

Stepping Stones to College Admission

BY JOHN KUZMICH, JR.

So many questions, so many schools and expectations. Obviously, the more time a plan has, the better its chance for success in the college admission and scholarship area. Two years of preparation can make a big difference for a college-bound music student without the senior year "rush job." A four-year plan can creatively shape students for college admission as a music major. I'll attempt to outline the process of what should take place during each year of high school and you can be the judge of how to use these ideas in whatever time frame you have to work with.

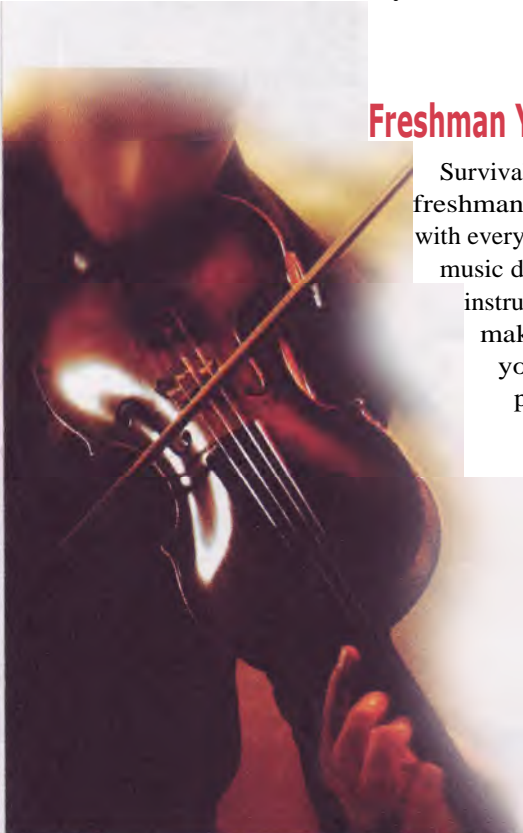


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Freshman Year

Survival is the theme of your freshman year. Get involved with everything possible in your music department: vocal and instrumental. You can only make good decisions if you have lots of good personal experiences to draw on. Success is a big part

of developing good self-esteem; besides, life isn't a spectator sport. Explore all the music education your program has to offer. Participate in jazz and classical ensembles plus marching band and chamber music. Being able to improvise is important; it is instant composition in real time. Learning how to use computers in music may not be a traditional freshman activity, but there are some students in your school who are already doing it. By the time you attend college, it will be to your advantage to know how to compose/arrange with Finale 2004 or Sibelius. Generating an automatic accompaniment with Band-In-A-Box and jazz solo transcribing with Transcriber software would be an excellent educational experience. College music theory/ear-training proficiencies are never easier to achieve than with computer-assisted instruction with such software applications as Auralia and Musition by Rising Software, Essentials of Music Theory by Alfred Publishing, Music Lessons by MiBAC, Musica Practica by Ars Nova, and others.



Sophomore Year

Finding a private music teacher is important for the college-bound student. No school music program will cover all repertory for individual instrument in preparation for college. Essentials of embouchure, sound production, sight-reading skills and etude and solo repertory can never be pursued too early. Unfortunately, high school students don't necessarily focus on this essential procedure until well into their junior and/or even their senior year of high school. The sooner you get started with private lessons, the sooner you will know if you are cut out for the college scene.

On top of everything else, you will need to prepare for the SAT and/or ACT tests. You would not believe the disappointment that ripples through students who are talented and have decent grades but don't test well on these national tests. It is possible to get admission into a good school with fine talent and good music achievements. If your ACT/SAT scores are not competitive enough, get an English or math tutor to help you improve those scores.

Junior Year

Getting ready for the senior year of high school in pursuit of college admission and scholarships is important. Unless performance skills are where they need to be, disappointment is in store no matter what guidelines this article offers. A private teacher can be an important link with successful high school ensemble experiences. Auditioning for all-state orchestra and/or band ensembles is a necessary stepping stone. The more audition experiences you encounter, the better prepared you will be for the rigors of college auditions.

What distinguishes one student from another are achievements and awards acquired over four years of high school and not just what your school music ensembles achieved at festivals. It helps settle the nerves to go into an audition with music that you have had adequate time to prepare, rather than a newly polished selection.

Your junior year is also a good time

to contact the high school guidance department to do a college survey for you based on financial aid, location, size, major options, distance from home, and even religious affiliation. Most high schools offer a free diagnostic assessment test that can aid students in identifying what schools best suit their needs and preferences. Likewise, your music teacher and private lesson teacher can offer counsel about colleges in your area. Once a list is established, you should contact the college

music departments about scholarships, procedures, deadlines, etc., sometime before spring break. Your parents will also start to take you seriously about your college pursuits.

Learning about the college music department is a necessary "evil." Too often, students only apply to colleges that their friends are applying to. Be aware that there are two kinds of colleges that you should apply to. First, there's the kind of college that has a prestigious music department that only

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offers music scholarships to potential music majors and few if any to non-music majors. Then there are other colleges that want to attract good musicians regardless of what their major is. These colleges will offer scholarships to music majors and non-music majors alike.

Senior Year

Though marching band season dominates the beginning of the school year, October/November is also the time to schedule an on-campus interview and perhaps a mini audition at the colleges you are most interested in. This is a great way for high school seniors to jump-start their college-screening process. It gets you on campus and gives you a chance to be evaluated by a faculty member. A private lesson can also be arranged for better insight into your strengths and weaknesses for college music major admission, and hopefully you'll receive some encouragement for auditioning in January, February or March, when most college music

departments formally audition prospective music students for the upcoming school year.

Late fall college visitations are especially helpful because you not only can schedule a private lesson, but also observe the music ensembles. If you feel confident, you may be able to arrange to sit in with the ensemble and really get a "bird's eye" view of what's expected musically at that college. Additionally, this is a good time to visit with admission and financial aid representatives to get a better perspective of compatibility for admission opportunities and incurring the cost and effort of applying for admission. It would be nice to get a guided tour of the college campus and eat lunch at the union or a dorm, but most students seem to leave this experience for freshman orientation. Spending a day on campus will give you a better understanding of whether this college is a good fit and provide a basis for comparisons. It will also shed light on the admission and audition process, including what reper-

tory is acceptable for the formal audition process. I find e-mail is the best way to schedule things with minimum time and effort.

Because most campus visits take place during a school day, I suggest you arrange your travels to visit more than one school when possible. For example, if there are several very good music schools in a metropolitan area, you can schedule two or three colleges in two days, which makes the cost of the trip more economical.

The well-prepared student does a few more things beyond just contacting officials. In e-mails to the college music departments, he/she gives senior class rank, ACT/SAT scores, and a professional-looking resume. Most important of all, send a short sample recording beforehand, playing samples of scales and etude excerpts used for all-state band or orchestra auditions plus two contrasting solo movements representative of a concerto. I suggest you use a Sony mini disk player or a Superscope PSD 300 to make a live,

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digital-quality recording. Duplicating them on a CD is easy and mailing them is just as easy. If time permits, I also encourage you to do a mock recording with a video camcorder. A short video presentation can make a very good impression if you are properly coached on what to say as well as what to perform. The length should be seven minutes or less. Organizing the introduction, sample scales, etudes and concert literature in seven minutes will take some planning but will be well worth the time and effort. Once the college faculty member hears and/or sees your performance expertise, the campus visit will be encouraged.

The live audition on campus in January or February is very important. If at all possible, do attend. Yes, a recording can be submitted when travel is not possible, but the personal contact is best. Also be aware that the formal college auditions on those January/February Saturdays are not very personal. The number of students auditioning is often similar to the number of people auditioning at all-state, in which the audition is over in just a few minutes with limited opportunity for a private lesson or personal interaction. That's why the fall visit is a good idea and helps create some level of relationship with the faculty, provided you've taken care of business since that visitation — namely practicing and perfecting the instruction given in the fall. During the interim of two to four months, a private music teacher can help improve your performance skills.

Be aware that colleges will probably make up their mind about offering music scholarships and admission for the upcoming year sometime in April or May. If the college music department belongs to the National Association of Schools of Music and if you are offered a music scholarship, a contract will also be given to formalize acceptance of the scholarship offer. The scholarship contract is a binding contract, so you cannot easily "jump ship" to another college once it is signed and sent in. Also, if you should want to transfer to another college after freshman year, you will first need to get approval for transferring and

seeking a music scholarship. This procedure is much like that of NCAA sports where strict rules and procedures apply for college transfers.

Attitude Is Everything

Believe me, the sooner you develop a positive attitude toward excellence, the sooner you will mature in your preparations. It is never too early to get started on the college recruitment trail. Remember, good musicianship talents and expertise can pay dividends for college recruitment. Success may not come easy, but with a plan, you have something to strive for.

For 33-plus years, John Kuzmich has guided high school music students through their college music major admissions and scholarship auditions. A public school instrumental music and computer educator since 1966, Kuzmich has taught in New Jersey, Michigan, Missouri, Illinois, California and Colorado. He is currently teaching at Carmody Middle School in Lakewood, Co/o.

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