

A Guide to Military Band Auditions:

Preparation

By Matthew Shipes

One of the best and most sought-after job opportunities in the realm of tuba and euphonium performance exist in our nation's premier military bands. It stands to reason that a common concern held by students and aspiring professionals is how they should prepare to audition for these bands, and, more importantly, what they can expect at the auditions themselves. There are currently around 25 euphonium positions, and 36 tuba positions in the 4 DC bands, premier academy bands, and US Army Field Band. While this may seem like a large number (and certainly feels that way when attending various band concerts and events in the DC area!), it is important to realize that each of these positions can, and often are, kept for anywhere from 20 - 30 years by each individual. With an increasing pool of talented, educated, and qualified players in the world today, these auditions are consistently highly competitive and demanding on each individual musician.

As someone who went through this entire process of preparing for, participating in, and ultimately performing successfully at a premier band audition, I wanted to share my experiences and knowledge in a clear and concise manner to help others on a similar path. However, just like there is no one "perfect" mouthpiece for everyone to use on their horn, my experiences alone may only be useful to me, or only partially useful to others. To that end, I decided to reach out to a collection of 30 premier band members who have all, by definition, prepared for and won their own respective auditions. I asked each of them to answer a series of questions about their audition experience and have compiled that data into a usable format. This larger sample pool will show commonalities between others' experiences and ultimately be more useful to a larger group of people.

What's Involved in a military audition?

From the 30 people interviewed, the average number of auditions taken before finding success is 5. In addition, 5 won their first audition, while 7 took 7 or more attempts. Personally, I took 5 auditions before winning a position with the United States Air Force Band. Every band has different requirements and expectations leading up to the audition. These certainly change over time and may be different from one audition to another. General requirements include preliminary recordings, resumes, or full-profile photos. Don't be surprised if you are also asked to meet with a recruiter for pre-screening, or even attend MEPS before the audition (the latter is usually only necessary when travel is being paid for by the auditioning band for live semi-final and final rounds).

The audition itself typically involves 2-3 rounds, and includes prepared excerpts, sight reading, section or chamber playing, as well as a short interview. There are things we can do to prepare for much of this on the horn, but there is a sizeable portion of the audition process that has

nothing to do with how you play. This article will present ideas, suggestions, and concepts that relate to the actual musical preparation for the audition.

Preparing for the audition

If this were a dissertation, my prospectus might lead with the following big idea: “No one has identical preparation.” Of those interviewed, everyone demonstrated unique qualities in describing how they prepared. The biggest commonality is that everyone, without exception, displays a high degree of inquisitiveness about how they practice and improve.

The last thing many of us need to hear is that we should practice our excerpts slowly, and play with a metronome. I think everyone who may take an audition would like to play with technical perfection, and probably understands how to work on and eventually get closer to that goal. With that said, I would argue that no winning audition has ever demonstrated literal *perfection*, and that there are many other important elements that might lead to a successful audition.

Similarities

Almost everyone that I surveyed mentioned the following preparation ideas:

- Record yourself
- Listen to many different recordings of the excerpts
- Always use a metronome
- Practice Sight Reading Daily
- Practice with organized mock auditions

These are each concepts that require little explanation and should be performed regularly. In my opinion, anyone seriously pursuing this career path would know to do these things already, or would certainly be encouraged to by their studio teacher or mentor. However, two other ideas kept recurring in the data that are worth mentioning:

1. Be sure to practice fundamentals, not just the excerpts

“[I spent] 2-3 hours a day [practicing], not necessarily on the audition excerpts. I was more focused on fundamentals - having a good sound, good rhythm, and good intonation.”

- SSG Toby Furr (euphonium, The United States Army Band, “*Pershing’s Own*”)

In my own experience, I found limited success focusing intently only on the excerpts themselves. At some point, a 999th repetition of *Festive Overture* yields diminishing returns. Before my successful audition, I certainly stepped away from only practicing excerpts every day for hours and focused more on the fundamentals of playing. I think this idea can be summarized as focusing on “sounding good” and being comfortable rather than reaching for perfection.

2. Employ Positive Visualization

“I worked on my mindset as much as I worked on excerpt preparation....I had to truly believe that I was going to win as I prepared....I would have [liked to focus] on mindset sooner. I believe it's the most important thing [for] separating yourself from the rest of the applicants.”

- MU1 David Miller (trombone, The United States Navy Band)

“I decided that I was absolutely going to win this audition. I don't think I had made that commitment in the past - my mental mindset had been more, 'it would be nice to win.' I also focused on mental preparation and had a list of positive affirmations I would go through every day....I would tell myself that I was going to win this audition. I was absolutely convinced that there was no other option.”

-Premier Band Member

Next, the idea of positive thinking can be incredibly powerful in music performance. So much of what we do as students and professionals is very negative. For example, have you ever said or thought to yourself “I suck?” Private lessons are often (by design) an exploration of everything you are doing wrong, and, if you are doing it correctly, practice sessions are as well. Before important performances or auditions though, it is important to think on the positive side. Try to see how much progress you have made since the last attempt, think of your successes, and even try to imagine yourself being successful in that moment at the audition.

For me, I was able to remain positive at my last audition by focusing on other positive things in my life away from the horn. We often place so much weight on things like performances and auditions, and the truth is that we are not a “failure” for performing below our expectations. It is just another step forward in the right direction.

New Ideas

While there were many common ideas presented, several stuck out as unique that might be a refreshing take on things.

1. Both critique and give positive comments of your recordings.

“After my practice sessions, I would listen to the recording, give a positive comment, and a critique. This helped me to set up my main focal point of the next practice session.”

- TSgt Nikki Hill (clarinet, The United States Air Force Band)

Again, this idea falls into the category of positive thinking or visualization. We are all told at some point to record ourselves in practice to become our own teachers. Part of teaching is recognizing the advances, and not just areas for improvement. Take a few moments to find something **good** about each excerpt or piece of music that you record.

2. Create a midi version of the excerpt, play along, and record that.

“[I listened] to myself, to recordings, and to myself with recordings. Listening to myself play with recordings and with midi (for time and pitch!) revealed all the issues. Also I was very realistic with my preparation. I know that some excerpts are difficult but I felt each one could go well 99% of the time. I didn't want to feel shaky on any.”

- SSgt Hiram Diaz (euphonium, The United States Marine Band, “*President’s Own*”)

This very interesting idea suggests playing along with a “perfect” representation of the excerpt, obviously intensely training the technical aspects of playing. I think this a great idea because anything that helps us step away from playing slowly with a metronome is a beneficial use of our time.

3. Schedule additional solo performances.

“I also tried to schedule as many solo outings as I could leading up to the audition to get used to performing alone since the bulk of my playing was in ensembles that I would gig with.”

- SSG Jeremy McBride (The United States Army Band, “*Pershing's Own*”)

This person added more stressful events to their schedule in order to prepare for the inevitably stressful audition day. Also, scheduling more performances creates more chances for one to have positive experiences that can be drawn upon for the important audition.

4. Practice journal: plan every session.

“I organized my practice much better than before. I had a set plan for every session and I kept a practice journal. I recorded myself more than ever before and critiqued my playing from the recordings.”

- Premier Band Member

I have always been told to keep a practice journal, but it is something I have rarely done. Inevitably, preparing audition excerpts was so time consuming that I did need to keep a journal if only to track which days I would practice which excerpts. Even a handful of short excerpts can present more problems that can be addressed in a single practice session, or even in a day. This tool kept me organized.

5. Practice the physical requirements for audition day.

"I...stayed up as late as 2am and woke up as early as 6am for a solid 2 weeks."

- SSG Irving Ray (euphonium, The United States Army Band, "*Pershings Own*")

"I remember doing a lot more "mock audition" practice, where I'd play for a microphone after very little warm-up, and do several excerpts in a row with no break....I also imagined all the details of playing: walking into the room, sitting down, making myself out of breath to simulate nervousness (running up flights of stairs or doing push-ups), and trying to make a consistent starting tone on every excerpt. These were all things that seemed like they could trip me up before even starting to play. "

- SSG Simon Wildman (tuba, The United States Marine Band, "*President's Own*")

It is important to realize the stress and physical toll that the audition day can take on you. Auditions often begin early in the morning, and you will likely be flying or driving long distances to get there. You also will need to be ready to perform and stay alert for a long period of time if you advance. My audition day with the USAF Band began at 8:00 AM and I did not leave until after 8:00 that evening!

Sight Reading

Sight reading is a very important part of any audition, and is often included in some or even all rounds of the process. The following concepts represent both common and unique ideas presented by the interviewees.

1. Play every tuba/euphonium part.

"I consider my sight reading to be weak, so I decided to learn pretty much everything ever written for my horn. It took years, but when I "sight read" in auditions, I rarely saw something that I had not worked on before."

- SSG Jeremy McBride (euphonium, The United States Army Band, "*Pershing's Own*")

"I went to my college band librarian and over the course of a few months, obtained a copy of every tuba part in the...band library. The stack of music as I remember it was about 6" high....I would work on that stack of music to where, at any time, I could play each piece very, very well. I don't sight read very well to this day, but one thing I do very well is prepare. I make up for my shortcomings through preparation."

- MUCS Jarrod Williams (tuba, The United States Navy Band, retired)

This is a piece of advice that is very useful for getting comfortable with sight reading. First of all, if you have seen the music before, then you aren't actually sight reading. Sight reading excerpts for most, if not all auditions includes other pieces from the standard repertoire. It can include solos or etudes, but it is most often pieces of music that the band actually plays. They do this because that is what the job will often be: sitting down (or standing) and playing music that you have never rehearsed. A university band library is a great place to do this; pick out as many pieces as possible and sight read your instrument's part.

2. Transcriptions in all clefs, music for all instruments

"For sight reading, I made a book of...1,000 excerpts from our library at school. Marches, standard stuff, not so standard stuff, transcriptions in all clefs, etc. I would play through at least 10 a day just to keep those mental skills working."

- SSG Phillip Broome (euphonium, The West Point Band)

All euphonium players pursuing a job in a military band should be completely fluent in both Bb treble clef as well as bass clef. Additional clefs like tenor, alto, or even C-treble clef may show up in music (though not likely as sight-reading in an audition). It is beneficial to practice reading music in these perhaps unfamiliar clefs to challenge yourself in terms of sight reading. If you can sight read in alto clef without hesitation, then a more comfortable clef will be even easier.

3. Play something new everyday

"About 2 months before the audition, I tried to read something new every day. It could be anything: etudes, band parts, orchestral string bass parts, and some music in treble clef. I would give myself about a minute to look through it (big picture first and then sing it through measure by measure until a minute passed), and then played it with a metronome to keep myself honest."

- SSG Simon Wildman (tuba, The United States Marine Band, "*President's Own*")

"I practiced something new every other day. It could be a solo, it could be an excerpt, it could be marches, it could be cello pieces....Anything. I made a pact with myself to never stop once I began and to always have a plan before beginning."

- TSgt William Timmons (trombone, The United States Air Force Band)

While self-explanatory, this suggestions is useful because even when "sight-reading" we tend to gravitate toward things that are familiar. Trying actively to find music by different composers, or even different instruments is a sure-fire way to ensure you are finding variety in your sight-reading.

4. Turn on metronome/scan music/play without stopping

"With my 6" stack of music, I would turn on a metronome to 75-80% of the marked tempo and play without stopping. Then I would practice the parts that I couldn't cut by reading. After about a year, I wasn't really reading any more."

- MUCS Jarrod Williams (tuba, The United States Navy Band, retired)

“...I would grab all [of the] parts from brass quintets and orchestral [pieces] (including non-bass clef, non C keyed parts) and read them, making sure to go through without stopping. I would read these parts (usually trumpet or violin parts) for the challenge as they were more demanding technically and rhythmically than bass clef instrument parts.”

- Premier Band Member

When sight-reading, or even practicing performing, I find that the metronome is a good way to generate stress. In these suggestions, the presence of a time-element forces the player to stick with the beat, regardless of how challenging the music is. When sight-reading at an audition (as with all music performance), time is the most important thing you are presenting.

5. Record yourself sight reading

“I recorded myself sight reading. I discovered that I rushed long notes, and I wasn't playing musically. To change that, I worked with the metronome and I started thinking about musical ideas more than notes!”

- SSG Hiram Diaz (euphonium, The United States Marine Band, “*President’s Own*”)

“I sight-read almost every day for months leading up to the audition. I read through marches, band excerpts, and etudes in bass, treble, and tenor clef. Most importantly, I recorded myself sight-reading and listened back to hear what I needed to improve. Its an extremely revealing exercise that drastically improved by reading ability.”

- SSG Chris Leslie (euphonium, The West Point Band)

This is a wonderful idea, and is something I never did as a student. Many of us record ourselves playing prepared repertoire regularly, but going through the same process with sight reading is an additional challenge. Use this tool to really check and see how accurate you are with time, pitch, rhythm, and even style/musicality.

Selected Quotations on various topics:

1. What did you do different to prepare for your winning audition?

“I'm an over-practicer. It was something that I learned the hard way. I would end up taking auditions on tired chops and sounding fuzzy. Finally, I started limiting how much I would practice each day.”

- SSG Jeremy McBride (euphonium, The United States Army Band, “*Pershing's Own*”)

“I organized my practice much better than before. I had a set plan for every session and I kept a practice journal.”

- Premier Band Member

"I just tried to have fun with the whole process. The excerpts were great and from really good band pieces. I enjoyed playing them, therefore enjoyed playing the audition. I looked at it as a performance and not an audition that I had to win"

- TSgt Brandon Jones (euphonium, The United States Air Force Band)

"I worked on my mindset as much as I worked on excerpt preparation."

- MU1 David Miller (trombone, The United States Navy Band)

2. What are the most important things you worked on?

"For me, it was working on my nerves under pressure. I would do crazy things like set up my stuff upstairs, then go downstairs for a bit. I would run up the stairs and immediately start playing- no warm up, just taking the plunge! For me, getting my heart rate up simulates how I feel when I'm nervous, so knowing that I had the ability to still control my performance while winded gave me much more confidence going into the audition."

- TSgt Nikki Hill (clarinet, The United States Air Force Band)

"Tempos. Making sure I was spot on every time I played an excerpt. I think that might be one of the hardest things about an audition is keeping up with all the different tempos in different excerpts. I got really good at tapping tempos on a metronome. If you come within a few clicks of all your tempos by tapping, you're pretty good."

- SSG Phillip Broome (euphonium, The West Point Band)

"Early steps of preparation were making everything very clean, almost robotically clean. Then once the excerpts are consistent and reliable I stopped focusing on the Metronome, tuner, etc, and just tried to create a story and find what I enjoy playing about each excerpt. It's crucial that those steps happened in that order.

- MU1 Leah Bedard (oboe, the United States Coast Guard Band)

3. Telling a story

"I focused on making each excerpt sound like a valid piece of music. I worked hard to identify and describe the specific style of each excerpt and make that a musical reality that also fit into the context of the larger work it was a part of."

- SSG Chris Leslie (euphonium, The West Point Band)

“...once the excerpts are consistent and reliable I stopped focusing on the metronome, tuner, etc, and just tried to create a story and find what I enjoy playing about each excerpt.”

- MU1 Leah Bedard (oboe, the United States Coast Guard Band)

“The most important thing I worked on was getting the sound that comes out of my bell to match what I had in my head. Style was the big issue that was lacking. I would hear it my head, but then I wouldn't hear it on the recording.”

- Premier Band Member

“Making the music happen. I tried to make it sound like I was playing the part actually in the ensemble. I had a deep knowledge of how each piece sounded, and the excerpt within that piece....I just played like "me". I didn't try to sound like a robot, which I feel a lot of people think they have to do to win a job.”

- TSgt Brandon Jones (euphonium, The United States Air Force Band)

While this article focuses on musical preparation, I will present an article in the future that addresses “everything else.” This will cover ideas from travels plans, the audition day itself, physical preparation, to tips from the audition committee. It was a wonderful and easy experience collaborating with all of these professional musicians. Thank you to all of those who contributed to this project.

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