Royal Conservatoire *of* Scotland

RCS Bachelor of Music (Performance)
Audition Tips – September 2024

AUDITION REQUIREMENTS

- Review the current requirements for your audition very carefully on the RCS website and also on the websites for any other college that you apply to.
- Requirements at conservatoires vary considerably, can change from year to year and you don't want to get caught out.

There is often a free choice of repertoire for your audition but sometimes there are more specific requirements, possibly set pieces or a choice from a group of set pieces or songs. Sight reading and scales may also be asked.

RCS is a great place to study for undergrad, but it is probably wise to apply to a few colleges even if you have an idea where you want to go. This is because we can all have an off day. It makes sense to cover yourself by doing 3 or 4 auditions. This also means that there is less pressure to play amazingly at your favourite conservatoire. If you don't end up coming to RCS for your undergrad you can always return for a post grad where opportunities like the apprenticeship schemes, playing with different professional orchestras, are probably the best in Europe.

REPERTOIRE

- Your choice of repertoire for the audition is extremely important.
- Try to demonstrate things that showcase your particular strengths and abilities.
- Choose pieces that resonate with you, that are contrasting and show some different styles, speeds and skills, if possible.

It is important to perform pieces that you are comfortable with, rather than attempting to play works that exceed your technical level. Singers should sing songs that sit well in their vocal range, with texts they are comfortable sharing with the panel.

PREPARATION

- It seems obvious to say "be really well prepared" but this is key.
- Immerse yourself in the pieces that you will be presenting.
- Understanding the background, context and nuances of your repertoire will enhance your performance and help you to connect with and interpret the music on a deeper level.

Listen to different recordings of the pieces / songs you are performing. Study the piano part (if accompanied), the harmony and the structure. Learn the "whole part", not just your part. Record and crit yourself as if you are on the panel. Don't just rely on your teacher. Play your repertoire to friends and family, anyone who will listen. Perform your programme in different sized rooms and in different acoustics and listen to how your sound fills the space. You may need to adjust your volume / projection levels slightly if you find yourself performing in a small room or a concert hall.

For pianists and percussion players, you should perhaps perform your programme on different instruments. You may consider yourself at a disadvantage because you can't play on your own instrument in the audition.

For RCS auditions this shouldn't be an issue as the piano auditions are usually in the Stevenson Hall on a piano that you should be used to playing on in performance class and the percussion auditions will be in the Percussion room on instruments that you should be familiar with.

If auditioning elsewhere, prepare, as mentioned, by playing your pieces on different instruments if possible. The RCS warm up pianos and percussion instruments are very similar, if not identical to the instruments which you will use in the actual audition, but this is not the same at all conservatoires. It can be a bit of a shock, particularly for percussion players to go straight from playing one instrument in the warm-up room, to another very different feeling instrument in the audition.

- Perform your programme in its entirety (even without accompaniment) a few times before audition day.
- If possible and practical, the week before the audition, get your body clock acclimatised by performing your pieces at the same time of day as your actual audition will be.

This may help you to be more 'in the zone' in your audition and will be particularly relevant if you are performing when you are perhaps not accustomed to playing, such as early in the morning. Warm up, if at all possible, before you travel to the venue, however early. If you do have an early morning time slot, play the night before, to help minimise warm up time needed in the morning.

Reed players, try to have two or three reeds that you are used to playing on ready the week before the audition. If one breaks or dies you will have a backup that you are used to playing on.

- Make a checklist of things you need to remember on the day.
- The obvious things like music and piano accompaniments, but also things like, where relevant, a hankie for sweaty hands in the audition, snacks/food, cigarette papers for water issues in some wind instruments, water for dry nervous throats, questions for the panel, etc, etc. If you take water into the audition place it on the floor next to you and not on the piano.

Plan in advance to allow yourself plenty of time to get to the RCS, making allowances for delayed trains, planes and buses. If your audition is very early and/or if you are travelling a very long distance, if affordable, it might be worth staying in a nearby hotel or with a local friend/ relative the night before. It feels horrible if you arrive late and have to rush to warm up. You will likely feel much more stressed if you are even a bit late and this will normally result in you not performing your best.

Practise performing your pieces in the actual shoes and clothes that you will be wearing on the day. In general, wear loose, comfortable, smart clothing which does not constrict your breathing or movement, or make you sweat.

NERVES

Performing under pressure is very different to playing at home in your bedroom or even to your teacher in a lesson.

- Try to think and plan ahead to help alleviate this pressure by being organised and utilising the fantastic performance opportunities at the Junior Conservatoire.
- Try to make sure you have performed all your audition repertoire beforehand in a more pressurised environment, in performance class, in an assessment, and most usefully in the student concerts.

This will give you so much inner self-belief and confidence before your audition to know that you have performed your pieces previously, to an audience, under pressure. In addition, at the very least, if you are

playing with an accompanist in your audition, try to make use of the wonderful Junior Conservatoire accompanists and ask your teacher to book rehearsal slots with them in your lessons. Bookings for student concerts and piano accompaniment slots have to be made online by your teacher.

It is OK and quite normal to feel nervous on audition day. If you have practised and prepared thoroughly, nerves can actually help you to play better. Most professional musicians get nervous too. There are different things you can do to help cope with the nerves, but this is better explored in advance and certainly worth discussing with your teacher.

The people listening to you will be very experienced and will know how it feels to be nervous. They really are on your side and are willing you to play well.

THE ACCOMPANIST

(for non-solo instruments)

- Prepare your piano accompaniment parts. It is advisable to not use photocopies and have accompaniment parts that lie flat and do not fold in on themselves. If you absolutely have to use photocopies make sure they are extremely clear and manageable for the pianist (and panel if stipulated). Do not give folders with plastic pouches to the accompanist.
- Rub out all previous, old, non-appropriate markings if using a borrowed piano part, or a part from the library.
- Mark VERY clearly on the piano part any extra, useful information for the accompanist who will play for you on the day.

For example, if you are doing or not doing repeats, any extra dynamics or tempo changes, important breaths that may not be obvious or maybe where you need a little more time to breathe. Rehearsal time is limited in your warm up to 10-15 minutes, so doing these small things will help the accompanist enormously and will make your performance go as smoothly as possible. (Dynamic markings for the pianist should be marked between the bass and treble staves, not above the solo part.)

- For BMus Traditional Music auditions, you are responsible for bringing your own accompanist, if required.

However, your audition programme is not required to include accompaniment other than in the case of specific instruments for which accompaniment is integral to the discipline (e.g. pipe band snare drum or bodhran).

It is also advisable for trad music to include accompaniment when auditioning in a discipline where accompaniment forms a large part of how the instrument is used (e.g. piano or guitar). For these at least half of the 15-minute programme may be accompanied.

- In all disciplines in Traditional Music, demonstrating some skill in accompanying, or being accompanied, is very welcome in audition, though the panel always want to hear clearly your solo musical voice.

- For all other accompanied auditions, consider carefully if you really want to play repertoire that has a very difficult piano accompaniment which the poor pianist may never have seen before and won't have time to practise. How easy will it be to put together quickly? Could this well intended plan to perform a piece with 'impressive' ensemble challenges actually backfire?

FOOD

- You need energy through eating and drinking to perform at your best.

- Try not to overlook this and try to plan when and what you intend to eat before your audition.

This is particularly important for singers as there are certain foods to avoid (chocolate) before singing. Some musicians and a lot of sportspeople find it hard to eat before performing due to nerves, The go-to superfood for many performers is bananas which are easy to swallow if nervous. They provide instant and sustained energy, are full of B vitamins which can help calm nerves and contain tryptophan, a happy hormone which can keep your mood upbeat.

WHAT TO EXPECT ON THE DAY

Arrive in plenty of time and register on arrival.

Time in warm up room. (10-15 minutes max with pianist)

- You will have some time alone with your pianist (non-solo instruments).
- Have a plan of what you want to play / sing with your pianist.
- Don't play too much if you are worried about being tired going in (brass / wind/ singers).
- It is YOUR time, not time for the pianists to learn the part.

Against that, have a clear idea of tempos and how to communicate them. Your accompanist may be playing the same piece several times, so they need to be sure of the tempi YOU want. (You are of course allowed to bring your own accompanist if you prefer.)

The right tempo for all your repertoire is critical in order for you to play your best. Ask your teacher to advise on any entries in pieces that they think an accompanist would benefit from you giving them a clear lead. Practise this especially when you play or sing at the very start of a piece, by breathing in time with the pulse of the music and giving a small upbeat movement with your instrument or head if appropriate, just as you breathe.

When rehearsing with limited time, with an unfamiliar accompanist, give priority to ensemble moments, such as start of movements, fluctuations in tempi, rits and accels and changes of time signature.

- Make sure your pianist is ready before you start to sing / play.

In the actual audition (and in your rehearsal) if the speed feels wrong you need to sort it. If it feels wrong in the audition, either in the piano introduction, or in the first few bars of playing either:

1. Stop and say, "sorry can we start again, it is a little fast/ slow".
2. Change the speed yourself, assertively, right at the start and the pianist should follow you. This can be tricky and is easier to do with some pieces than others depending on whether you or the accompanist has the faster notes.

It is also worth considering presenting an unaccompanied piece in your audition, not just because it means you can save your lip (voice) by not rehearsing it in your warm up, but because for all performers, it means that you have more time to rehearse your accompanied piece(s) with your pianist.

Finally related to this, if you are invited to play for a scholarship panel (Not relevant for RCS), it could mean playing through your whole programme three times over a short period which might pose some stamina issues (e.g. oboe, horn, trumpet).

Performing from memory

- Even if you are going to use music in your audition, try to have it secure in your memory.

It will likely make you play with more confidence. Playing from memory is a personal choice, though arguably, for some solo instruments, e.g. piano, harp, guitar, accordion, it may be more beneficial (impressive) not to use music. For singers there is a memory requirement.

You will not be penalised if you play using music, though it is important if facing your panel, that you try not to perform with your eyes glued to the stand for the whole performance.

Traditional Music

- In Traditional Music, applicants are asked to perform to their audition panel entirely from memory.

This is ingrained in the Scottish (and related) traditional music idiom, so for most of you this is a natural element of your music-making and therefore poses no problem in audition. For those relatively new to traditional music and not yet accustomed to playing from memory, think of the audition as a useful challenge in that respect, and something to work toward; however, if you must have a score or text to hand, this will not in itself disqualify you from entry.

Pointers particular to the Trad music applicants include having a good understanding of the idiom, and a real willingness to work with peers. Think about the skill set you need as a Traditional musician, e.g. where do you find your repertoire? Who or what are your influences? Do you have performing, ensemble or collaborative experience?

Jazz

For Jazz auditions, it is all about improvisation. There is no sight reading or scales requirement. The interaction with the live band and development of the ideas will form a major part of the audition. Applicants will hopefully be able to demonstrate a great sound, good timing, energy, musicality, emotion and motivational story telling through improvisation

Time in audition room

- Two or three pieces depending on your instrument. Check the relevant webpages for specific requirements.
- Don't worry if the panel stop you.

Most people's programmes will be too long to hear everything, so they will want to hear a variety of music and may ask you to "jump to the last section" or stop you to ask you to play your next piece or sing your next song. Also don't worry about what the panel are writing down – often it is good stuff! They need to remember who is who, so need some notes. Don't read anything into the scribbling or let it distract you. They WILL be listening while they write. If you are asked to play something again, perhaps differently, it is often a good sign because a panel may want to give you the chance to show that you are a performer who is musically adaptable / flexible and who can change things quickly – an important attribute for all musicians.

Scales

You may or may not be asked to play a few scales depending on your instrument and again each college / conservatoire differs in their requirements. Play them as you normally practise them - musical, expressive, agile, familiar. You might be asked to play them with a variety of moods.

Sight reading

If required, try to play rhythmically, with style, with as much detail as possible and DON'T stop.

First impressions count

- The first few minutes of the audition can be extremely influential.
- Take care to acknowledge the panel (usually two, sometimes three people) with good eye communication.
- Take your time to get comfortable and settled at the beginning (adjusting stand height/ angle/ position. Adjusting piano stool etc).

If playing with the accompanist, take time to tune carefully, this will instantly give a good impression. You may have a lovely sound and/ or an impressive finger technique but if it is not in tune it will spoil your performance. Retune between pieces if you need to.

Prepare and practise the first two lines of your first piece more thoroughly than anything you have ever played or sung. You may be more anxious at the start of your audition and if you get off to a good start it will ground you and set you up well for everything else.

What is the panel looking for?

- At a basic level, a performer who will cope with the demands of the course and who has a good work ethic.
- An engaging performer, someone who is passionate and talented and who shows potential for development.
- Enthusiasm and passion
- An understanding of the idiom
- A willingness to communicate and work with peers

Your panel is looking for musicians and performers who have something important to say, the ability to communicate and tell a story in their playing or singing. A committed performer. A performer with a strong musical imagination and a sense of style will be incredibly persuasive. The panel is looking for a good level of technique on which to build but not a flawless performance at the expense of musicality. They are looking for interesting musicians, not robots playing instruments; students who are enthusiastic with positive energy. Someone who is curious and interested in everything. Someone who is confident but not arrogant.

- The panel are not looking for or worried about little mistakes in a performance.

The panel is looking for someone who will be good to have around the department, a reliable, dependable person. The panel want to see your true (gutsy) personality shining through.

When an accompanist leaves the room, it is always nice to see the courteous student who thanks them....

The Interview

- The interview is an important part of the audition.
- Sit upright in your chair.
- Know what you want to do with your hands.
- Try to engage with the whole panel and have good eye contact with both (all three) panel members.

See the list on final pages of likely, possible and some more abstract questions to think about, all of which have been asked in recent years at various music colleges in the UK.

- Ensure that you know something about the composers and the pieces you are performing.
- Make sure that, where possible, you have listened to different recordings with different performers to back up anything you might say.

Percussion players, if you are asked to prepare orchestral excerpts or a study containing extracts of excerpts (Nick Woud), make sure you have listened to them in context with the orchestral accompaniment.

- Try to demonstrate that you are a broad minded, inquisitive enthusiastic musician.

You may be asked what concerts you have been to recently. Your answer could cover a range of music and concerts, but if required, the RSNO is usually in the concert hall playing just across the road every Saturday after Juniors.

Also, once again, explore the RCS website (and any websites of other places where you may be applying.) Do your research on the BMus Course for your department and your possible teachers. The questions you get are often self-reflective but also quite open so think about things you might want to talk about or ask.

Look at the questions listed on the final pages and ask your teacher for pointers if in doubt. Do also try to speak freely and show your ideas and passions. Be honest in your interview and try to be aware of the things you are still developing in your playing. Be prepared to talk about them.

- Prepare some questions that you would like to ask.
- Make sure you ask at least one intelligent question (not something you could find easily on the website.) Something perhaps that shows a genuine interest in the course at that particular place.

If you are worried that in the heat of the moment you might forget your questions write them down on a small piece of card and have this in your pocket. This demonstrates thorough preparation rather than a forgetful mind. The question(s) you ask is your chance to show the panel your hunger to become a performing musician.

Question NOT to ask – what level of scholarship can you offer me?

AFTER THE AUDITION

Don't worry about anyone else auditioning or how many places are available. Play your own game and be your own, enthusiastic self.

RESULTS

It is rare to get an offer on the day, especially if you are on the first day, but it is not unheard of. If you get offers at several places – happy days. Think carefully about which teacher is going to be best for you. Your Juniors

teacher is the person best placed along with your parents/ carers to help you decide where to go to study but there are many considerations. If you do get an offer, don't be too shy about asking about scholarships, but do it sensitively. It is a reality of the times that many students will be looking for financial help. Staying in Scotland means that your fees are already paid.

- After the audition, check the email address you put on your application regularly as the head of department will use that contact information if needed to follow up after your audition, to offer a consultation lesson or discuss any possible funding etc.
- If you do not respond to this the head of department may assume that you are not interested, which could be to your disadvantage.

If you get a rejection from the place you want to go, it is potentially worth waiting and re-applying. This is a personal decision and one which, again, you should discuss with your teacher and family. Sometimes a panel may feel that a student is just not quite ready for that course, but that doesn't mean you won't be ready next year. If you go back next year and demonstrate significant progress that is a positive thing. If you do want to try again, look at Continuing Education courses and gap years courses, or create your own gap year course with a good teacher, consultation lessons, time playing repertoire with a pianist, diploma exam, concerts, competitions, NYOS, summer courses etc.

Starting a degree course a little older and more experienced can mean that you graduate with more experience / maturity etc, better prepared for what happens next. Imagining a positive outcome from the results, whatever they are, takes the pressure off.

- Thorough preparation, enthusiastic engagement and a committed musical delivery will give you the best chance in your audition.
- Finally, stand tall or sit with good posture and you will perform with more confidence.

Good luck!

Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

EXAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The likely, less likely and obscure. You will only get asked a few:

1. How do you think that went? Were you happy with the way you played? What could you have done better?
2. What do you think are your strengths and weaknesses as a performer?
3. Can you appraise your musical and/or technical strengths and weaknesses?
4. How did you choose your programme? Where do you find your repertoire?
5. What did you find the hardest thing to perform from your repertoire today?
6. How are you working on your e.g. … bowing, articulation, breathing, vibrato, stick technique, dynamic range….?
7. How long have you played these pieces for?
8. What concerts have you been to recently?
9. Who is your favourite harpist, singer, cellist, clarinettist, pianist etc? Why?
10. Describe your tone.
11. What kind of playing do you enjoy most? Orchestral? chamber? solo?
12. Where do you see yourself in 10 years?
13. What is your favourite piece?
14. Do you have a favourite composer?
15. How much performance experience have you had?
16. How much experience have you had playing collaboratively or in an ensemble?
17. Which teachers here would you like to study with/ have a consultation lesson with?
18. What are you working on at the moment with your teacher?
19. What is the favourite part about playing your instrument?
20. What do you want to get out of this music college?
21. Why have you chosen a conservatoire over a university?
22. What do you know about our teachers /department activities?
23. Why have you chosen to audition here? Why are we on your list?
24. What will you do if you don't get in anywhere this year?
25. Where is your preferred place of study?
26. If you get offered a place everywhere, where do you think you will go?
27. What are your strengths and weaknesses as a person?
28. Describe your personality.
29. Why should we choose you / offer you a place?
30. What music do you listen to?
31. What can you bring to this conservatoire?
32. What two things would you take to a desert island?
33. Which two pieces of music would you take to a desert island?
34. What is your dream?
35. What qualities do you think are necessary to be a professional singer /musician?
36. Who is your biggest musical inspiration? Who are your influences?
37. Do you prefer singing solo or in a choir?
38. Have you got any questions for us?
39. Which is your favourite piece of the ones you played today?

by Stephen West, RCS Lecturer in Woodwind