

Applying to Graduate Schools

Reasons to consider graduate school

There is no “right” answer here — people usually have several reasons (some public and some private) for wanting to go to grad school, but it is best to be honest with yourself about what your motivations are. Your choice should be an educated one. You should also determine whether or not graduate school is necessary for you to achieve your goal. If you plan to invest thousands of dollars more in your education, you should be clear about your expectations. Here are some typical reasons students consider graduate study. In order to:

- Study with a specific teacher
- Explore specific repertoire / techniques / technology
- Develop further as a musician
- Become certified to teach in the public schools
- Explore a professional field of interest
- Explore a different area from your undergraduate work
- Avoid moving back in with Mom and Dad
- “Buy time” against finding a job
- Figure out what to do with the rest of your life

Do your homework

In researching various schools to apply to, talk to friends, colleagues, teachers, to ask about schools and teachers they would recommend. When considering how many schools to apply to, between 4 and 7 is common and recommended — make sure you apply to enough schools so that you have several viable options. Visit campuses if at all possible — don’t rely on the general prestige of a school. After meeting with teachers, observing classes, seeing the facilities and auditioning, the school that originally was your first choice may not be, so it’s advisable to explore several possibilities. Request placement statistics from the school to find out how successful the programs are. It is also important to determine whether to pursue the degree on a full-time or part-time basis, understanding that there are benefits and drawbacks to both given each individual circumstance.

Every school has a website on which you can find a wealth of information, read about the faculty, the degree requirements, the performance opportunities, etc. Keep in mind that faculty and programs can change, though, so it’s good to make sure that the teacher you are interested in studying with will be teaching there the year that you apply. To get started, there are also several directories in the Career Services Center that can help:

Directory of Music Faculties in Colleges and Universities, U.S. and Canada, published annually by the College Music Society. For each school, this directory lists contact address and phone/fax numbers, degree programs and faculty, coded by area of teaching specialization. If you only have the name of a prospective teacher, you can use the index to find which school(s) she/he is affiliated with. Faculty are indexed both alphabetically and by area of teaching interest. Schools are indexed by graduate degrees, so that if you are looking for a very specialized degree, e.g. a PhD in ethnomusicology, or a DMA in choral conducting, you will find a list of every school offering the program. For DMA/PhD programs, pick up the Career Services Center list of schools offering these degrees.

Musical America lists contact addresses and phone numbers for music schools in the U.S., by state, and abroad, by country. With an address or phone number, you can call the school to have the current catalog sent directly to you.

The Peterson’s Guide series for colleges/universities offers profiles of every school in the U.S., including tuition costs, financial aid options, and profiles of grad programs. Included in the series are *Professional Degree programs in the Visual and Performing Arts*, *Peterson’s Guide to Graduate Programs in the Humanities and Social*

Sciences (includes music programs), *Guide to Four-year Colleges*, *Guide to Two-year Colleges*, and *Study Abroad*. These annual guides describe degree programs, student-body makeup, campus facilities, career and student services, latest tuition, financial aid, retention information, application deadlines, etc.

Links to music schools worldwide are found on the Sibelius Academy site at:
<http://www2.siba.fi/Kulttuuripalvelut/institutes.html>

Degree programs

Master of Music Usually a two-year program. Applicants must hold a Bachelor's degree, or its equivalent. With a Bachelor of Music degree from an accredited college you can usually proceed without having to make up course work. Placement and/or admission exams are often required in music theory and history. Most students find the course work and requirements lighter than a Bachelor's program. Typical Master's programs require about 36 credit hours, which for performers usually include large ensemble, chamber music, lessons, master class or repertoire classes, language competencies for singers, and at least one "academic" course per year in theory or history. Students generally find (and need) more time to practice, freelance, and work part-time jobs while doing a Master's program than in a Bachelor's program.

Doctor of Musical Arts This is the doctoral degree in performance or composition. Programs vary greatly. The Master of Music degree is a prerequisite to enter a DMA program. Usually takes a minimum of two years to complete the course and residency requirements. For performers, this usually involves 3 to 6 full solo recitals (sometimes lecture recitals and chamber music recitals are included); for composers, this may be a number of compositions. A thesis or doctoral research paper(s) focusing on an aspect of performance, or a musical analysis and/or theoretical work is also required. Language requirements, course work / seminars in theory and history, and sometimes chamber music, accompanying, and/or orchestral credit hours may fill out the degree requirements.

PhD programs are for doctorates usually in musicology, music education, music theory, and composition. These programs include the Master's degree. After the first two years of coursework, general exams precede work on the dissertation. If a student leaves after the first two years, she/he receives a Master's degree. Usually takes a minimum of two years to complete the course and residency requirements. Dissertations are for major original work – research, analytical, or creative.

Other diploma or certificate programs offered at various music schools include Artist Diploma or other performers' diploma programs geared for performance concentration with little or no academic requirements. These programs are often less expensive than degree programs and can be attractive to international students, if English language proficiency is a concern. The competitive level of these programs can vary dramatically from school to school, as does the program content, so check carefully. Be clear about what these diploma or certificate programs offer and what can be done afterwards with these degrees. For instance, if your long-term goal is to teach in the public schools, or at the college level, your choice of degree programs will be affected.

Considerations in choosing a school for graduate study

- Faculty
- Degree programs
- Tuition
- Living expenses in the area
- Financial aid, including teaching assistantships
- Opportunities for work (freelancing, private teaching)
- Location (rural or urban, climate – both cultural and weather-wise)
- Housing

Choosing a teacher

For most performers, *the specific teacher they will study with is the most important factor in choosing a school* – not the reputation of the school or its faculty in general. Many faculty teach part-time at more than one school – so if you're mainly interested in studying with one particular teacher, check out the comparative pluses of studying at each school – make sure you know all your options.

Ask your teacher for recommendations, ask your colleagues, ask your classmates who they've studied with or heard about. Listen to recordings, watch as many master classes as you can get to, and go to summer festivals – they're a great way to find your next teacher.

Once you have a list of people who sound interesting to you, write each of them requesting a lesson *before* you come for the formal audition at each school. Some teachers do not make a habit of these "preview lessons/auditions," so call and ask the admissions office at the school first.

This is important: don't assume that the school which accepts you will give you the teacher of your choice – they may not. Don't assume that because a teacher has verbally accepted you in her/his studio that you will be accepted by the school. Also, don't assume that the teacher with the great reputation will be a good match for you. By arranging to have a lesson before you come to the school for the formal audition, you give yourself the chance to find the best teacher for you. Yes, this can get expensive, you'll probably have to travel and pay for the lesson, but it is worth it. The teacher you like and who likes your playing may then have a chance to make a strong case for your acceptance and financial support.

Looking for your next teacher

With whom should I study? You need the right teacher at the right time in your development as a player, singer, etc. Naturally, this is going to mean something different for each individual. For instance, if you need a teacher to help with the basics of tone production, technique and musicianship, it would be a mistake to study with someone interested only in coaching interpretation. Likewise, if you want help producing a great sound, it would be a mistake to study with a teacher who does not have one. If you are looking for someone to help with your career, you should be consulting with established, successful professionals. If you are interested in an orchestral career, it would make sense both to study with a teacher with a successful orchestral background, and to study at a school with an excellent orchestral program. *

"The first and most important step in becoming a professional musician is to seek out and remain with the best teacher. The second step is to know when to leave. The third step is to take what you have been taught and redefine those values in your own terms." *

* (From Charles Stier's book, *What happens after graduation?...the Classical Musician and the Music Business*, self-published, 1993, available by calling (301) 589-3867). p. 9

Financial Considerations

Most schools offer similar financial aid packages for grad and undergrads. These include work-study, loans, and scholarships which may be need and/or merit based. The availability of these resources is limited, so you will want to apply early for institution-based assistance and national competitions. Also, it's best to hedge your bet by applying to several schools – five is not too many – you may need to weigh the financial aid packages offered you.

State universities are considerably less expensive than private schools. In addition, grad programs may offer teaching assistantships. Depending on the school, there may be teaching assistantships available (giving you a stipend plus valuable professional teaching experience). It's a good idea to check out what freelancing opportunities are available in the city of the school you're considering. While you should make sure you can afford the school you choose, your choice should not be based on money. Often a short-term bargain is not a good long-term investment.

Outside of the financial aid offered by individual schools, there are also grants and fellowships offered by foundations, individuals, and local community organizations. You can find some of these listed on the NEC financial aid web pages at: www.newenglandconservatory.edu/financeYourEducation/OPscholarship.html

The NEC Career Services Office has an “Opportunities Abroad” handout for more information on scholarships for studies overseas.

There are also scholarship databases available on the web (use the ones that are free only!) check out www.fastweb.com.

Placement Tests

Ask the theory and history teachers at your undergraduate school for any sample grad placement exams they may have used in the past, or any study materials. You may want to find a tutor, or someone who might want to swap lessons in theory for lessons on the oboe! Schools vary in how much weight they put on these tests, so find out how tough the test is likely to be from others who have taken it recently.

Letters of Recommendation

Most applications require 2 or 3 letters of recommendation. Ask the teachers who know your most recent work best and who are likely to write the most positive recommendations about you. You may want to phrase the request, “Would you feel comfortable writing me a letter of recommendation for graduate school?” This gives the referee the option to suggest you ask someone else in case she/he does not think they would write the optimum letter about you.

There are a few other tricks to asking. Don’t wait until two days before the deadline—give the “referees” plenty of time and give them any specific forms they may need to use. Call and remind them a week before the deadline—everybody is always very busy—they’ll probably appreciate the reminder as long as you don’t get pushy!

Make sure you follow each school's directions regarding the confidentiality of the letters (many schools require confidential letters on specific forms sent by the referee directly to the school). Provide a stamped addressed envelope for the convenience of your referees. Make sure they know what specifically you are applying for and why.

In the case of letters from teachers you are not currently studying with, it is helpful to provide them with a note reminding them of the courses you took with them, what years, any special projects you took on, etc. This will help the referee to write a more detailed letter describing the work you did.

You can set up a dossier file at the Career Services Center with general letters from your NEC teachers and any others you wish to include (i.e. from other schools, summer festivals, internships). There is no fee to open your dossier file and you are encouraged to keep personal copies of your letters, in case you need to send them yourself in special cases. These are sent to prospective employers and programs at your request for a \$5 fee per packet of letters sent. The dossier file is ideal for general letters—if a school, program, or employer requests specific confidential letters of recommendation, then you should ask for these letters even if the teachers you ask have already written general letters for your dossier file. Confidential letters are sent directly from a referee to an employer or program. You should also be sure to make photocopies of everything you send to the school to which you are applying.

GRE

The GRE (Graduate Record Examination) is a standardized test which provides graduate schools with a common measure for comparing the qualifications of applicants. The testing areas for the general GRE are in verbal, quantitative, and analytical skills. In addition to the general aptitude GRE test, there are separate 20 minute advanced tests in specific disciplines — yes, there is one in music (it is not offered very frequently, so check your options). Make sure you take the general aptitude test and the specific music test if these are both required by any of the schools you are applying to. These tests are offered across the country at many sites at specific times during the year.

Check the admissions requirements for each school you are considering carefully (in general, universities require the GRE and conservatories do not). Leave yourself plenty of time to take the GRE so that the schools can receive your scores by the required deadlines. You may need to take the GRE as early as October to have your results in time. For most music schools, the GRE is not a MAJOR consideration in judging admission, but it is a factor that schools do look at and usually require for admission. In short, the audition, for performers, is the most important

factor. So most of your energy should go towards preparing well for the audition (as opposed to studying every night for the GRE). There is GRE preparation info at the Career Services Center.

Year-round computer-based testing (CBT) is now available for the GRE. Testing times are flexible and administered at Educational Testing sites in the Boston area. Call (800) 473-2255 for computer testing appointments or call (609) 771-7670 for paper test locations. On the internet, visit the GRE web site at : <<http://www.gre.org>> or the ETS web site at: <<http://www.ets.org>> or e-mail: <gre-info@ets.org>.

Admission Application Essays

Yes, admissions committees really do read these essays, so it's worth doing a good job. The essay is primarily a statement of your ideas and goals. Committees generally look for clear purpose and realistic expectations. It's a good opportunity for you to evaluate your goals. Think seriously about the essay, write concisely, proofread carefully, and have people you respect read a draft before you send it off.

Auditions

Live auditions are very much preferred over tapes. Audio tapes are MUCH preferred over video tapes, which generally have very poor sound quality. Audition committees prefer hearing and seeing performers live. If you are able to do the live audition, do so, and your chances will be much improved.

Specific schools have specific audition repertoire requirements — sometimes a menu of works for you to choose from and sometimes specific required pieces and etudes. Check these out early and carefully so that you allow yourself enough time to prepare the repertoire well. Choose works which highlight your strengths as a performer and which demonstrate a range of types of playing, periods and styles, as well as your technical and interpretative abilities. Prepare for the auditions by performing these works in advance, in recitals, master classes, or in arranged “mock auditions” for colleagues, friends, family.

If distance prohibits the live audition, do everything possible to produce the highest quality tape within your budget.

Tips for the auditions

- #1-4 from Janice Papolos' *Performing Artist's Handbook*, Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 1984, p. 13-15, reprint available from the Manhattan School of Music, (212) 749-2802.
- #5 from Ellen Highstein's, *Making Music in Looking Glass Land*, NYC: Concert Artists Guild, 1993, p. 89 available for \$16.95 plus postage by calling (212) 333-5200.

1. If possible, find out who will be hearing your audition and what kind of room or auditorium you will be playing in. Knowing what to expect will help you feel more comfortable.
2. About accompanists — check with each school, some provide accompanists for you. Although you may present a more polished performance with your own accompanist, the audition committee will generally only hear a portion of three works and they may ask you to stop and start and to cut any long piano introductions, so it may not be worth paying your accompanist to travel with you for the audition. If you use the school's pianist, this may inform some of your repertoire decisions, in case you are programming any obscure or very new music not easy to sight-read.
3. If all your repertoire is not memorized, make sure your page turns work well — you don't want any unexpected mishaps.
4. Make sure you allow enough time to warm up and collect your thoughts. Be prepared to be kept waiting.
5. Treat every audition as a performance. Janet Bookspan, a stage director and coach says, “There are no auditions, there are only performances.” Granted, an audition can often be a weird sort of performance, where you don't always know exactly what you will play, and during which you may not be able to see or hear the people to whom you're playing. Nonetheless, if you are able to maintain the integrity of the ‘performance,’ thinking of the piece from the beginning to end and wanting to share your performance with your listeners,

you're much more likely to draw them into your experience and convince them of your musical vision." Make sure you smile and make eye contact with the audition panel as you enter the audition room, or as you come on stage, that you say thank you and smile when you leave, *no matter how you may feel about them, yourself, or your performance*. Make sure the high quality of your playing is complemented by the standard of your professionalism.

Helpful Websites for Applicants

For searching grad schools online:

www.petersons.com and <http://www.gradschools.com>

For music schools internationally, see the *Sibelius Academy* site at:

www.siba.fi/Kulttuuripalvelut/institutes.html

From *US News & World Report – America's Best Graduate Schools Graduate School Survival Guide*

www.smi.stanford.edu/people/pratt/smi/advise.html

Stanford grad student Wanda Pratt offers a comprehensive primer on getting the most out of graduate school.

Jobtrak's Guide to Graduate School

www.jobtrak.com/gradschool_docs/gradschool.html#about

Includes a list of criteria for deciding on a graduate school, a step-by-step description of how to complete the application process, advice on financial assistance, and a list of grad school reference books.

Kaplan's Guide to Graduate School Admissions

www.kaplan.com/grad

Kaplan Educational Centers provides a number of pages on finding the right graduate school and preparing for standardized tests.

Petersons.com: The Education & Career Center

www.petersons.com/ugrad/discuss/wwwboard.html

Sponsors discussion groups on college and graduate school topics.

Princeton Review Home Page

www.review.com/index.shtml

Includes lots of tools for someone just beginning to explore graduate school options including financial aid advice and discussion groups on a variety of graduate school topics.

US News & World Report's Colleges & Career Center

www.usnews.com/usnews/edu

For educational and career information. Look at graduate school rankings, the Grad Directory, and the Answer Zone Discussion group for questions about grad school-related issues.

College View

www.colegeview.com

Internet College Exchange

www.usmall.com

Financial Aid from the U.S. Department of Education

www.ed.gov/prog_info/SFA/StudentGuide

Sallie Mae Information

www.salliemae.com

Educational On-Line College Compass

www.edonline.com

Office of Postsecondary Education, U.S. Dept. of Education

www.ed.gov/offices/OPE

The Financial Aid Information

www.fastweb.com

www.finaid.org

Also try:

www.gradschools.com