If there were a category in the Guinness Book of World Records for the person who has served on the most jazz audition panels, I just might be a contender. Throughout my career, I have listened to myriad jazz auditions and juries and been part of and privy to the conversations of the panelists/jurors immediately following. And, I’ve subsequently seen which students receive the big scholarships or placements in the top groups, and why. This has given me keen insight into how a well-executed audition can reap big scholarship awards. Indeed, I’ve learned precisely what the panelists want to hear.

Based on these experiences, I offer my advice on how to prepare for and perform your auditions. I also provide pointers regarding letters of recommendation, how many schools to audition for, repertoire and more. Follow these tips, and you just might be going to college for free.

Preparation

It's impossible to overstate the importance of preparation. For all the schools you're interested in applying to, visit their websites right away so that you know all the critical deadlines. Be sure to learn 1) the application requirements, 2) recommendation letter procedures, 3) due dates, 4) audition requirements, 5) audition procedures and 6) audition dates.

Start preparing now for your audition. Listen to definitive recordings, memorize heads and changes, transcribe solos by the masters and practice with play-along recordings daily (just like you were playing a seven-night-per-week gig). Learn as many standards and jazz classics as possible, and play with a live rhythm section as often as you can.

It's crucial to select audition tunes you know extremely well and have been playing for months. (Don't make the mistake of trying out a new tune at an audition.) Play mock auditions for your teachers, family and friends so that you'll be more comfortable when it's time for the actual audition.

Plan to audition for as many schools as possible, including all those within reasonable driving distance from your home. The more you audition, the better you get at it.

For each school on your list, apply early but audition late. The later you audition within the acceptable time frame, the better. This gives you more time to practice and prepare.

Think about the clothes you're going to wear to the audition. Don't wait until the last minute to select a proper outfit. Be sure to dress up: Men should wear a jacket and tie. Women should wear a dress or pants with a nice top.

Work on your sight-reading. Do it daily. Two excellent books are Melodic Rhythms for Guitar by William Leavitt and Reading Contemporary Guitar Rhythms by M.T. Szymbczak. Both are good for all treble clef instruments. For bass clef, I suggest Develop Sight Reading for All Bass Clef Instruments, Volumes 1 & 2 by Gaston Dufresne.

Letters of Recommendation

All scholarship-granting institutions will require you to provide letters of recommendation with your application. Be sure to request letters from your band director and primary private lesson teacher, plus noted artists who know your playing. (Often the more famous the name, the more clout the letter will have.) Ask for these letters at least six weeks before the due date.

Send your writers an updated copy of your curriculum vitae (CV) that includes all your school and professional experience, awards won, prominent players with whom you’ve performed, honor ensembles with which you’ve performed, tours you have taken and jazz camps you’ve attended. Make sure that your CV looks professional, with standard formatting and no typos or misspelled words.

Provide your writers with specific instructions on how to submit their letters (e.g., online, via regular mail, etc.) and the due date. Provide them with the exact name, title, mailing address and email address of the person to whom the letter is to be written (e.g., director of admissions) for each school to which you are applying.

Ask your writers if they’d be willing to “cc” a copy of the letter to others who might have influence—each school’s dean of music, director of jazz studies and primary instructor of your instrument. Provide your writers with their email addresses as well.

Have as many letters written as possible. For example, let’s say a particular school requires three letters of recommendation or three recommendation forms completed online. In addition to those three official letters, you could also ask other people to “put in a good word” on your behalf. You might ask a teacher or musician to email the director of admissions, dean of music, director of jazz studies and/or primary teacher of your instrument. An extra letter or two from an accomplished artist or teacher can make a difference.

Check with each college’s admissions office two weeks before the recommendation letter due date to see which letters have been received. For those not yet received, gently and respectfully remind your writers of the due date (via email). Do the same three days before the due date. If any of your writers missed the deadlines, notify them.
by email that it’s not too late—a late letter is better than no letter. Provide them again with the names and email addresses of the recipients.

Send each writer a thank-you note once you know their recommendation letters have been received.

Send an email update to your writers once you’ve decided on which school you’ll be attending to inform them of your decision and thank them again for their help. If you’ve received a scholarship, let them know and thank them for their part in making that happen as well.

**Audition Repertoire**

When it comes to audition repertoire, the best preparation is to memorize dozens of tunes. Fortunately, most institutions help students narrow things down a bit by specifying the type of material they’ll be expected to play at their audition. Visit the website for each school to review the required audition repertoire.

When you arrive for your audition, bring very readable lead sheets for piano, bass and drums, just in case a house combo is there to accompany you.

Have at least two tunes memorized in each category for those schools that provide a choice of styles (e.g., uptempo bebop tune, straight-eighth contemporary tune, ballad, etc.). For those schools that provide a specific tune list from which to choose (e.g., two tunes from Column A, two from Column B, etc.), have at least two tunes memorized in each category.

Know at least three blues heads, and be able to play them in both F and B-flat. Know at least three "Rhythm" changes tunes in the key of B-flat.

Quote from other blues and "Rhythm" changes tunes (as well as from solos of the masters playing on these tunes) when soloing on blues and "Rhythm" changes. Do not over-quote (i.e., quote sparingly), but your playing should subtly let the audition panel hear that you know multiple blues and "Rhythm" changes tunes and that you’ve studied solos by the masters.

Keep in mind that playing well on easier tunes trumps playing poorly on more difficult tunes, and playing well at a medium tempo trumps playing poorly at a fast tempo.

**Scales & Arpeggios**

During your audition, you can expect panelists to ask you to execute some scales and arpeggios off the top of your head. With this in mind, you should know and be able to play the most common jazz chord scales and their related arpeggios in all keys.

When playing scales, start on the root, then ascend to the highest practical scale tone on your instrument, descend to the lowest practical scale tone on your instrument, and ascend to and conclude on the root (the same note on which you started).

When playing arpeggios, start on the root, ascend the chord tones up to the ninth, then
Tips for Rhythm Section Players

- **Pianists**
  - Make sure you can comp chords to all of the tunes you’re playing.
  - Be able to comp two-handed voicings when accompanying others, and one-handed voicings (left hand) when accompanying yourself.
  - When comping behind a soloist, make it obvious that you are listening and responding.
  - Demonstrate the following techniques when comping: right hand comping with left hand comping, two-hand unison soloing (hands two octaves apart) and block chordal soloing.
  - Prepare at least one solo piece (i.e., a standard to be played as a chord solo).

- **Bassists**
  - Outline the harmony at hand clearly when walking bass lines (e.g., play correct thirds, sevenths and alterations), landing on the roots every time as the chords change during the first chorus. You may land on other chord tones as the chords change on subsequent choruses; however, the root should still be attacked on the first beat of each chord most of the time, especially at crucial points in the chord (e.g., the first bar of each section), clearly anchoring the form.
  - Use skips, drops and triplets sparingly. Use a wide range of the instrument, from low open E up to at least high G (sixth position/G string). Construct lines that are linear (scalar and chromatic) as well as chordal. Play long, connecting notes (legato). Be sure to swing.
  - Make sure you can play the head and solo on all tunes. Play at least a portion of your solo in thumb position. Use vibrato sparingly.

- **Guitarists & Vibraphonists**
  - Make sure you can comp chords to all of the tunes you’re playing.
  - Comp four-note, rootless voicings for the most part.
  - When comping behind a soloist, make it obvious that you are listening and responding.

- **Drummers**
  - Prepare to play the following grooves on the drum set at all tempos (in addition to whatever snare drum and mallet requirements there are): swing (including both a 2 feel and straightahead jazz 4 feel with both sticks and brushes), bossa nova, samba, rock and funk.
  - Be able to trade fours with yourself (alternating between four bars of time and four bars of soloing). Likewise, be able to trade eights with yourself.
  - Be able to trade 12-bar blues choruses with yourself (alternating between 12 bars of time and 12 bars of soloing).
  - Be able to play a tune completely solo, stating the head (rhythmically) around the kit, playing time, trading fours or eights with yourself, and playing the head out. Make sure the form is clear.
  - When playing with a soloist and/or rhythm section, make sure it is obvious that you’re listening and responding to the other players. Delineate the form clearly (via fills, playing the bridge differently, changing cymbals for different soloists, etc.). Make it obvious that you know the tune.
  - Remember: “TGIF” (time, groove, interaction, feel). —JB Dyas
before the end of the head and the beginning of your solo; fade out after your solo is over.

**Piano for Non-Pianists**

It’s a good idea for every instrumentalist and vocalist to be able to play some piano. You don’t need Art Tatum-level chops—just enough ability to demonstrate your knowledge of harmony and give a sense of your overall musicianship.

So don’t be surprised if one of your audition panelists asks you to play a little piano. Be sure you’re able to comp two-handed and one-handed voicings for II-V-I progressions in all major and minor keys, blues in B-flat and F, and “Rhythm” changes in B-flat.

Also, I suggest you be able to play all the tunes in Volume 54 of the Jamey Aebersold Jazz Play-A-Long series (Maiden Voyage) as follows: head with the right hand, comp with the left hand; solo with the right hand, comp with the left hand; and two-handed comping.

**At the Interview**

You’ll be expected to do more than just play great at your audition. You’ll probably have to do some serious talking as well. Practice this. Get together with a teacher to practice talking about your goals as a musician—especially if you are somewhat shy or quiet.

During the interview portion of your audition, be sure to speak loudly, clearly and definitively. When asked about your goals, mention (as applicable) your desire to:

- be a well-rounded, thorough musician in addition to becoming an artist with your own voice.
- perform, compose, arrange and teach.
- give back; promulgate and perpetuate the art form (teaching, conducting clinics).
- serve the underserved (e.g., participate in school outreach programs that teach young students about jazz and its values, including teamwork, democracy and persistence).

Remember, your audition panelists are people, too. Be personable, serious (but not stiff), confident (but not arrogant), humble and deferential in the way you speak and carry yourself. Do your best to enjoy the experience, and make an earnest effort to learn something about your panelists and the program they represent.

**Tune Learning**

It has been my experience that, in general, the more tunes a student knows, the better jazz player he or she is. Having a memorized repertoire of standards and jazz classics gives you more breadth, depth and credibility as a musician. Hence, the more tunes one knows, usually the higher the scholarship award.

A bachelor’s degree at a top school can cost about $200,000 nowadays, so you should aim to get as large a scholarship as you can. Although I haven’t conducted an empirical research study on the topic, anecdotal evidence I’ve accumulated over the past two decades points to a correlation of about $1,000 of scholarship money per tune learned. For example, I’ve found that if a student knows 50 tunes, then he or she is likely to receive a 25 percent scholarship (i.e., $50,000 toward the total $200,000 cost). If the student knows 100 tunes, then a 50 percent scholarship is the norm. And I’ve never met a student who knew 200 tunes who didn’t receive a full ride!

So start memorizing tunes now. It will pay off, literally. For a methodical procedure on how to memorize and retain tunes (and which ones to learn), see my two-part article “Methods for Fighting the Epidemic of Tune Illiteracy” in the May 2010 and August 2010 issues of DownBeat.

**Performance Clarity**

Finally, remember that clarity is paramount. Often, the final judgment as to the amount of your scholarship award is based more on how clear you are than anything else. This means that your playing should clearly demonstrate that you are in the know, that is, you know the tune, you know the changes, you know the language of the style and you know the definitive recordings. “Skating” on your solo doesn’t fool anyone. Now go for it!

---

**Additional Resources**

- “Prepare To Nail Your Auditions,” by Geoffrey Himes, DownBeat, October 2013
- majoringinmusic.com
- jazzinamerica.org/jazzresources/jazzeducation/college
- jazzstandards.com
- hopestreetmusicstudios.com/articles/100-must-know-jazz-tunes
- jobsearch.about.com/od/sampleresumes/a/sampleresume2.htm

Dr. JB Dyas is Vice President for Education and Curriculum Development at the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz at UCLA, and he formerly served as the executive director for the Brubeck Institute at University of the Pacific.