

# Tips from Anna Edwards, Interim Music Advisor and Youth Symphony Orchestra Conductor

## A Practice Philosophy

Practice, play, practice, play – this means that music students benefit both from their own structured practicing *and* from playing in front of other people.

## Structured Practice Tips for Your Child

- Practice daily – daily half hour sessions are actually more effective than hour sessions every other day, student can pick a few things to really work on and isolate problems.
- Practice playing scales in different rhythms – this helps students work on different technical aspects like string crossings and helps the student hear different tones.
- Use a metronome – this helps students rehearse in rhythm.
  - Bonus tips: if your child is reluctant to use a metronome, introduce it slowly allow them to practice with the metronome for two minutes the first week, five minutes the next week, etc.
- Use recordings and then self-critique practice sessions – this helps students hear themselves more accurately.

## Other Ideas for Improving Your Child's Musicianship

- Encourage your student to play in their middle/high school orchestra class or in SYSO rehearsals when the teacher asks for one student to perform a section – this helps students feel comfortable playing for others.
- Encourage your student to memorize as much of the performance pieces as they can (especially for string instruments) – this allows your student to more closely watch the conductor for their cues.
  - Bonus tips for memorization: memorize sections at a time, and then memorize sections in a non-linear order
- Encourage your student to mark their music – this helps students pay attention to details and can indicate when to pay attention to their conductor.
- Encourage your child to listen to music, classical and other genres – exposure to various compositions helps students become more familiar and appreciative of the pieces they are learning and music in general.

## Preparing for Your Child's Seating Placement Auditions

- DO encourage preparation. Students are first assessed on whether or not they are prepared to audition.
- DON'T let your student solely focus on the audition piece. Concentrating on one piece is a detriment to your child's overall music participation.
- DO encourage your child to slow down. Playing at the speed they have comfortably mastered is more important than attempting a faster tempo that could lead to sloppier technique.

- DO pay attention to scales. Students will be assessed on tone, intonation, etc. They will be asked to perform one slurred and one tongued (for wind instruments) or one slurred and one separately (for string instruments). They will be assessed on fingering and intonations.
- DON'T worry if your child's piece is cut off during an audition. While students are asked to prepare a two minute piece, being asked to stop earlier is *not* a negative sign. Adjudicators can often assess capability within the first 20-30 seconds.
- DO encourage your child to practice their sight reading. This is a needed skill for auditions and helpful for future musical endeavors. Chamber music groups are a great practice for sight reading.

### **Adjudicators at Seating Placement Auditions Look For**

- Intonation (pitch)
- Rhythm
- Tempo (speed and rhythm accuracy)
- Tone/Articulation (sound quality – looking for resonant and lovely)
- Musicality, Musicianship, Dynamics (phrasing, variety of sound)
- Sight-Reading (pay attention to the key signature, rhythm is more important than pitch)

## **Selections from the Parent Q&A Session**

### **Should I be concerned if my child places in the same orchestra for multiple years?**

Placement into a SYSO orchestra indicates that child's learning pace. We all acquire new skills on a different timeline and if another child of the same age enters a higher orchestra level it does not mean your child is behind, but is acquiring certain skills at a different speed.

### **Does SYSO coach kids on how to deal with the ranking and internal competition?**

SYSO curriculum does not directly incorporate dealing with competition and disappointment, but often conductors give context about placement. For example, the first chair is not bounds ahead of the second or even 20<sup>th</sup> chair. Every musician in each orchestra is selected because they are playing at the level of that orchestra. It's important that an orchestra's sound blends together. In some ways, building an orchestra is just like building a sports team and just as you wouldn't have a football team of all quarterbacks, neither would you have an orchestra of all first chair violins – the important thing is all musicians play well and complement each other.

We encourage parents and our young musicians to remember that hard work and doing your personal best are more important than seating placement, that chair placement is about one specific audition so there's always another chance to try and move, and that often our young people are very resilient and the sting of disappointment need to impede a wonderful learning and performance opportunity.

### **Are there recommended solo pieces for the auditions?**

Students are not required to pick certain pieces, but should find a selection that shows their musical and technical ability.

### **How do you help kids recognize their playing ability?**

Encourage your child to record practice sessions and play back. They will hear tones and sections differently in a recording than their live practice. Other methods of learning to recognize playing "correctly" include call and response and learning by repetition.

### **How is bias dealt with at auditions?**

SYSO has created an audition process that strives to eliminate bias. While SYSO coaches for that particular instrument listen to auditions, only conductors make the placement decision. Furthermore, blind auditions are not helpful for student auditions, because part of the assessment looks at whether they are demonstrating correct technical skills for that orchestra level.

SYSO does want to balance encouraging continued participation and welcoming new promising musicians. Again, the goal is a balanced orchestra sound. Consideration is given for child's current SYSO placement and pace of acquiring new skills. Things like participating in SYSO summer camps or which private teacher they student has are NOT factors of the audition decision.

### **How much time does the conductor have with each student?**

With a full orchestra, often the conductor has less time with each individual student than we may like. Please encourage your child to talk to the conductors. This is a great way for the conductors to get to know your child and also for your child to get to know the conductor.