sequenced programs with audio-visual support, allowing you to practice alone or with a group, and providing feedback on your accuracy.

c) Students have always used the opening two notes of familiar tunes as a means of identifying intervals (My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean for a Major 6th, Star Wars for a Perfect 5th, No-body Knows the Trouble I See for a descending Major 6th, etc.).

d) It’s generally agreed that minor chords are “sadder” than major chords.

e) The following web-sites provide free ear-training programs. This list is but a selection of the many available sites.

i) “Good Ear” (www.good-ear.com) - reasonably comprehensive online tutorial, completely free.

ii) “Big Ears” (www.ossmann.com/bigears) - ear training tutorial

iii) “Eartraining Software” (www.soffege.sourceforge.net) - many links with an online tutorial

iv) “Eartraining” (www.earpower.com) - as above

v) “EarTrainingResourceGuide” (www.reddit.com/r/musictheory/comments/1de7c/the_ear_training_resource_guide) – a number of recommended software programs.

At McMaster we try to make the audition experience as comfortable as possible. We want to hear you at your best. However, nothing helps reduce nervousness like good preparation.