Becoming a Conservatory or College Music Major

So many choices. So many decisions. So little time.

Choices:

❖ Conservatory
  o Music is the main focus.
  o The core program usually includes literature and history courses. In addition to the core music classes (theory, ear-training, piano, conducting) you must take your applied major and perform in ensembles or larger groups. If your major is something besides performance, you will have those classes, too.
  o This would include concentrations in music education, recording, business, etc.
  o Entry is based on audition. Scholarship may be based on performance or academics.

❖ College or University
  o Some have Schools of Music within the college while others simply have a Music Department.
  o Although music is the main focus of study, besides core classes mentioned above, a foreign language, and math and/or science classes are often required.
  o For the university or college, acceptance is two-fold. The student must be accepted in both the university/college (grades) AND the Music Department (audition).
    ▪ Acceptance must be in both.

Decisions:

❖ General considerations:
  o Housing – how many years on campus?
  o “Outside the walls” – is it safe?
  o Location and size of school
  o Demographics of student population
  o Student life
  o Location: Urban / suburban / rural / USA / international

❖ Unique considerations for music majors:
  o Access to practice rooms – always open or sign-up?
  o Conductors?
  o Playing opportunities – for example, are you able to play in an orchestra freshman year?
  o What type of ensemble playing is there?
  o Who will teach the lessons for your instrument – professors? Graduate students?
  o How many semesters will it take to complete studies?
  o Dual degree programs (music and something else); some special programs that combine a liberal arts education through a university with a music program through a conservatory (e.g., New England Conservatory and Tufts University)
Local programs around the Capital District:
- College of St. Rose – music ed., performance and music industry.
- Schenectady Community College – music ed. and performance
- RPI – has some electronic music-type studies
- Skidmore College
- Union College

Finding schools outside the region
- Performance & Visual Arts College Fairs – register to get information about college fairs, tops on finding schools, and much more
  - [http://www.nacacnet.org/EventsTraining/CollegeFairs/pva/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.nacacnet.org/EventsTraining/CollegeFairs/pva/Pages/default.aspx)
  - Bring pre-printed labels (mailing labels) to use for information sign-up sheets
  - New York and Boston fairs tend to be in October/early, early November
- Summer Music programs
  - A great opportunity to meet teachers, see schools, determine how strong is the passion for majoring in music

Before auditioning:
- At home:
  - Take private lessons from a specialist on your instrument. This includes voice lessons for a vocal major.
  - Take piano lessons. Take piano lessons now. You need some type of keyboard experience to navigate through theory. Most music conservatories require 2 to 4 semesters of piano.
  - Take theory
  - Sing in a chorus

- Research what others have been playing for their audition at that particular institution.
  - Consider carefully before loading your senior year with AP classes. If you are sure you are going to audition for a music program, your AP classes may not be relevant in a conservatory. On the other hand, they may be very useful at a college or university. Preparing audition material is very, very intensive.
  - Check carefully to see what audition repertoire the institution requires. There are often different repertoire requirements for performance vs. education majors.
  - Check the excerpt list.

- At the school:
  - Visit. Walk around the campus and beyond.
  - Take a lesson with someone you might want to study with. The personal relationship with the teacher is extremely important.
    - Call the school’s music department directly to find out who you would study with as a freshman / who you might take a lesson with.
    - There may or may not be a fee. You should find out before hand and come prepared if there is a fee (and ask – cash or check?).
Questions to ask during your lesson/visit:
- Is the teacher an active performer?
- If yes, how much time is he/she on/off campus?
- Will grad students be handling lessons during the “off” (or “on”) time?
  - Try to time your visit with a performance by their orchestra or band. Look at their recital schedule.
  - Ask how many the school is accepting in your major and on your instrument.

**Time:**

- **Types of auditions:**
  - Pre-Screening – just to qualify for auditions. Probably requires a recording (see below).
  - Rolling auditions – when the audition dates are scattered throughout the year.
  - Set dates – usually scheduled during the institute’s “week, or two, of auditions.”
  - At the school v. regional auditions (in more convenient locations)

- **When you go to audition:**
  - If there is any distance involved, go the night before. Auditions are usually in the winter – not a great time to travel!
  - Wear comfortable clothing, but don’t forget - you are making an impression. Wear something you can play in but that shows that you know how important this audition is. First impressions count.
  - Turn your phone off.
  - Check to see how many copies of your music you need to have with you. Have it neatly organized and ready to present to each adjudicator.

- **Making a recording:**
  - Sometimes a college may require a recording to pre-screen applicants and determine who will be invited to come for an audition.
    - In our area there are a number of places you can go to record. Some suggestions we are aware of: The College of St. Rose; SUNYTunes at University at Albany. These may or may not be open to the public. Commercial options include Cotton Hill Studio, Blue Sky and AudioART.
    - It used to be necessary to make a professional recording. With advances in technology, personal recording systems now provide higher-quality recordings at an affordable cost. You have to decide which method will meet the school’s criteria for recordings.
      - Costs: Recording fees vary; you may be required to have an accompanist(s) who may/may not charge a fee.

- **Keeping current:**
  - Requirements for and programs offered at conservatories, colleges and universities are constantly changing.
    - Be sure to make your own inquiries so you know your information is current.
    - If college decisions are few years away, always check for the upcoming year.
Applications

- The Common App - Unified college application that may not be so unified as many schools require a unique supplement in addition to the Common App.
- Yes – essays may be required even for conservatories.
- Schools of music (within a university) and the university itself may each require separate applications.
- Music resume – keep a binder with copies of concert programs as an easy way to track the repertoire they have played. We are building an archive of programs on esyo.org – but it is not yet complete.
- Assistance from high school guidance – great resource but check with the counselor as to his/her experience with applications to conservatories and music schools. The process is different enough that you may need to be more of an advocate/manager of the process than might have been required for a more “standard” college application.

$$ Tuition assistance can be based on financial need or playing ability.
- A college or university will also use high school grades to award scholarships.
- Check if you must apply for the scholarship every year. Some are granted for only one or two years and then renewed, based on performance.

Accepted or not?

- It’s all about the audition but decisions can be very arbitrary and based on the need for a particular instrument at the school.

Proficiency and Placement Exams

- Many schools offer on-line proficiency tests for non-music subjects. Some of these can be taken in the summer before the first semester.
- The first week of school is usually filled with proficiency tests. Many places allow you to test out of semesters of ear training, theory, music history and piano.

What to study?

- A quick note about not being a music major: If you do not want to be a music major but wish to be part of a performing ensemble, be sure to look at the possibility of joining one as a non-music major before making a final decision.
  - Some colleges/universities that have music programs fill all the playing positions from their own music department and don’t have room for non-music majors.
  - Many large cities do have community orchestras or bands to perform in.
- Double majoring or dual degree programs
  - Not for the faint of heart!
  - Consider the time needed for both majors – especially practice time on your instrument or time needed in a lab, etc.

- Ask yourself – what do you want to do with your degree?

Mom & Dad: Best advice: patience, patience, patience! And never say anything before the audition!