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Advice to a (Prospective) College Student

Please send comments to: cmsunday@alummi.rice.edu



[Auditioning Advice](#) • [Physical Things](#) • [Mental Attitudes](#) • [Habits](#) • [Final Words](#)

[← Back to "Issues in Choice of Undergraduate Programs"](#)

A college-bound student on one of the Facebook string forums asked what "things" would an adult who had been through a university program in string performance, recommend. I feel qualified to answer this question; starting at local, state schools, I attended 12 of these programs. Not exaggerating: every time I got a better orchestra job, the concertmaster, who taught at the university, invariably offered me an orchestra scholarship (i.e., I played in the school orchestra for free). So I took the required coursework (principally music theory, music history—and at the graduate level, the research tools course), sometimes more than once. I finally slowed my peripatetic behavior for a while, and finished at Rice University in Houston (in 2 1/2 years). I was 37. Full scholarship. Here is a list of my recommendations, regrets and advice, in no particular order of importance:



A. Auditioning advice:

1. I would never audition for any university, cold. Instead, contact the teacher the year before and say that you want to study with them. Your teacher is going to be the deciding factor, both with respect to where you want to go to school, whether you get into that program, and whether you get a scholarship. Prepare consistently for the first lesson with that teacher, which you should schedule long before the school audition. You don't have to be the world's great player; what you have to show is that you're working hard, are thoughtful and consistent, and will be a feather in this teacher's cap, so to speak.
2. Find out all about your prospective teacher; their background, where they play currently, if they have any recordings extant. If you think they won't notice you care about them personally, think again. It's only common courtesy.
3. Prepare consistently for your SAT test. Don't just wing it, no matter how well you play. Do the best test you can. Hopefully, you also have good grades. And turn in a winning application with no spelling or grammar errors and a solid essay, expressing your love of music.
4. When you do audition (if you need to), be as classy as you can, as conservatively but beautifully dressed, good instrument, positive and friendly attitude. If you have problems, they can be fixed, but you won't get that chance if they don't like you.

B. Physical things:

1. Get the best instrument and bow you can. Get an expensive case, if you can. If you join the musicians' union (AFM, American Federation of Musicians), you can get a loan. Or you can borrow one. Rice loaned me a good instrument, but you have to give it back when you finish.

2. Good rosin, shoulder rest, chromatic tuner/metronome. Don't leave these in the practice rooms; they will very likely not be returned.
3. Decent backpack.
4. Good self care: visit dentist, get yearly check, and monitor your diet/exercise. The stronger and healthier you are, the more you will be likely to succeed, both personally and professionally. Don't make excuses.
5. In terms of printed music, your teacher will suggest pieces, and sometimes you can make copies from the music library, but you will invariably need etude books and Carl Flesch Scale Book. But teacher will let you know. Don't fail to get these immediately.

C. Mental attitudes:

1. Bertrand Russell (English philosopher and mathematician) wrote that the two most important things in the world are "kindness and intelligence."
2. Remain professional under all circumstances, even if someone acts like a jerk (they will) or is outright rude, racist, sexist, whatever. Know in advance you will encounter this. Ignore it. Maybe they will grow up spiritually some day, but it's not your responsibility to enlighten them. Your responsibility right now is to yourself, so you can get a good degree and contribute your gifts to society.
3. If you can always be kind, always have a sense of humor about everything, never gossip, never be hateful to anyone, and always see the other person's side (especially when they're screwed up in some way)—develop empathy, in other words—you will be a much happier person, be much more loved and supported by others, and save a lot of wear and tear, not to mention time, with things that really don't matter.

D. Habits:

1. Make sure you're healthy, not over- or underweight, and have good eating habits. Whether it's fair or not, the better you look, the more that will contribute to your success. I recommend veganism, with D and B12 supplements, lots of water, and small meals. Change your habits and you will change your life for the better. Get exercise, throw away the television, and learn how to monitor your breathing (yoga).
2. More on diet: this is my personal opinion, of course, but it is supported by research. Avoid SAD (Standard American Diet). McDonald's is killing the American (and now world) population, is horrible for the planet, and has dire consequences for everyone's health. Salt, sugar and fat are the enemies. But don't take my word for it. Investigate. Personally, I don't do eggs, dairy, meat, fish, sugar or alcohol. I don't look like I'm 66, or act it, or feel it. Don't believe the propaganda from the meat and dairy industries. It's all an attempt to manipulate you and get you to spend your money. It's a lie.
3. One of the things I regret the most is not attending enough concerts and recitals at school. I took every freelance job that was offered, and I think in retrospect this was a mistake. Go to everything. The people you meet or see at the concerts, and the music you hear, will be more instructive than the freelancing. Take miniature scores, if you can determine what the works are that will be performed. Watch the scores with a pencil in hand to mark things you want to look up later.
4. Needless to say, always be clean, neat, appropriately dressed, with a happy and friendly mental attitude. Don't do weird things. Don't wear the same clothes over and over, get some decent concert clothes, always wear clean shoes, and pay close attention to grooming. Don't wear loud perfume (especially on stage), and wear very light makeup. No nose rings, tattoos, or multiple earrings (unless your field is rock or jazz—but not classical). This may sound over-restrictive, but remember: the people who are evaluating you are mostly older folks.
5. Always keep your commitments. If you say you're going to do something, do it, or at the very least, contact the person(s) involved and apologize. This is incredibly important if you want to earn income as a player. Contractors will not tolerate prima donna behavior; there are plenty of good players, and if you act like you're doing them a favor by showing up, they'll take you off the list and call someone else. People need to be able to trust you, and if you act like a self-centered child, they won't. They'll write you off.
6. Never, ever be late. Some people make a habit of this and what it indicates is that they think they are so important people have to wait for them. This is a mistake. Nobody is that important.
7. Create a practice/study schedule and keep to it. Practice every single day, slowly, 20 minutes at a time with full focus, and as many 20 minute sessions as you can manage, at least four. Length of practice is far less important as focus. Don't be afraid to play very slowly, but be careful not to practice mistakes. See Galamian on this issue. Time management is key.

E. Final Words:

1. There is an old saying in the music business, "the music world is a small world," so be nice to everybody because it is pretty certain that you will see that person again. Don't, in other words, get into interpersonal conflicts with anybody, no matter what, no matter how much they deserve it. Some people are not very developed spiritually,

and say and do things which are stupid, insensitive, unkind and unnecessary. Count on this happening. Don't interact with it.

2. Show the utmost respect towards your teachers, following their instructions carefully, even if you disagree, even if it puts a huge burden on you time-wise or any other way. Do everything asked of you to the best of your ability. Understand what it took for them to get where they are and try and learn everything you can while you're around them. You will graduate sooner or later and you won't have that access again.
3. Learn how to manage your time. Pay attention to the excuses and rationalizations in your head. This comes under self-knowledge, which is sadly lacking in most people. Stop, and breath, and think about what you are doing and how you are managing your time.
4. Above all, have respect for what you're doing. The violin is a 400 year old art form, and is the doorway to a very happy life. It opened the world to me and allowed me to experience things I never would have, otherwise. Don't take your gifts for granted. Respect yourself and the people you encounter who have done the things you'd like to do.

Best wishes!!



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