

Orchestral Sectional

WESTON SPROTT & MATT WALLEY



YOUTH, EQUAL OPPORTUNITY, AND ORCHESTRAL AUDITIONS

by Weston Sprott and Colin Williams

The time in a young musician's life when they begin the journey of auditioning for professional level opportunities is truly exciting. A combination of enthusiasm, hope, and anxiety builds once the process of submitting a resume and preparing repertoire begins. Unfortunately, these feelings are often quashed after waiting, sometimes for several weeks, only to be denied an audition opportunity due to "lack of qualifications," even for part-time or regional positions. These experiences can lead young musicians to feel orchestras are creating a false sense of meritocracy—one where musical prowess matters less than having the right connections. In most cases, age discrimination is viewed through the lens of damaging the career prospects of older workers. In fact, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 protects certain applicants and employees 40 years of age and older from discrimination. In this article, we consider if the behavior of orchestral stakeholders is appropriately protecting our youth from age discrimination. The hope is to encourage our colleagues to endorse hiring practices that are equitable and provide opportunities for all who deserve them, regardless of age.

We've both recently had students apply to audition for small regional orchestras. These are fine groups, ones that provide the kind of job that forms a dependable slice of a freelance career. Some pops, some light classics, some war horses. A great job for anyone due to its variety of rep and relative flexibility of schedule. Initially denied an audition based on their resume, we've advocated for these students by personally writing recommendations to personnel managers or calling members of the sections. In these cases, we believed that what the student lacked in experience was made up for in talent and work ethic. In other cases, we believed students with a resume showing they have advanced in previous professional auditions and work as a substitute with a highly respected orchestra should qualify them for an audition opportunity. One way or another, they might be just the kind of player this orchestra was looking for, even if they were a little green. Certainly worth the committee's time to hear. Orchestra managers and section members alike told us that they were looking for someone with multiple years of experience in large orchestras, and that no amount of "scintillating personality" could possibly make up for their dearth of knowledge. This is but one example of a fundamental problem with the way some auditions are run in the US, and it falls particularly hard on younger players who are, by definition, less experienced.

There are myriad reasons, both personal and institutional, that orchestras give for denying auditions to job applicants. Most common is the ultimate catch-22 for young players: lack of experience. Despite recommendations from respected professional performers and professors who are qualified to attest to an applicant's job readiness, many gatekeepers contend that a lack of working experience is a uniquely disqualifying trait. The end result is that many orchestras, purporting to hold blind competitions of merit, simply engage in a form of age discrimination that is antithetical to the values of inclusiveness that most musicians and orchestras claim to espouse.

Many orchestras, even large institutions, claim that financial burdens associated with conducting auditions force them to be less inclusive when determining who they will hear. Beyond scheduling difficulties, organizations must consider the costs of compensating committee members for their time, renting a venue, and staffing it appropriately. This provides further pretext to establish criteria that increase efficiency by excluding players who are deemed to be unqualified. This concern can be addressed with some flexibility. Although not ideal, a round of recorded pre-screening auditions can

be arranged to listen to players who might not have qualified for a live audition based on their resume. When done with integrity, this process helps identify applicants who might not have looked qualified on paper but clearly demonstrate the proficiency necessary for deeper consideration. Another option is to hold a European style "vorprobespiel" audition. This format allows less experienced candidates the opportunity to audition, but they are more efficient because the repertoire list is condensed and they take place in a less costly location. Neither is a perfect substitute for allowing a live screened audition for everyone, but both are preferable to flatly denying players opportunities for career advancement.

Disappointingly, another explanation we've heard for denying talented young players an audition is that "if they are that good, they won't stay in a place like this anyway", or "this is a job for local players; nobody would move here for this job." What could be worse for the health of an organization than an aversion to talent? Even if an exceptional player has a short tenure at an organization, the entire group benefits when acquiring the most qualified candidate becomes the top priority.

Furthermore, the social capital of an orchestra increases when the greater community recognizes a group as one where great players come to play. As an example, much of our community is aware that the San Antonio Symphony is a place where many, at the time inexperienced, trombonists got their orchestral start. Imagine if that orchestra denied these players auditions based on their lack of degrees or professional experience. The list of San Antonio Symphony alumni includes:

(Inclusion in the lists below does not indicate that referenced players endorse our opinion.)

- » Lisa Albrecht (Rochester Philharmonic)
- » Mark Davidson (Utah Symphony)
- » Steve Lange (Boston Symphony)
- » Ilan Morgenstern (Vancouver Symphony)
- » Brian Santero (New York City Ballet)
- » Amanda Stewart (St. Louis Symphony)
- » Robert Taylor (Oregon Symphony and Pink Martini)
- » Matt Vaughn (Philadelphia Orchestra)
- » Colin Williams (New York Philharmonic)
- » Nathan Zgonc (Atlanta Symphony)

In our conversations with personnel managers and section members, another commonly voiced sentiment relates to players not having a deep educational resume. One player stated that admission to the audition was based on a point system that included giving greater value to players with advanced degrees. He further stated the person one of us was advocating for “hasn’t even finished undergrad” and “nobody wants to hear someone like that.” It is difficult to understand why performance and audition experience would be outweighed by academic experience in the context of a job search for a performer. An incomplete, yet representative list of trombonists who started playing in great orchestras prior to completing their undergraduate studies includes:

- » Joseph Alessi (New York Philharmonic)
- » Blair Bollinger (Philadelphia Orchestra)
- » Norman Bolter (Boston Symphony)
- » Ian Bousfield (Vienna Philharmonic)
- » Eric Carlson (Philadelphia Orchestra)
- » Nitzan Haroz (Philadelphia Orchestra)
- » James Markey (Boston Symphony)
- » Peter Moore (London Symphony)
- » Charlie Vernon (Chicago Symphony)
- » Sam Schlosser (San Francisco Opera)
- » Weston Sprott (Metropolitan Opera)
- » Ward Stare (Chicago Lyric Opera)

If the people listed above were given the type of treatment that many young players now receive, the landscape of the field might look quite different. Of course, we are not suggesting that every student in the world is qualified to take professional auditions. However, we do believe that young players who have demonstrated success in previous auditions or have the strong support of someone with a deep knowledge of industry standards should be given consideration. It is worth noting that most players who play in major orchestras have significant experience on both sides of auditions, have an understanding of the concerns of committees and auditioners, and are unlikely to make a habit of recommending unqualified players to other organizations.

We believe that everyone deserves the opportunity to advance in our field. Experience must be valued, of course, but the young player also deserves to be heard. We would certainly not be where we are today if our colleagues in our first jobs had decided to make our age and inexperience disqualifying factors. In the trombone community alone, there are numerous players who got their start in the types of jobs that students are now often denied auditions for.

Auditions, while being as inclusive as possible, still need ground rules for determining who is invited to participate.

There are some basic credentials that should allow participation in an audition. The completion of a degree at a conservatory or school of music is a great indicator of an applicant’s depth of knowledge about the repertoire and their basic proficiency on the instrument. Obviously, prior audition success or employment in an orchestra also indicates the potential of an applicant. As previously noted, there will still be people who fall outside of these criteria who are prepared to be valuable members of an ensemble. That is why it is imperative that committees strongly consider a personal recommendation from someone who is experienced and respected in the field. A resume will never be able to fully describe the potential of a young musician as completely as a word from a knowledgeable musician. When these recommendations come from credible sources, they should be given strong consideration. Equally important is the need for those in positions to provide recommendations to not do so frivolously. Recommenders should be honest about the applicant’s capabilities, as advocating for unqualified players weakens their own credibility.

Unfortunately, despite qualifying credentials and strong recommendations, many talented young players are denied auditions. In the 2015 article “A Look at Both Sides of the Audition Process,” Nathan Kahn (AFM Symphonic Services Division) states:

Getting admitted to an audition can be almost as challenging as the audition itself. While there is no AFM bylaw that requires any orchestra to grant a live audition to union members, the AFM can sometimes assist candidates who are seeking acceptance to an audition by convincing personnel managers and audition committees to hear “just one more.” Appearing at an audition without having been invited, although some candidates still insist on doing this, will get you nowhere and is strongly discouraged.

Each organization has the right to conduct its business in the manner it deems appropriate. However, we must consider the cost of telling aspiring musicians their industriousness and musical accomplishment has no value to potential employers. What does this message communicate to the next generation of musicians? What does it say about the audition gatekeepers?

Marginalizing young talent comes with tangible consequences. These musicians are often led to believe their career trajectory is determined by a strict meritocracy; one only needs to prove themselves worthy with great playing and collegiality, and an opportunity to build a life as a musician is possible. Motivation to pursue a career is stifled when players realize that in a field with limited opportunities, prospects are even fewer than they imagined. Even worse, it can create a lifetime of bitterness towards an industry that survives on the advocacy of the community. As currently constructed, we exist in a paradigm where players who, by resume alone, qualify to

audition for the New York Philharmonic or the Metropolitan Opera are being denied auditions for regional orchestras. When the pathways for career advancement are unevenly and often unfairly policed, the reasons for principled people to remain in our industry lessen, and an exodus of talent ensues.

In recent years, the orchestra field has turned its collective attention towards the work of overcoming implicit bias. Recent national convenings by the International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians (ICSOM) and the Regional Orchestra Players Association (ROPA) have been dedicated to this work. While most equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts have focused on race and gender, we submit that age discrimination is another aspect of the hiring process that also needs attention.

We hope this article will spur discussion among orchestras about how to reconcile efficiency concerns with the equally legitimate need for young players to have advancement opportunities. Those of us within the field can do our part by trying to see past our implicit biases related to age and work to provide a platform for new talent to rise. We can advocate within our own organizations and local chapters of the AFM to create auditions that are truly contests of merit. The more we work towards these ideals, the more our institutions will reap rewards of rosters filled with the most qualified musicians. ■



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