

## **Music at the Next Level – What’s the Best Fit for Me?**

So you’re thinking of continuing with music in college? That’s great! There are many different options depending on what school and what area of the country you find yourself. This document was written to help you ask the right questions when considering music at the next level.

### **Music Department Offerings**

Schools may offer Majors & Minors in the following (There may be more, these are popular):

- Music Education
- Music Performance
- Jazz Studies
- Music Composition
- Music Technology
- Music Business

Sometimes, a minor may be more broadly titled as simply a minor in music. For many of these areas, the courses you will take as a first year student will be very similar – a music theory course, lessons, participation in an ensemble, possibly an ear training and sight singing course . . . even if you’re not planning on pursuing a major or minor in music, you may still be able to perform in an ensemble or take lessons at your school for credit, and those credits may fulfill elective requirements for your degree! Ask to see the curriculum for different tracks you are considering, and look at a program of studies to see how often these courses are offered. Plan ahead to make sure you don’t get stuck your spring semester realizing a specific course is only offered in the fall. See where tracks overlap, and take those courses early so that you give yourself more opportunity in the future if you are considering multiple potential areas of focus.

### **What questions should I ask when I’m looking at potential schools?**

#### **Studio Questions**

If you are studying music in college, your relationship with your studio professor is hugely important – you’ll be spending the next few years with this person – you want to make sure that you connect with their teaching style and personality. See if you can visit the school and set up a lesson with them. You may be able to sit in on a lesson they are giving and see them rehearse some studio chamber groups. Contact current students in the studio to get an inside scoop on the culture of the school. The music office will generally be able to help you make these contacts.

- Ask how many faculty members there are for the studio.
- What determines which students study with each faculty member? Is there a chance you would be studying with a graduate student?
- How long are lesson times? Are the lesson times the same for majors vs. minors? How about for Music Education majors vs. Music Performance majors.
- Are the faculty members for your studio full time or adjunct? How much time will they be spending on campus – how accessible will they be during the week?
- Are there times when the whole studio gets together?
- What are recent alums of the studio currently doing?

## **Ensemble Questions**

- What ensembles are offered?
- Is ensemble participation limited to majors, or is membership open to the entire student body?
- Are there auditions for the ensembles? Are the auditions blind? When will the audition music be made available, and where can you find it?
- Is there a stipend for students participating in ensembles? Sometimes student musicians will receive financial compensation for the service they are providing to the school community for their participation in an ensemble. If so, make sure you ask how you could become eligible for financial remuneration.

## **Scholarship Opportunities**

Make sure you ask what scholarship opportunities are available, and seek out financial aid and grant packages. You want to make sure you understand all of your options. Sometimes, speaking directly to the studio professor and letting them know your position can be helpful. If there's a specific school you are committed to, but cannot afford, let them know. Sometimes a school will be more willing to offer scholarship money to a student who is a "sure bet" to attend vs. having their offer tied up with a student who may decide to go elsewhere. Find out when the scholarship deadlines are for each school you apply to. That way, you can schedule your auditions accordingly, to ensure you are eligible for as much financial aid as possible.

## **Composition**

- Are there student groups on campus that will play student compositions?
- Is there a composer's society where students get together to share compositions and bounce ideas off of each other?
- How often are concerts held showcasing new music?
- What software is used for composition, and is it provided to students?

## **Music Technology**

- How much opportunity will you have to work in the campus studio?
- What equipment & software is available to you, and what are you expected to purchase?
- As a studio do you produce albums of other student ensembles?

## **The Audition**

For most schools, to be accepted as a music major or minor, you need to set up an audition. Schools will have multiple audition dates, generally January through March. Earlier auditions may set you up in a better position to secure potential scholarship money. Ask to see if that is the case.

Find out how to set up auditions. Do you need to send in an audition tape beforehand? Find out early so that if you need to put together recordings you can give yourself enough time to do it right.

Dress up - suit, tie, the whole deal! First impressions are huge. You want to convey a level of professionalism and preparation in everything you do. Carry yourself with confidence. Many

times an audition will turn into a mini lesson, and professors may offer you suggestions on your playing. Don't make excuses or try to defend a way you prepared something – this meeting is a two-way interview – it's an opportunity for you to see whether you can connect with the faculty, and it's also an opportunity for the faculty to see whether you are open to new ideas, and to see how you respond to instruction – Faculty want to see someone who is teachable – someone they will enjoy spending significant time with over the next four years.

What should you play? Don't guess, put together a repertoire list with your private instructor, and then contact the studio professors at your prospective schools to see whether they approve of the literature. Your goal should be to prepare one audition that can be played at each audition you take. Many schools will post literature online detailing what they are looking for.

You can expect to have to perform a prepared piece, sight read, and play through additional exercises such as scales (major and the three forms of minor) and arpeggios. Pre-screening recordings may be necessary. The auditions themselves may also be recorded. You may also need to turn in SAT scores, a transcript, and your G.P.A. Some schools will have an interview, and a theory and/or ear training & sight-singing portion of the audition as well. Make sure you ask ahead of time so you know exactly what to expect and how to prepare.

What are professors looking for?

- A sense of passion for what you do.
- Confidence.
- Strong fundamentals on your instrument.
- Openness to new perspectives.
- Excitement & enthusiasm.
- Preparation & self-motivation.
- How do you recover from any potential mistakes in your audition?

They are not expecting to hear professionals! They want to see someone who is yearning to get better – that is why you are applying. It is their job to help you achieve your potential over the next four years. Remember, some auditions may turn into lessons. They are seeing how you will react to input on your playing, and also providing genuine feedback on how you can improve! Be gracious for the opportunity to get the lesson, and thank them for their time. If they offer you suggestions about your playing, or refer a resource or musician to check out, follow up with them after the audition (a week or two after) with follow-up questions. This shows your initiative, and that you were truly listening and will act on their advice.

*\*Don't let one mistake wipe out all of the other attributes you have to offer. Excellence is more than absence of error. You are not just presenting a musical selection, you are presenting who you are as a person – they'll be lucky to have you!*

### **Questions about the School**

There's no substitute for visiting a campus in-person, and do try to visit when school is in session! You can familiarize yourself with the school's atmosphere, campus spirit, get a sense of the kinds of students and faculty who are on campus, observe student life, etc. Sit in on lectures and lessons, and interact with staff and students. Ask about shadowing a student in your

prospective major to gain a new perspective. And most importantly, ask yourself, “Is this a place I can be comfortable? Do I like this program?”

- What is your access to practice rooms?
- How many undergraduates vs. graduate students?
- What are the concert and rehearsal facilities?
- What is the distance to the nearest urban center (opportunities to hear live music and get gigs)
- What are the academic standards, do you need to maintain a certain G.P.A. for your major or for any scholarships for which you are applying?
- What is the program’s mission statement? Do you believe in the faculty’s approach to learning?
- How will this school better prepare you to be a teacher, to interview for jobs, to audition for jobs? Ask them.
- Is the school in a location that you may want to live? You’ll be building connections and a network while at school that will inevitably open up job opportunities near the school, so finding a location near where you’d like to eventually live can be opportunistic.
- Evaluate the affordability of the program and explore all of your financial assistance options, from aid packages to grants to potential scholarships.

### **OK, Where do I start looking?**

- Downbeat magazine publishes a Where to Study Jazz digital edition.
- School Band & Orchestra magazine has an annual Music Student’s College Search & Career Guide.
- Find scholarship opportunities on the National Association for Music Education’s website.
- Try a summer program at a school you’re interested in.
- Ask your private teachers and your music teachers – when guest clinicians come, and when you make honor ensembles, tell those people what you’re interested in and see what recommendations they have.

### **Final Thoughts**

I hope that music has served as a valuable outlet for you during your time in high school. Whether it was the social scene, the friendships made, a stress reliever, a powerful personal connection with the music, your artistic growth . . . being a part of a music scene is a special opportunity, and there’s no reason why you can’t continue to have valuable music experiences beyond your high school experience! Go for it, and enjoy the places that music will take you.

It’s wonderful to go to an internationally recognized school on paper, but consider what the cost will be – years of loneliness and exhaustion, sacrificing friends, fun, and your health in order to excel – that’s not worth it. Will you be the bottom man on the totem pole because graduate students get all of the attention and the opportunities? That’s not going to be worth it . . . The right school for you is the one that makes you feel energetic and enthusiastic about your work and studies – it is the one where you connect with the faculty, and feel at home.

If you are considering music as a major, you simply can't settle for just trying to be good enough. You have to have the passion that drives you to be excited to get into the practice room in the morning *before* class begins, that propels you to *want* to get in front of students to teach – whether it's teaching, performing, or composing, success in this field requires impassioned and truly motivated professionals. If you find you're not “all in,” find a new profession – music can continue to play an incredibly important role in your life; it may just not be the right fit to also be your primary profession.