AUDITION Hacks for Musicians

Compiled from The Metropolitan Opera, Juilliard, TEDx, San Francisco Symphony
INTRODUCTION

By Marc Gelfo, Co-Founder/CEO Modacity

Auditions are hard, and that’s good. In addition to honing your craft, auditions motivate you to improve confidence, organization, tenacity, and positive focus. But, there are a million ways to prepare poorly for an audition.

These 30 “hacks” are the result of decades experience in the practice room and on stage. I was horrible at auditions for the first 15 years of my musical life, getting rejected by 5 music schools among other painful failures.

After applying cognitive science, meditation, and a global assortment of pro “secrets” to my practice, I finally got into music school. I got into music festivals. I won orchestra jobs and did six seasons with the Hong Kong Philharmonic. I auditioned for and won sub list auditions for San Francisco Symphony & Philadelphia Orchestra, playing on multiple international tours.

I want to share these techniques so you can achieve your dreams with auditions. I want you to learn faster, have more fun, make better music. I want you to go out on stage and show what makes you an amazing musician.

How does all this relate to Modacity music practice app? We care about practice efficiency, and we want our community to rock it! Download Modacity for iOS and discover a new way to practice.

And now, the “hacks”...
# 30 Audition Hacks for Musicians

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Too many performers show up for an audition planning to deliver a series of right notes and rhythms. This is problematic for a few reasons:

1. No audition committee wants to hear robotic performances. Just playing the notes, no matter how perfectly, is not enough to show musical understanding.

2. Focusing on notes requires you to manage a high quantity of detail, which dramatically increases your chances of messing up. If you were reciting a speech you wouldn’t focus on getting each syllable right during performance.

3. You have less fun trying to get things right (that’s not what music is about), and you won’t play with as much charisma, confidence, or joy if you aren’t engaged in a musical process.

Learning the music requires practicing the emotions and large scale gestures of your audition pieces. You must master the big picture. Get this right and so many details will take care of themselves. Here are 10 tips to ensure a complete grasp on the music.

#1 KNOW THE OTHER PARTS (for orchestral/accompanied works)
Can you imagine learning one person’s lines in a movie without knowing what the other characters are saying? Show up to an audition understanding why you’re playing what you’re playing, and how it works with other instruments. Be able to feel and hear the other parts.

#2 TOP DOWN. NOT BOTTOM UP
Don’t try to learn the music by sequencing it note by note. Work like a sculptor, getting the basic shape and feel first and then refining. Start with a crude but emotionally accurate performance. Clarify your intentions for performing. Then work down from the big picture to smaller and smaller details. This is the opposite of micromanagement and it will save you time, because so many details take care of themselves when you have clear concepts for style, musical message, and intention.
#3 SING IT, DANCE IT

This is one of the best ways to explore your big picture. Sing the music or do an expressive interpretive dance to it. Record and watch a video of yourself doing this and be amazed how much you learn.

#4 MAKE A PLAYLIST

You may get away with a Spotify or Youtube playlist of your audition pieces. But for orchestral auditions with excerpts, there’s no substitute for making a playlist of audio files trimmed to contain exactly the requested measures (with 5-10 seconds of lead-in audio). Include more than one performance for each piece. **Listen to your playlist obsessively!**

#5 TEST YOURSELF

According to *Make it Stick: The Science of Learning*, testing is the best way to prevent forgetting. Don’t just “practice” the music. Test your ability to perform it. Test your ability to reproduce solutions and improvements from previous sessions. This one tip will make a big difference.

#6 SPACED REPETITION

Want to make sure you stay on top of the memory game? Use a spaced repetition program like Anki or Brainscape to prevent forgetting and keep your learning refreshed.
#7 ORGANIZE YOUR BINDER

Maintain a binder with the printed sheet music plus blank pages for comments on each piece. Keep a cover page that allows you to manage overall audition details. Make notes or at least a tick mark every time you practice the music. If you like, use colored pencils or markers to decorate the sheet music and infuse it with color and mood.

“I believe in documenting everything that you do. You absolutely have to remember the problems, the solutions, and the process that you went through to get from problem to solution.”

ROB KNOPPER - MET ORCHESTRA / AUDITION HACKER

#8 MATRIX MODE LEARNING

Who says you can’t control the passage of time? Recreate “bullet time” from the Matrix when you hit a tricky passage. Go super slow through parts that challenge you, and resume to normal or even faster speed for other sections. Get a feeling for the maximum speed where you can achieve a certain level of quality, and don’t exceed that maximum speed. You may need to go much slower for difficult fast passages, that’s ok! With this hack you’re slowing time with your mind… and ingraining the perfect performance.

#9 REFRAME ALL SUGGESTIONS MUSICALLY

So your teacher said to play a certain note shorter? Or you listened back and realized you need more crescendo on a particular phrase? Connect these improvements with musical artistry. How does that shorter note change the feeling of the phrase? Why play a big crescendo here? (e.g., for the amazing climactic arrival). Internalize these musical requirements and the details will sound more organic.

#10 GET REFLECTIONS EARLY AND OFTEN

Music doesn’t happen in a vacuum. Perform the audition music for friends and family. Ask them what they feel when they hear it. Ask them if it invokes any pictures or memories. If you hear vague responses like “that was nice” or “sounds good”, work harder to communicate the musical message.
Knowing the music inside out isn’t enough. Doing well at an audition requires technical sophistication. But here’s the rub: you never “reach” technical sophistication. It’s a never-ending process of refinement and expansion. How do you know when you’re ready, or good enough? You can’t.

Realistically, achieving technical sophistication means evolving with informed priorities. Get better every day, at the thing you most need to get better at. Know the expected standard, aim high, and practice smart.

#1 ONE THING AT A TIME
Pick a single theme for your practice session, such as “phrasing”, “rhythm”, or even “confidence”. Apply this theme to each musical passage you are preparing. What consistent weaknesses and strengths show up across the board for this theme? Work with this information constructively.

#2 DELIBERATE PRACTICE
Deliberate practice - opposite to aimless, mindless, or just exploratory practice - is the key to making intentional improvements in your craft. Think of it like the scientific method. Choose one thing you want to improve. Form a hypothesis about what you can do to make that improvement. Test the hypothesis. If it doesn’t work, no worries, just form a new hypothesis and test that! If it does work, practice your solution until it’s automatic (over a period of days). It’s not necessarily easy, but it’s guaranteed to move you forward. Download Modacity to experience automated deliberate practice.

#3 “RUN WITH ANKLE WEIGHTS”
Ever try running with ankle weights? When you take off those weights you feel a lot lighter! Set your instrument deliberately out of tune and try to play as in tune as possible. Deliberately play with poor posture and make your phrasing as beautiful as possible. Ice your fingers and then play fast passages. You get the picture :) Run with ankle weights, and prepare to float in the audition.
#4 FIND THE MASTER ISSUE

Sometimes there’s one abstract thing you can focus on that takes care of smaller details. Staccato is too heavy, intonation is poor, speed is slow, and you’re getting tired? Instead of trying to fix your articulation, worrying about intonation, spending hours with a metronome, and working to increase your endurance, you could ask a simple question: What’s the master issue here? In this example, I’d say “style” is the issue. Commit to a lighter, happier feeling and all the other details will fall into place.

#5 RECORD, REFLECT, PLAN

Don’t shy away from recording yourself. Record a single excerpt or section of music. Take ample notes on everything you hear that you either very much like, or want to improve. Select some of the top priority items, and make a plan to practice them. Amplify what you like, and turn the improvements you desire into new habits of excellence.

Legendary San Francisco Symphony principal trumpet Mark Inouye records himself and then listens back at half speed. He practices until the excerpt sounds great even at half speed.

#6 BALANCE MASS PRACTICE WITH INTERLEAVED

Mass practice is short term repetition. It feels good, like you’re making fast progress, but that may be an illusion. Interleaved practice involves switching between different tasks or skills. Don’t just mass practice, and don’t just interleave practice. Mix them wisely. For example:

- Repeat your C Major scale until it sounds really good (maybe 5 times).
- Then play a favorite piece of music once, and make a note about what you most want to improve.
- Come back to C major scale and test if you retain the improvements you made. Practice it again.
- Return to your favorite piece of music, focusing on that thing you want to improve.

This is very powerful! (and we can’t wait to automate this for you in Modacity)

#7 BE CLEAR ABOUT PRIORITIES

You know how that final note on the bottom of page 2 sounded a little... “blah”? Well, you also MISSED 17 NOTES ON PAGE 1. Don’t get caught up on low-priority improvements. Maintain a list of the highest priority fixes and improvements, and stay focused on what matters most. Don’t try to drive your improvements to 100% perfect. Be satisfied with 80% and move on to other important things.
#8 TEST YOUR RECORDING WITH A METRONOME

Sense of time is the biggest committee complaint and source of audition failure. If you can play with impeccable timing (especially under pressure), you are well on your way to success. This hack will help your timing get rock solid.

Turn on a metronome at the desired tempo. Start recording. Internalize the pulse, turn off the metronome, and perform your music. Now listen back, you’ll hear the recorded metronome ticking before your performance. Turn on your live metronome and sync it with the recorded version, then test how far your performance goes before it strays. This is even easier to do with Garageband, Ableton, etc.

“I used this hack extensively while preparing for the LA Philharmonic 2012 horn audition. This was the audition where I went from prelims to semis to finals to superfinals, competing with other hornists from orchestras like the Metropolitan Opera, Philadelphia Orchestra, and St. Louis Symphony. I was runner-up in the audition.”

- Marc

#9 QUANTIZE AND PITCH SHIFT

Modern audio technology is amazing. Record yourself and then use auto tune to play back a version that is perfectly in tune. You can even play along with it like a guide track. For rhythm, listen to a metronome at half tempo (in-ear preferably), and record yourself playing with super time precision. Then 2x speed the recording and use that as a time guide.

#10 VISUALIZE PERFECTION

Your imagination is a powerful tool. It’s also a powerful limit, if you don’t use it well. Imagine yourself playing the music with every detail perfect. You may need to slow down time (see Matrix Mode) at first. You may not be able to imagine it all at first. Strengthen the neural pathways associated with exactly what you want. With persistent positive visualization, you are bound to be successful.
BRINGING IT TO THE AUDITION

So you’ve mastered the music, you sound great... you must be ready to rock the audition, right? **Not so fast!** Being able to play your audition music with excellence in the practice room is completely different from being able to play it with excellence in an audition.

The final step of audition success is to invest in the skills and practices that will translate all your hard work to the stage.

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**#1 PRACTICE PURE FOCUS (MEDITATION) FOR THE DURATION OF EACH PIECE**

Going to play a 3 minute piece, but can’t concentrate for more than 20 seconds? Controlling your focus is a prerequisite for performance success. Otherwise you’re at the mercy of distraction. Practice meditating for the exact duration of each of your pieces. It can be mantra meditation, or watching your breath, or just feeling your toes. Simply practice controlling your focus for those durations.

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**#2 THERE’S NO SUCH THING AS TOO MANY MOCK AUDITIONS**

Don’t just run it once for your pet dog the day before your audition. Reach out to colleagues, friends, teachers, and family members to schedule multiple mock auditions many weeks before the audition. Set up **too many mock auditions**. Start early and practice being proud and confident about your product no matter what stage of polish it’s in. Become an expert in playing this audition.

“Batching” will help you with scheduling. Sit down and set a timer for 25 minutes, send the same email or Facebook message to 25 people you can do a mock audition for. Here’s an example of what that might look like:

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**Hi [Name],**

*Personal mention - “it was great to see you yesterday!“*

*I’m preparing mock auditions for this upcoming [name of organization] position. It would really help me if I could play my audition for you in the next couple weeks. Would you be willing to schedule something?*
#3 DON'T TRY YOUR BEST, JUST DO YOUR AVERAGE

Playing auditions is stressful enough that you shouldn't put undue expectations on yourself. When you play your audition, don't try to play your very best. Just play your average and trust your preparation, leaving a margin for magic to happen. This takes off the edge of striving. You can personally experiment with 100% effort, 90% effort, 80% effort, etc., recording yourself until you find what works under pressure.

#4 LEARN TO LOVE PAINFUL FAILURE

If you 100% succeeded at 100% of things you tried, you wouldn't be growing. Failure can be extraordinarily painful and discouraging, but it's important to recognize and even embrace the experience. Practice failing, whether it's at the karaoke bar or having difficult conversations with loved ones. Learn to love failure, because it means you're growing.

#5 HAVE A “FREE THROW” ROUTINE

Bounce, bounce, spin, shoot, swish! Have a routine for what you do before you launch into each piece. A typical French horn routine might look like: empty water, center your energy, imagine the orchestra introduction, hear the first note, and play. Tennis great Rafael Nadal has a 12 step pre-serve routine. Experiment and evolve your routine in mock auditions, but settle on a consistent routine at least 2 weeks out from the audition.

#6 CONSIDER A BETA BLOCKER PRESCRIPTION

For some sensitive folk, performance stress causes a huge adrenaline spike that destroys fine motor movement and upsets mental clarity. You can overcome this naturally but it may take years and years of work. Banned for Olympic sharpshooters, Beta blockers have been used by musicians for decades to inhibit dry mouth and shakes. Personally, I have used them for multiple audition wins. Make your own informed and mature choice.

If you want to consider beta blockers for an upcoming audition, talk to your doctor. They can legally prescribe an appropriate dose for relieving symptoms of performance anxiety. Beware potential downsides such as lower emotional engagement or tiredness.

“72% of ICSOM musicians have tried using beta blockers for performance anxiety. Out of that group, 90% said they would consider using them for auditions”

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE FOR SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA MUSICIANS
What you do after an audition is extremely important. Take a minute to write or scribble or draw in your journal. Capture your feelings and thoughts. If you are feeling embarrassed or any other negative emotions, a great trick is to shake your whole body like a dog. Shake off the negative charge! Finally, recognize that an audition can be an important event in your life. No matter how it goes, treat yo’self afterwards, and spend a couple days reflecting on what you learned from the experience!

#7 IDENTIFY MULTIPLE OUTCOMES
Don’t think in binary terms like “success” or “failure”. There are a lot of places on the “audition map” which are equally valid. For example, you might play tremendously well yet not advance. You might mess up a really important passage, and win! Identify a few likely positive outcomes, and think about what choices you can make that will lead you there.

#8 PREPARE YOURSELF TO EXPERIENCE SUCCESS
How many times have you visualized yourself painfully failing on stage? If you’re like many musicians, the answer is far too often! Just like “Visualize Perfection”, prepare yourself to experience success by visualizing each step of the audition. Imagine yourself arriving with joy & ease, warming up and feeling good. Visualize every step and every moment from the morning of to the evening after.

#9 MANAGE AND OPTIMIZE YOUR STATE OF BEING
Starting at least a week out, plan to feel your best on the day and time of the audition. Taper down practicing your instrument a few days before, so you feel fresh and excited to play. Hydration, exercise, and sleep the week of the audition are crucial. On the day, you must get adequate exercise. Yoga and cardio seem to work best. Before you play, journal any negative thoughts or emotions, and identify thinking traps. Find new thoughts.

For the obsessed only: If there’s a time zone change, live in the target time zone for a week before travel.

#10 LIFE DOESN’T END ON STAGE - FOLLOW THROUGH AFTER THE AUDITION
What you do after an audition is extremely important. Take a minute to write or scribble or draw in your journal. Capture your feelings and thoughts. If you are feeling embarrassed or any other negative emotions, a great trick is to shake your whole body like a dog. Shake off the negative charge! Finally, recognize that an audition can be an important event in your life. No matter how it goes, treat yo’self afterwards, and spend a couple days reflecting on what you learned from the experience!
That’s really all you have to do to excel in auditions. And you can do it faster and more reliably with these hacks. Consider printing out this document and putting it in your audition binder. Place a tick mark by each tip when you try it. Aim to get a couple tick marks each day, and after 15 days you’ll have tried them all!

Nothing about these tips is especially hard. They take time, but they also save you time. That’s the Modacity philosophy.

If you want to take your music practice to the next level, download our music practice app offering smart organization, deliberate practice, and personal feedback from expert musicians.