Insights on College Percussion Auditions

BY SCOTT HARRIS

Every year hundreds of high school percussionists audition at colleges and universities throughout the United States. For many students, this single event can make or break their future career in music. As students apply to schools, the biggest advantage they can have is to be prepared for the audition. While every school will have a slightly different admission process, many of the actual auditions are similar.

Recently I asked a number of college percussion teachers about their approach to the audition process. The teachers who participated in this survey were: Lance Drege, University of Oklahoma; Gene Fambrough, University of Alabama at Birmingham; Michael Kingan, Indiana University of Pennsylvania; Robert McCormick, University of South Florida; Mel Mobley, University of Louisiana-Monroe; and Jonathan Wacker, East Carolina University. Coming from different geographic locations and teaching environments, their collective insight is a great resource for students who are preparing to audition for college-level study in percussion.

Harris: *Many colleges require a combination of snare drum, mallets, timpani, and drumset for percussion auditions. Are there specific instrument combinations that you feel are essential in a college audition?*

Kingan: You nailed it, although I don't require drumset. It's icing on the cake. Students can play concert and/or rudimental snare—I've also heard concert snare and tenors, which is fine—two- and/or four-mallet keyboard, and a demonstration of timpani fundamentals: good ear, proper technique, tone production, rolls, and muffling. If students don't play all three, I can't assess their skill level and potential. Even if they are uncomfortable on an instrument, I encourage them to learn and perform something. The effort they make to accomplish this is important to me.

Michael Kingan

Mobley: When the degrees offered are in general percussion, I want to hear the prospective student's skills in the three major areas: timpani, snare drum, and mallets. If the student has drumset skills, I also want to hear that, although I don't require it of those without any experience.

Wacker: Since the majority of college music students are looking to pursue a degree in education, I want the audition to show that they are capable of achieving a satisfactory level of ability for their future career. A future band director absolutely has to be competent on snare, mallets, timpani, and basic accessories. Drumset, congas, and steel pan may not be so critical to his or her success. Therefore, I ask the students to demonstrate competence in three of the four standard areas: snare drum, mallets, timpani, drumset; however, two of those three must be snare and mallets. Performance majors must demonstrate competence in all four of those areas.

Mel Mobley

Harris: *Should students be prepared to demonstrate rudiments, scales, timpani tuning, or other specific techniques?*

Fambrough: Yes, for any instrument they audition on, they should be able to demonstrate basic techniques such as those, plus various styles with appropriate fills if they choose to play drumset.

Kingan: This usually comes out during the course of their playing. Sometimes, for clarification, I ask for a demonstration of a specific technique. I also might ask for these if they have nothing else to play. For example, if they don't have a mallet solo because they have no experience, I might ask them if they know any scales.

McCormick: Yes, especially timpani tuning, or singing!

Mobley: I ask for major and minor scales, and rudiments, but I don't expect them to know all of either group. Hearing tuning is a plus. If a student is doing a

Jonathan Wacker

Robert McCormick

timpani piece with no tuning changes, or not doing a timpani piece at all, I ask to hear him or her sing a few intervals to gauge pitch perception. Students should also be prepared to play some accessories, such as crashing cymbals.

Wacker: I like to hear students play a couple of rudiments, for a couple of reasons. First, it shows me how well they can control the stick; second, it shows me their level of dedication. If they can play all the rudiments from memory, they are probably going to be good students. The same can be said for the ability to play all the scales. Tuning the timpani, in my opinion, is more important than the ability to bang out a specific solo. If the student can't hear pitch, that person has little future in music, and the ability to tune timpani shows this rather quickly. Even if students have not prepared a timpani solo, I always ask them to sing pitches back for me and to tune a couple of notes on the drums.

Harris: *Are specific etudes or solos better audition pieces than others?*

Drege: In Oklahoma we usually hear the same etudes or selections that are required for all-state and regional band auditions. This is usually fine and provides enough literature for snare, keyboard, and timpani.

Fambrough: Not really, as long as it is played well.

Kingan: The best pieces are ones that demonstrate technique *and* musicianship. Some contemporary rudimental solos show chops but aren't very musical. The students dwell on the hype more than the content. The same concept goes for mallet pieces, but the literature is a bit more open.

McCormick: I like to see the student's choice of literature, but always recommend the standard texts or solos on state contest lists.

Mobley: I prefer to hear at least one thing that the student has mastered. I am often surprised to hear some great literature that is, unfortunately, a little over the student's head. I know it's good for students to pick challenging pieces, and I'm happy to hear things that aren't perfect, but when all of the pieces are difficult and beyond their ability, I'm unable to tell how musical they can be.

Wacker: As long as the piece shows technical and musical ability I am usually happy to hear it. Students should remember that the audition only lasts 10–15 minutes, and we have a lot of other people to hear. Preparing a 20-minute concerto only means that after two to three minutes we will have to stop them and listen to something else. It's a shame to prepare all that music if we won't have time to hear it.

Harris: *How important is sight-reading in your audition process?*

Drege: For our auditions, sight-reading is very important in the overall determination of the student's potential as a music major. It is especially helpful with mallet instruments; it lets us know if students learned their piece by reading or rote.

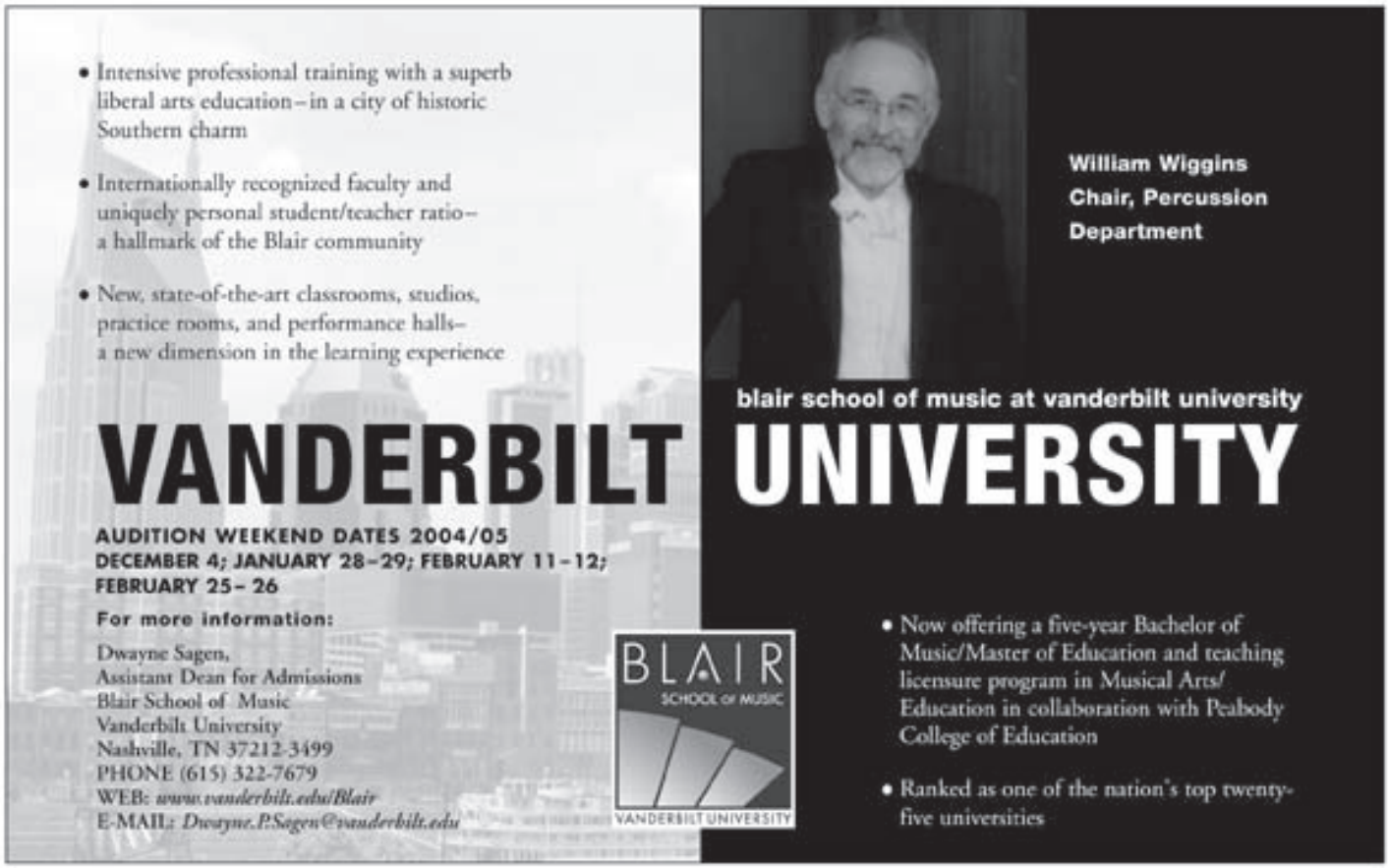
Fambrough: I require sight-reading on mallets, snare, and drumset. It is very important to me because it shows what kind of training and potential they have. I do take various factors into consideration, however, since someone might be excellent at snare reading but below average at mallet reading.

Kingan: Sight-reading is very important. I require it for snare and two-mallet keyboard.

McCormick: It's very important. I especially like to hear keyboard sight-reading.

Mobley: Sight-reading is the best indicator of the student's experience level and gives an idea of what challenges lay ahead for him or her in future musical study. I find it important to hear sight-reading in order to advise students of what these challenges are and how they will have to be addressed within the framework of the curriculum.

Wacker: I ask students to sight-read on every instrument they are prepared to perform on. To me, sight-reading is really the place where a student shows his or her "stuff." Anyone can prepare an audition if they take enough time. Sight-reading shows the real level of students' ability and musicianship; after all, once they are accepted, their school ensembles will require them to prepare parts with fairly little preparation time. If it takes them three months to prepare a xylophone part for band, they will be little help to the ensemble.



Gene Fambrough

Lance Drege

Harris: *Can you offer any advice to students who need to send videotapes in place of a live audition?*

Drege: Use the best equipment available, but if possible a live audition is most beneficial to both the student and the school.

Kingan: When making the tape it's a good idea to put a sign on the door saying "video tape session in progress" so people don't walk in. Check the lighting on the tape to see if you are visible, and don't set the camera too far away or too close; I want to see your hands, body, and some of the instrument you are hitting. Be sure to watch the tape before you send it. I had a student tape over a used tape, rather than a blank one, and when he finished the last piece the tape kept running and suddenly I was looking at an infant in a baby swing and listening to its parents talk baby-talk to it. It was hilarious!

McCormick: Avoid music stands getting in the way of the camera so we can observe hands and stickings.

Mobley: Include some scales and rudiments. Students should dress as if they were auditioning in person, and they should pay attention to the audio quality. An introduction of each piece should also be on the tape. Smile!

Wacker: Try to make it appear as close to a live audition as possible. Turn the tape recorder on and let it run through the entire audition. Don't stop and start. Let us see how you play each piece on your first attempt. Also, try to find a place to record the tape that has good acoustics. I've received some audition tapes that were recorded in the high school gymnasium, and the echo was so bad I couldn't hear a thing.

Harris: *In your experience, is there one thing in the audition that students are regularly not prepared for?*

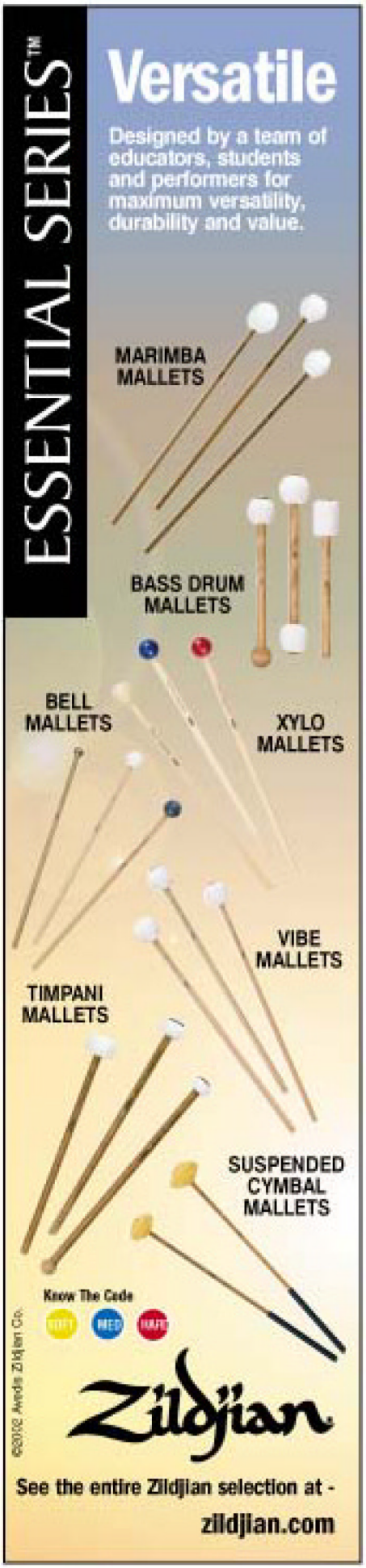
Fambrough: Sight-reading!

Kingan: Sight-reading on mallets is typically a weakness. Their preparation levels are always much higher than their reading levels. This is often the case on snare drum, too, and many students are clueless about timpani fundamentals.

Mobley: Sight-reading on mallets is often the bane of high school students. Sight-reading simple melodies at a slow tempo sometimes shows more than playing a moderately difficult prepared piece.

Wacker: Students rarely practice sight-reading. If you take just 10 minutes per day to practice sight-reading, it will make an enormous difference in your ability.

Harris: *Beyond the playing, what qualities*



impress you the most during the audition/interview process?

Drege: How the students present themselves in terms of dress attire, interest level, and attitude is very important to me. The types of questions they ask about the school, the music program, and the percussion studio are a clear indication of their interest and their previous research into the program. Having their "act" together is very impressive. Playing well is, of course, also important, but so is the whole package: having a resume ready, having a repertoire list ready, and having letters of recommendation in hand.

Fambrough: Dress and demeanor. This can be a non-factor if the student is dressed well and is very cordial, but can detract seriously, for me, if not appropriate.

Kingan: I look for potential, drive, and evidence of a strong work ethic. I also look to see if the student's personality will fit in with the rest of the percussion studio. Time allowing, I'll ask the student if they have any other musical talents. Some have played piano—some quite well, some quite poorly. One student brought his banjo to the audition and asked to play it! He wasn't too bad. Then he said he had perfect pitch. I hit a few random notes on the piano and he nailed them all. I accepted him, but I was never able to put his banjo skills to use in percussion ensemble!

McCormick: People with "quirky" personalities are usually very creative, and I like that! Grades are always important.

Mobley: Interest in the curriculum. Generally, students who actually ask questions or act interested in what they will be learning are the ones who are ultimately successful. Curiosity is often a good indicator of future success.

Wacker: As a college faculty member, I am looking for the student who will succeed over the long term. A music degree is very difficult to complete, and it takes intelligence, dedication, and hard work. I really like to see evidence of a good personality, the ability to work hard, good grades, and a long-term interest in and dedication to percussion.

Harris: *If you could give students one piece of advice before their audition, what would you tell them?*

Drege: Visit as many schools as possible before your auditions. Schedule the visit while students are on campus to see what goes on around the music area during a typical day. Sit in on music and non-music classes, various ensembles and lessons, and tour the campus, dorms, city, and surrounding areas to see how you feel in that environment.

Fambrough: Don't say anything unnecessary and don't over-apologize if you don't think it went well. Relax!

Kingan: Try to represent yourself the best you can on all instruments. Play what you are comfortable with. Don't try to learn a new, really hard piece a few weeks before the audition. I'd rather you resurrect something you can already play and nail it with confidence, because you will be nervous. Being nervous is fine, but I'll be watching to see how you handle your nerves.

McCormick: We understand that you will be nervous, but remember that we want you to do your best. It might be a good idea to stay away from caffeine on the morning of your audition. Don't be too disappointed if you are not accepted. You may be very talented, but there simply may not be any openings in the studio that year.

Mobley: Don't worry about playing perfectly. Worry about presenting exactly who you are and what you want to do.

Wacker: Contact the professors at the schools you are interested in before the audition date. Often they will invite you to come in for a pre-audition meeting and lesson. This will help you prepare for what they will be asking you to play, and it will give you an opportunity to get to know them.

CONCLUSIONS

There are many particulars and specifics in preparing for a college percussion audition, but in this discussion a few points stand out. The first is that it's not so much *what* you play but *how* you play it. Students should focus more on quality performance than picking the hardest or most technical pieces available. The second point is that sight-reading is an extremely important, and often overlooked, part of the process. Speaking as a college teacher myself, I can attest to the need for high school students to work harder at developing their sight-reading ability, especially on mallet percussion.

Probably the most important point is that students should contact the school and teacher in person before the audition. Being familiar with the specific requirements of a given school, and with the individual percussion teacher, is a great asset for students preparing to audition.

Dr. Scott Harris is Assistant Professor of Percussion at Stephen F. Austin State University and serves as the coordinator/director of the annual SFA-Yamaha Summer Percussion Symposium. He holds degrees from the University of Massachusetts, East Carolina University, and the University of Oklahoma. He is an Associate Editor for *Percussive Notes*, and a member of the PAS Contest and Audition Procedures Committee. **PN**

PASIC 2005 SCHOLARSHIP INFORMATION & APPLICATION

The Percussive Arts Society is pleased to announce several scholarships assisting students to attend PASIC 2005.

Each scholarship winner will receive the following courtesy of PAS:
1 year of PAS membership
PASIC 2005 registration
Ticket to the Hall of Fame Banquet
PASIC 2005 souvenir T-shirt
$500 toward the cost of transportation/lodging

Winners will be notified in August 2005.

SCHOLARSHIPS

Avedis Zildjian Co.
Cloyd Duff
James A. Sewrey
Ludwig Industries
McMahon Foundation
Remo, Inc.
Steve Ettleson
Thomas Siwe
Val and Venus Eddy
William F. Ludwig, Jr.
Yamaha Corporation of America

SEND APPLICATION TO:

PASIC Scholarship Application,
Percussive Arts Society,
701 NW Ferris Avenue
Lawton, OK 73507-5442
Tel: 580.353-1455
Fax: 580.353.1456
E-mail: percarts@pas.org

DEADLINE: JUNE 15, 2005

STATE CHAPTER PASIC SCHOLARSHIPS

State Chapter PASIC Scholarships are currently available in California, Illinois, New York and Texas. Additional scholarships may be available. Contact your chapter for application information.

PASIC 2005 SCHOLARSHIP APPLICATION

Applicant's Name _____

Phone _____

Address _____

_____

Name of Instructor _____

Telephone _____

Name of School _____

School Address _____

_____

Grade level _____ Years studying percussion _____

PAS Member # _____ (You must be a current member of PAS)

How many years have you been a PAS member? _____

Have you ever received a PASIC scholarship? _____

If yes, when? _____

Have you ever attended PASIC? _____

If yes, when? _____

Applicant's signature _____

Date _____

- ❑ Include a separate sheet detailing awards, scholarships, etc., and dates received; Goals; Major instruments (instruments that you have or are seriously studying); and a Personal statement (optional).
- ❑ A four to five minute standard 1/2" VHS videotape of the applicant's performance with applicant's name printed on the spine enclosed
- ❑ One supporting letter of recommendation verifying age and full-time student status enclosed
- ❑ Recent copy of grade transcriptions or latest grade card enclosed