

## Applying to Music College/Conservatory

*A collection of observations from parents of DSA musicians (class of 2007) who survived the college audition experience and went on to see their children venture off into the world of college/conservatory music study.*

First of all, if planning, deciding, applying, figuring, finagling, wondering, and waiting for college admissions is making you feel worried, frantic or even a little crazy, please know you are not alone. This is hard work! Not hard to accomplish, but just hard.

### Pre-audition trips

- Usually take place around spring break of junior year or early in the senior year. Plan carefully - some schools have spring break the same time as DSA. Even if the school is “closed” for spring break, you can set up appointments with someone from admissions to talk to, or even try for a walk-in meeting. Many of us last year chose to make those trips early in the senior year. That worked well, and it felt more immediate and imminent (because it was!) to the student. We also were able to actually attend planned events – “student for the day,” and some of the student tour guides were newly entering freshmen with whom the senior could easily relate.
- These trips help with decisions about which college will work for your student, and help rule out which ones aren’t right for you. Encourage students to apply at “safety schools”, where they could be happy, as well as at their top choices.
- **Get a private lesson while there.** When planning the trip, email or call the department that handles the instrument/program your student is interested in, or contact teachers directly if you can. Try to fit in a private lesson with the main instructor, or one who is available. Ask ahead what their fee is for a private lesson. If they aren’t available for a lesson, see if they will simply meet with the student. These contacts are invaluable in the decision-making process, and they can help deflate some of the anxiety for the student. One lesson resulted in the head of the department waiving the audition for us! (A great ego booster, but don’t count on that one – it was almost a fluke.)
- Sometimes you can get information on specifics:
  - How many of your instrument are they looking for?
  - What do freshmen play in (orchestra, etc.)
- Teacher options: we narrowed our search based on the size of Vinny's instrument faculty. Chicago and New School had half a dozen jazz saxophone faculty members. Chicago allows and encourages him to study with all of them over the four years. What if you choose a school with only one sax or flute professor, and you don't like them??? (Starble)
- Remember that instructors sometimes leave a program, so be careful if you choose the school solely on a single instructor. The instructor is the single most important factor for some students. Leaving does happen, so you may want to ask frank questions if the instructor is of high importance. Ask others than the actual person in question.
- Ask how often students get their first choice of instructors.
- Look into the specialties of the instructing professors. Justin went with Boston Conservatory because of Nancy Zeltzman who is a world-class marimbist and travels, performs and records. He also spent the prior two summers at music camps that helped him get to know the instructors, i.e. Juilliard summer percussion, Tanglewood (Boston Symphony, BU) and the Nancy Zeltsman summer percussion festival. This is more for freshman through juniors. (Doute)
  - Related to the camp experience: For those of you who think it's too early to be looking at colleges, the camp choices can be a great way for the younger high school student to get a sense of whether music is the field they want to stick with; also they are making friends as well as making connections with instructors and conductors who may really make a difference down the road, when school choices are being made. Madeleine has very close friends from both Rocky Ridge Music Camp (where she attended from 8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> grades) and Interlochen (where she attended after 11<sup>th</sup> grade) at her conservatory now.
- If possible, take a day or so to learn the layout of the city that you visit, including subways, hotels, etc. That way, come audition day, you'll already know how long it'll take to get to the audition. The more familiar your student is with the surroundings, the less anxious he/she will be.
- It's always interesting to travel with a high school senior, especially when the senior is your own. It's a wonderful opportunity, without the pressure of auditions.

## Applications

- **Go through admissions websites carefully.** Make a list of requirements, and be sure to meet all deadlines. Don't be afraid to help out/be over-involved (unless your student objects!). This is often too much for students to do on their own, especially if they are applying to multiple colleges. Even if your student is working on the applications, it is a good idea for you to look up the information yourself, make your own list of deadlines, check the website often (amazingly, things can change!), and talk to students about these deadlines even if they get annoyed at you.
- Encourage the student to write essays early and get feedback on them; pacing is very important.
- Help your kid fill out the applications, or at least proofread them before the student hits the submit button, because incomplete applications happen often.
- Most applications must be submitted online. Complete and submit the applications a week or so early; don't wait until the last day applications are due (often the last day of November). Everyone else will be trying to send applications then and the network may be overloaded. With at least 2 of our 8 applications, we spent time on the phone with the admissions office/tech support folks, to iron out problems with our submission. If we hadn't been a few days early, we could have lost those applications.
- Be prepared to pay multiple application fees. They can run from \$35 to \$100 for each application.

## Audition recordings

- **The pre-screening CD is very important.** Deadlines (postmark or over the internet) for recordings, if required, are the same as the applications themselves! Allow lots of time. Really consider the best way to do this. Your student's private teacher will probably have some good advice.
- You may need to make a number of different recordings, schools will have different requirements.
- Encourage the student to think about what might work best – does he or she want the teacher to be present at the recording session?
- Be prepared to book your studio time a month or two in advance, and ask about the studio rental fee.
- Be prepared to hire an accompanist/rhythm section.
- For Madeleine, what worked best was having her teacher present as well – we paid for the teacher, the accompanist, and the recording studio. We chose an out-of-town studio, so the planning was complicated.

## Audition trips

- **These are the most emotionally exhausting**, for good and bad, no matter how prepared your student is.
- Include "safety school" auditions. Even the best musician may have a "bad" audition (all musicians will tell you this!), which will hurt if they put all their eggs in one basket.
- Audition preparation: know exactly the pieces they expect you to play and build a plan specifically with your private teacher to prepare those pieces. For jazz, audition pieces were required to be memorized. (Starble)
- Audition simulation: If the audition supplies the band members, arrange with teachers and friends (pay them if necessary) to simulate playing with a live group.
- If your audition is with a follow-along CD make sure that recording is as professional as possible.
- On the audition trip, be prepared to take really good care of yourself and your student.
- Remember that all auditions will be different: instructors from the program may attend or not, the auditioners may appear interested or be friendly or they may not, they may ask for a straight performance or treat the audition like a class. Be prepared for anything.
- Consider fatigue, nerves, the need to relax and have time before the actual event. Don't take it personally if he/she doesn't want to talk to you that day, snaps at you, then really, really needs you around when you least expect it.
- Scheduling: try to space the auditions if you can.
- For horn players: a "silent mute" is well worth the investment (\$50-\$100, Flescher-Hinton). Bring it with you on the audition trip so your musician can practice in hotel rooms, even late at night.

- For percussionists: find a practice facility in the city of the audition. We found a great place in NYC that is a practice/recording studio that rents rooms and equipment by the hour. We had access to full size marimba, vibraphones and even timpani. I can't remember the name now but if someone needs it I can get it. I remember that it is located in the "Hell's Kitchen" area, not far from Juilliard and the Lincoln Center. (Doute)
- The classical auditions (in our case, clarinet) may require that the student hire a specific accompanist from their list. When you receive that list, call the accompanist immediately (their schedules fill up fast) to schedule a practice time prior to the actual audition. The practice session will help the student feel more comfortable with the accompanist.

## Financial aid

- Again, **go through financial aid websites carefully**. Make a list of requirements, and be sure to meet all deadlines. Don't be afraid to help out/be over-involved. This is often too much for the students to do on their own, especially if they are applying to multiple colleges.
- Most of the financial aid applications require parents to fill out long sections. Some of us even met with our tax accountant to go over some of the questions. In the long run, this was helpful. Also, don't be afraid to call the school's financial aid office with questions. The office staff folks are often very helpful. They know these schools are expensive, and they are willing to help make sure your financial aid forms are adequately submitted – however, they are busy and expect you to get your part done in a timely fashion.
- Submit your FAFSA report early, before the end of January if possible. Some schools also require the CSS Financial Aid Profile, which is equally as time consuming.
- Complete the FAFSA (and CSS, if applicable) even if you think you don't qualify for scholarships or grants. All federally insured student loans have a lower interest rate than private loans, and they require a FAFSA.
- Scholarship: ask the hard questions (usually the parent) of the school you are applying to about how they award scholarship. We found out that if the department you are applying to is flush with saxophones then they are unlikely to a) admit you and b) give you money. If on the other hand they need saxophones they are willing to give large awards to draw students. Also, ask what kind of endowment they have for awarding scholarships based strictly on merit. Some schools like CalArts strictly award on need only. (Starble)
- If you/your student are taking out loans, once your child is accepted, call the financial aid office and ask how to apply for loans. Each school is different, except for the fact that their process is way easier than their website makes it seem.

## Waiting for results and recuperating from the ordeal – backlash?

- When all the applications and fees are submitted and the auditions are done, you will be exhausted and relieved. Your musician will be 100 gazillion times more exhausted than you! They may not want to see that instrument, and may even experience doubt about the whole decision to go to music school. "**Senioritis**" **sets in with a bang**, since they have been so focused on auditions for many months of the senior year. Don't despair.
- The weeks that lead up to April 1<sup>st</sup> can be excruciating. Again, this will be hard for you, but the student is having an even harder time than you are! You may feel you've "paid your dues" and don't deserve to be treated this way. Think again!
- Encourage the student to try not to take rejections personally. Schools sometimes hold auditions even when they are accepting only graduate students for a particular instrument. Each audition played is another chance for our children to face the music (ha!) and show the talents they have on hand on that particular day.

Remember, this is a process experienced only by a group of amazing young people and the adults who care for them. When it's over, the students will be off on their next adventures, and you'll be so darn proud (along with waiting for that next text message to show up!)

*Lara Newton & Steve Replogle (Madeleine, classical clarinet, New England Conservatory, Boston)*  
*Cindy Bittner & Andy Baird (Sam, jazz trombone, Manhattan School of Music, New York)*  
*Michael & Elise Starble (Vinny, jazz saxophone, Roosevelt University, Chicago)*  
*Jessie & Larry Doute (Justin, classical percussion, Boston Conservatory, Boston)*