

THE Organist's toolkit

Should you apply to a conservatoire?

Daniel Moult

I've heard a number of myths over the years about conservatoires. These vary from 'you have to be a *wunderkind* to even consider applying', 'all that matters is how you play at the audition', through to 'only people who can't get into university apply'. I'm very grateful to *Organists' Review* for the chance to demystify the audition, the application process, and aspects of the conservatoire experience!

How to apply

If you are considering applying to a conservatoire (whether as an undergraduate, postgraduate, young professional or gap year student), I strongly suggest booking an initial consultation lesson with the principal tutor of your choice. This can often be done via the conservatoire website, or through direct contact with the head of department. A consultation will give you the chance to get feedback on your playing (ideally well ahead of the auditions). More importantly, it should put you in a better position to gauge whether the musical and personal chemistry is right between you and the tutor and institution. You might be committing four years of your life to the place (as an undergrad), so it's best to find the right fit beforehand!

When the time comes to apply, applications are processed – as for universities – through UCAS (www.ucas.com; follow the conservatoire link). Although dealing with such matters is as exciting as watching paint dry, it is worth familiarising



yourself with the necessary admin well ahead of time. If anything is unclear, do drop a line to the conservatoire(s) to which you're applying. They will be delighted to help!

Audition day

The audition day has arrived. Hopefully, you have all the information that you need and were told what to prepare on receipt of your application – again, a quick email or phone call is all that is needed if there are loose ends or questions. I can only describe how we conduct auditions at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire: some of the specifics will obviously vary amongst our colleagues elsewhere, but I trust that this will give you a useful overview.

I'll restrict my comments to

undergraduate (BMus 1) entry.

First, we will do everything that we can to put you at ease before we start the audition! Don't be alarmed to find three staff on the panel. This is not designed to intimidate you, but allows for a fair and balanced assessment of your application. We are listening for what you can do, not what you can't yet do!

With this in mind, and given the necessarily limited practice time available beforehand, I would suggest that you pick music which you can adapt quickly and comfortably to different organs. Pieces which avoid fiddly registration changes or considerable 'console management' are best. We're listening to you as a musician, not judging you on virtuosic piston pressing! As with a concert or exam, pieces which you have lived with and which have marinated (like a nice casserole) will show you off best.

We realise that – when applying for undergraduate entry – you are at the foothills of your musical journey. Talent, potential and attitude are as important here as what you have achieved by the modest age of 18 or so.

Hopefully the pieces you have chosen will be comfortably within your technical control, and very fluent. Nonetheless, performing your pieces with conviction is much more important than worrying over the odd wrong note or blemish.

Whilst developing a calm and ergonomic technique is important for all young musicians, we do not

expect the finished product. Time is spent, from the first week of the course onwards, refining technique on sensitive instruments.

After your recital, you'll be given short tests in sight-reading and transposition (both around Grade 8 level). These give us a flavour of how you process music, but are not 'deal breakers' by any means! We teach keyboard skills in a systematic way from the first term onwards (with many of our students gaining ARCO and FRCO before graduating).

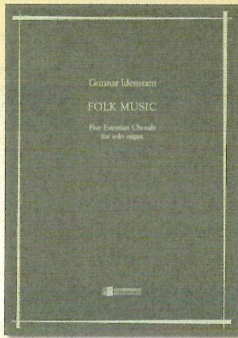
And finally – the interview. Interviews should be two-way processes; you need to work out if the tuition and institution are the right fit for you. From our point-of-view, we are looking for someone with the raw ability to succeed on quite a demanding course, the passion to be the best musician that they can be, and an open, questing mind.

Perhaps this is the time to dispel a final myth! Conservatoires, so the cliché goes, are purely interested in instrumental ability, and not in any academic prowess. Conservatoires do place a good deal of emphasis on practical music-making, and university courses do tend to have a larger academic content.

Nonetheless, conservatoires take disciplines such as history, harmony & counterpoint, and music philosophy seriously – and teach it well. These topics are an important part in making you a well-rounded, informed, confident musician, who can pursue your specific interests and strengths. Conservatoire graduates can be found in all areas of the music profession – performers, church and cathedral musicians, teachers and examiners, musicologists, and, increasingly, portfolio career musicians who combine different elements. A handful of graduates over the years decide that, on reflection, they wish to pursue related or even entirely different careers. Your degree and intensive training at a conservatoire, with the focus on performing excellence and musical breadth, stands you in good stead in many professions, and can be 'traded in' as with a university arts degree.

I think it is fair to say that the conservatoire route in the UK seems to be more popular than ever, with an increasing percentage of top-flight musicians having chosen it over a university music faculty. Of course, it might not suit everyone's strengths or temperament, but a conservatoire is not an exclusive club for the precocious (high though the standards should be), nor a refuge for *idiots savants*! This route allows you to have a really special four years working at the highest level on music that you love, whilst preparing you thoroughly for the next part of your life. Whichever route you (or your student) choose to take, do consider all the options and do observe or experience the teaching at first hand before committing to an application. I wish you every success and happiness on your musical journey!

With thanks to my colleague, Nicholas Wearne, for his help in preparing this article.



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