

A GUIDE TO CHOOSING REPERTOIRE FOR AUDITIONS

By Maureen Yuen 

Everybody wants students to perform well at college auditions—the student, the private teacher, and, yes, even the collegiate professor! This article focuses on how to best prepare students for university auditions. Violin professors generally prefer students audition with repertoire that demonstrates their technical and musical strengths, even if they perform what may be considered intermediate repertoire. We would rather hear students perform repertoire that aligns with their current strengths and abilities instead of performing works beyond their capability. A rubric for the systematic process of choosing appropriate repertoire is included in this article.

Choosing the Right Repertoire

Teachers should consider their students' current abilities and encourage growth by assigning a progression of repertoire that allows them to develop technical and artistic skills and helps them understand the depth of repertoire for their instrument in historical context. There are many wonderful pieces composed for developing string players that can build technique while improving artistry. Students have a lifetime to learn the masterworks composed for their instrument; there is no hurry to tackle the most challenging repertoire at such a tender, developmental stage.

It is vitally important that students develop technical and musical skills in a sequential manner that align with the repertoire prior to starting music school. While students who audition with repertoire beyond their abilities may be accepted into music school, their professors will focus on remedial work. This remediation can be incredibly frustrating to students who may perceive they are taking a step backward in their development. In a worst-case scenario where students have been assigned inappropriate repertoire, they will not be accepted into collegiate music programs.

While most colleges and universities require contrasting works from the standard repertoire, you should consider this a guideline. In an ideal world, potential string majors will have taken private lessons for several years, with a systematic progression of repertoire and technique that naturally leads to standard repertoire by the time they audition for music school. The reality is that many students start private lessons in high school and, even if they do start lessons earlier, they do not necessarily take lessons with the intention of attending music school. Professors are aware and empathetic of this—ideally, they prefer students who have had extensive training that will allow them to perform standard repertoire

successfully, but if they are not yet musically or technically ready for it, they should perform pieces that are aligned with their current development. Students will mature technically and artistically with repertoire that better meets their current abilities.

Scaffolding and the Zone of Proximal Development

Scaffolding is a learning process that “consists essentially of the adult ‘controlling’ those elements of the task that are initially beyond the learner’s capacity, thus permitting him to concentrate upon and complete only those elements that are within his range of competence” (Wood, Bruner, and Ross 1976, 90). The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD; Vygotsky, 1978) is the area just outside of a student’s current ability, “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance” (Kennell 1992, 8). Scaffolded repertoire selection within the ZPD will ensure that students have a solid musical and technical foundation.

Technique such as scales, arpeggios, études, and exercises need to be assigned alongside the repertoire, so that students learn to navigate the fingerboard, develop left-hand facility, improve tone production, and execute various bow strokes and articulations, including smooth bow changes. If anything, the technique assigned should exceed what is required for the repertoire—this allows for more focus on musical details and expression. Students will only be successful moving from the Vivaldi A Minor Concerto, RV 356 to the Lalo *Symphonie Espagnol* in the space of two years if they have the time, dedication, and focus to develop the necessary technique. These students are few and far between; high school violinists have school and family commitments and, even if they have enough time to practice, they are still learning *how* to practice.

There are several guides for selecting appropriate literature: the American String Teachers Association (ASTA, N.d.), the Royal Conservatory of Music (RCM, 2021), and the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM, N.d.) publish graded repertoire lists online. Ask your students what they would like to play, who their favorite composers are, and why. Their responses will give insight into their tastes and preferences, and you can choose something they will enjoy and will challenge them appropriately.



Seek to create a personalized sequence of repertoire based on their educational goals, strengths, weaknesses, personal tastes, learning style, commitment to practice, ability to retain information, and personal ambition.



Contrasting Repertoire Selections

You should recognize that your students may be planning to major in a music subject different from the one you studied and should seek to create a personalized sequence of repertoire based on their educational goals, strengths, weaknesses, personal tastes, learning style, commitment to practice, ability to retain information, and personal ambition. The pieces should be contrasting in tempo, style, historical era, genre, and so on. The length of pieces should also be taken into account—they should not be so long that the student is overwhelmed by the sheer number of notes. It is useful to work on contrasting pieces concurrently, so that you can draw parallels and connections between the works. Be sure to give your students historical and contextual background information—this will help develop critical thinking skills for them as they start to build a knowledge base about music.

How to Balance Technique and Repertoire

Technique exists solely to serve artistic goals. Without well-developed technique, it is nearly impossible for students to successfully express themselves musically. It can be tempting to ignore technique to keep lessons “fun,” but freshman year is not much fun when students realize they cannot play in second position or play down bows and up bows evenly! The key is to communicate that technique is absolutely crucial to improvement and mastery. Once students understand the importance of technique and possess skills that are aligned with the repertoire, lessons and practice become more fun.

By the time students apply to college, they should easily play major, melodic, and harmonic minor scales, and major and minor arpeggios in at least two octaves, ideally in three octaves. Playing two-octave scales in all major and minor keys is preferable to playing only a few major scales in three octaves. For your students to be ahead of the curve, they can work on chromatic scales, dominant seventh and diminished seventh arpeggios, thirds, sixths, and octaves. Many students arrive at college brandishing their Carl Flesch scale books but

can only play two or three of the major scales from it. Instead, I recommend using a scale book that includes one- to three-octave scales (major, minor, chromatic, artificial harmonics, thirds, sixths, and octaves) and arpeggios (major, minor, dominant sevenths, and diminished sevenths). After students are comfortable in all keys, they can move on to the Flesch or Galamian scale book.

Memorization

Students should strive to perform from memory even when not explicitly stated as a requirement. Memorization is not to be confused with rote learning; memorization is important because it is a process that provides a thorough understanding, not just of the notes, but also of themes, structure, phrasing, and so on, and allows the student to be engaged in the musical performance. If students are visually buried in the musical notation, they are often less expressive. Students listen to themselves better when their ears, rather than their eyes, are the primary sense involved in music-making.

The Rubric

The following three-point rubric may help choose suitable pieces for your students (Table 1). There are eleven categories to the rubric: intonation, rhythmic accuracy, note accuracy, ensemble, dynamic markings, tempo markings, bowings and articulations, phrasing, expression, style, and tone. If all of a student’s focus goes toward merely playing the correct pitches and rhythms, the piece is too difficult!

An unsuitable piece may provide either too high a degree of challenge or not enough challenge in too many categories to the student. In either case, the piece will not allow the student to grow or develop technically and musically. Overall, there should be a balance throughout all the categories for an overall Strong Suitability rating. To target a particular aspect of your student’s playing, the piece you select might fall under “Unsuitable: Piece is Too Difficult” in that specific category. To balance out the overall suitability for your student, you may want to ensure that the piece is also “Unsuitable The Piece is Too Easy” in another category.

Intonation, Rhythmic Accuracy, and Note Accuracy

Adjudicators understand that students make slips in the audition setting that would not happen in practice; it is easy to determine whether errors are caused by nerves, poor preparation, or inability. All the preparation in the world will not help a student to play in tune, in time, or with note accuracy if the repertoire selection is simply beyond the student’s capabilities. When selecting pieces for auditions, consider what technical skills the students already have. In which positions and keys are they proficient? Which rhythms and bowing articulations can they execute successfully? Choose repertoire that requires adjacent technique. For

Table 1. The Rubric.

	3 Strong Suitability	2 Weak Suitability	1 Unsuitable
Note Accuracy	<input type="checkbox"/> Will be able to play the notes accurately and, while there may be an occasional error, pitches and rhythms will be accurate.	<input type="checkbox"/> May struggle to play the notes accurately, resulting in frequent and/or repeated errors.	<input type="checkbox"/> Too difficult: Will play few accurate pitches and rhythms. <input type="checkbox"/> Too easy: Will be able to easily sight-read this piece and would require little to no work to master the notes. Not challenged with new learning.
Tone	<input type="checkbox"/> Tone will be consistently clear, resonant, and have distinct color in all ranges.	<input type="checkbox"/> Tone will be inconsistently clear and may lack color and depth.	<input type="checkbox"/> Tone will not be pleasing.
Intonation	<input type="checkbox"/> Can play in tune in the keys and positions required for this piece. <input type="checkbox"/> The piece introduces a new key area or position.	<input type="checkbox"/> Struggles to play in tune.	<input type="checkbox"/> Too difficult: Cannot play in tune. <input type="checkbox"/> Too easy: Can play in tune but the piece does not introduce any new key areas or positions to the student. Not challenged with new learning.
Rhythmic Accuracy	<input type="checkbox"/> Can play the various rhythms at the appropriate tempo required for this piece. <input type="checkbox"/> The piece introduces a new rhythmic concept or tempo.	<input type="checkbox"/> Struggles to play with rhythmic accuracy at the appropriate tempo.	<input type="checkbox"/> Too difficult: Cannot play the rhythms accurately nor in an appropriate tempo. <input type="checkbox"/> Too easy: Can play rhythmically accurately at the appropriate tempo but the piece does not introduce any new rhythmic concepts or tempos. Not challenged with new learning.
Tempo Markings	<input type="checkbox"/> Will be able to play at an appropriate tempo and follow all other tempo markings such as <i>ritardando</i> , <i>accelerando</i> , and so on. <input type="checkbox"/> The piece introduces new terminology.	<input type="checkbox"/> May struggle to play at an appropriate tempo and may struggle to follow other tempo markings.	<input type="checkbox"/> Unable to play at an appropriate tempo, nor will be able to follow other tempo markings.
Bowings and Articulations	<input type="checkbox"/> Will be able to execute all bowings and articulations marked in the score.	<input type="checkbox"/> May struggle to execute all bowings and articulations.	<input type="checkbox"/> Unable to execute all bowings and articulations.
Dynamics	<input type="checkbox"/> Will be able to follow dynamics as marked in the score. <input type="checkbox"/> Will be able to vary volume and tone color by knowing how to adjust bow speed, weight, contact point, and so on, to execute dynamics.	<input type="checkbox"/> May be able to play some but not all dynamics. <input type="checkbox"/> May not know how to adjust bow speed, weight, contact point, and so on, to execute dynamics.	<input type="checkbox"/> Will ignore dynamics. <input type="checkbox"/> Does not have the bow control to execute dynamics.

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

	3 Strong Suitability	2 Weak Suitability	1 Unsuitable
Style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Will be able to perform with appropriate style. <input type="checkbox"/> Historical performance practice may be a new concept. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> May occasionally be able to perform with appropriate style. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Unable to perform with appropriate style.
Phrasing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Will be able to show phrasing and musical direction through bow control, breath, and vibrato, while faithfully following the composer’s markings. <input type="checkbox"/> Will be able to shape and contour phrases to reflect an understanding of the structure of the piece. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> May be able to show some phrasing and musical direction but may deviate from the composer’s markings to do this. <input type="checkbox"/> May be able to add some shape and contour but may not reflect the structure of the piece. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Unable to connect the notes to form a musical phrase. Flow will be absent due to a lack of technical control and understanding of how to breathe in the music. <input type="checkbox"/> Unable to add shape and contour to phrases.
Expression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Will be able to vary vibrato, bow speed, bow weight, and bow contact point to create expressiveness, although these may be new concepts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> May sometimes be able to vary vibrato, bow speed, bow weight, and bow contact point but does so inconsistently. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Unable to demonstrate expressiveness due to limited technical control and ability.
Ensemble	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Will be able to maintain a steady pulse and be able to fit with the piano part. <input type="checkbox"/> Will be able to indicate when to start and where to take time through breathing and cueing. <input type="checkbox"/> The piece introduces a new collaborative skill, such as cross-rhythms, or indicates through breath and cueing where and how the pace of the music may change. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> May partially be able to maintain a steady pulse and be partially able to fit with the piano part. <input type="checkbox"/> May be able to indicate when to start through breathing and cueing but may struggle to show how/where to take time. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Unable to maintain a steady pulse nor fit with the piano part. <input type="checkbox"/> Struggles to cue and breathe.

example, if the student can easily play in keys up to two sharps and two flats, a piece in A major or C minor would be appropriate, but a piece in B major would not be appropriate.

Ensemble, Dynamic Markings, Tempo Markings, and Bowings and Articulations

An understanding of the score demonstrates a student’s intellectual engagement in music. Ideally, students will collaborate with a pianist; studying the complete score in advance and understanding how their part fits and works with the piano or orchestra will give students an advantage in collaborative settings. Students should also understand the musical terms used and faithfully follow the composer’s markings, including dynamics, articulations, tempo changes, and expressive indications.

Phrasing, Expression, Style, and Tone

Just as any performance rubric should include intonation, rhythmic accuracy, and note accuracy, phrasing, expression, style, and tone are crucial elements of music performance. The former demonstrate technical ability and the latter demonstrate artistry and musical maturity. When students are assigned pieces that are too difficult, they will be too concerned with note accuracy to consider musical artistry. Although technique and musicality may not develop equally in students, they should prepare repertoire that challenges both areas but will ultimately result in a performance that allows them to succeed in both.

As phrasing and expression are subjective criteria, students must be engaged and convincing in their performance. Teachers should not only nurture students’ individuality but also make sure they can justify the musical choices they make.

Style is a less subjective criterion; students should be able to demonstrate the differences in performance practice between historical periods. Bärenreiter or Henle editions for Baroque and Classical pieces are ideal as they maintain fidelity to the composers' manuscripts, and editorial suggestions are based on historical performance practice.

Preparation Required

The piece should challenge the student to grow technically and artistically with a reasonable amount of practice. Aim to assign repertoire that is realistic for them to prepare to a high level with limited lead time and regular practice. On the contrary, a piece that requires little effort on the students' part to prepare to a high level is a poor choice. The repertoire that you select for your student must include technical and artistic challenges that encourage them to grow beyond their current abilities.

Comparison with Model

Students should listen to professional performances of their pieces for an aural model—it is important to note that this refers to professional performances. Examples of this might include a recording by a recognized artist released by a record label or a live performance of a concerto with a symphony orchestra.

You may be thinking to yourself that it is impossible for your student to play a particular concerto at a level comparable to a member of the Berlin Philharmonic. This is precisely the argument—if this is the case, your student should be playing less difficult repertoire that can approach the quality of a professional's performance. The goal is aspirational and illustrates two points: first, there is no such thing as a "perfect" performance. Second, students should model their performances on those of professional musicians, regardless of the repertoire difficulty.

If your student can match the level of a professional performance, there are two possibilities: you are working with a top-level prodigy (congratulations!) or the piece is *too* easy for your student.

Potential for the Student to Move on to More Advanced Repertoire Successfully

Each new piece assigned should be more advanced than the previous piece. A problem arises if we advance students too far too soon, which will result in increasingly poor performances. When these students arrive at college and are matched with

suitable repertoire to work on, they can become demoralized as they feel that they are moving backward.

Conclusion

Students should prepare pieces that engage them and contain technical and artistic challenges that they can reach successfully in the allotted time for preparation while expanding their overall ability. It is my hope that this rubric will help teachers choose repertoire to prepare their students for successful auditions by selecting appropriate music. In short, teachers should choose repertoire that will demonstrate what the student *can* do rather than what the student *cannot* do.

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