How to Prepare Orchestral Excerpts

Orchestral excerpts are the standard method for instrumental ensemble auditions around the world. Not only can they quickly reveal a great deal about a player’s technical abilities, musicality, and knowledge of style and performance practice, but they also level the field by requiring that every candidate be evaluated by the same standards and criteria. As a student it is important to begin learning the standard excerpts for your instrument, since you will be seeing them time and time again throughout your career. Here are some tips on how to best prepare your excerpts to ensure that your audition is as successful as possible.

Listen to recordings! You can find recordings of just about anything for free on YouTube, Spotify, or Naxos Music Library. Keep in mind that not all recordings are created equal; listen to several, and be judicious in choosing what you listen to. Recordings will help you learn the style, tempo, and context of an excerpt. You may even find it beneficial to play along with some recordings to better hear how your part fits in.

Strategize each excerpt. Some excerpts challenge your technique; others will test your musicality. In approaching an unfamiliar excerpt, try first to figure out what makes it difficult: Speed? Phrasing? Bow control? Intonation? Rhythm? Dynamics? It will likely be some combination of these. Identifying what makes an excerpt “an excerpt” will help you strategize how best to practice it.

Choose a tempo carefully. For fast excerpts, start very slowly, and gradually work your way up to where you can perform the music flawlessly at the piece’s performance tempo (recordings will help you figure this out). Be patient, and resist increasing the speed before you are ready. For slow excerpts, starting under tempo is also helpful. Focus on intonation, control, and the quality of transition from each note to the next.

Listen to yourself! Critical self-evaluation is your best tool. Focus on hearing the evenness of your technique, tone quality, articulation, and intonation. Are you playing in the style of the piece? Are your dynamics contrasting enough? Metronomes and tuners can be very helpful here as well. Remember that your perception might not be as accurate while you are playing; record yourself using your phone or computer, and play it back to listen more objectively.

In addition to these general guidelines, there are many terrific resources for specific instruments available in books and online. Here are a few select websites which provide scores, recordings, and even practical advice on tackling many of the standard excerpts. Good luck and have fun!

http://www.orchestralbassoon.com/
http://www.hornexcerpts.org/
http://www.trumpetexcerpts.org/
http://www.tromboneexcerpts.org/
http://www.violinexcerpts.com/
http://violaexcerpts.com/
http://celloexcerpts.com/
http://www.doublebassexcerpts.com/