

School of Theatre & Music

UIC

Advice for Music Majors

1. Take your classes seriously. Theory, Ear-training and Music History provide you with the tools to understand the language of music. Your mastery of these subjects WILL help you play your instrument better. If you have had a math course beyond algebra, music theory should present no problems, as it is structured in a very systematic way. Ear training will help you learn what you need to hear, whether you are playing your instrument or standing in front of an ensemble. Music History will equip you with the tools to approach your interpretations from an informed perspective and will give you the insight needed to play and conduct with style. Just like your Math or Organic Chemistry class, if you need extra help, all you have to do is ask your professor! I think my colleagues would agree that we all use what we learned in Theory, Ear training and History on a daily basis.

2. Listen to as much music as you can! Spotify is a fantastic tool for students, if not horribly punitive to recording artists. The Naxos online music library is a great resource. A hard, but not impossible, goal is to spend the same number of hours listening that you spend practicing everyday. Listening to music and familiarizing yourself with a broad spectrum of music is where your REAL musical education will take place. Strive to be relevant by knowing music outside of your comfort bubble. Ska, Bop, Grunge, Hip-hop, Klezmer... these are not just great dog names...try to know a little of everything!

3. Learn and know your scales and arpeggios. They are the building blocks of western music. They have not changed in some time now, and the word on the street is that they will not be changing anytime soon! Realizing that virtually everything that you play is constructed with scales and arpeggios will make mastering your instrument exponentially easier.

4. Schedule your practice time as though it were a class, and make yourself a tough attendance policy. Success in music, like anything else in life, is dependent upon disciplined and persistent effort. Hard work will trump talent any day of the week. The world is filled with incredibly talented people who never reached their potential because they were undisciplined. Each of you has the power to positively affect the climate of music in the Department of Music, simply by doing what needs to be done in the practice room. It is really cool to not suck at what you want to do with your life... Daily practice will help you to appreciate your potential and your ability to improve.

5. Go to concerts! There is no substitution for listening to live music—every performance you hear provides you with the opportunity to learn something about your own performances. A good friend of mine put it this way: “It is the next best thing to being under the podium.” Whether you will teach or perform, you will spend the rest of your life evaluating performances and diagnosing the strengths and weaknesses of what you hear. You will develop this skill much more quickly if you are going to concerts. Do NOT go to 10 concerts in the last week of the semester! Compulsory listening yields no results. If you love music, attending at least one concert a week should not be a chore!

6. Embrace what technology has to offer us in developing as musicians. Rhythm and Pitch are the two empirical truths in music--- either they are right or they are wrong. Don't look at your metronome and tuner as though they are nagging you that you are not good enough—learn to make chamber music with your metronome and learn to look at your tuner as the teller of truth. RECORD YOUR PRACTICE! Almost every one of us has this neat little computer in our pocket 24 hours a day and we choose to use it to post funny

pictures of cats on Facebook or to take pictures of our food. Use your phone, a digital recorder like a Zoom, or your laptop to record your practice. It will double, if not triple, your pace of growth and will enable you to become your own teacher. Don't just nod when your teacher suggests this... Do it!

7. Be curious! Strive to know the repertoire for your instrument. Practice something every day that is NOT part of your lesson assignment for the week. Read ahead in an etude book or check out some music from the library. This will help your sight-reading skills immeasurably. I've never met a great musician who was not also a great sight-reader! Like everything else, sight-reading improves the more you do it! Strive to be a comprehensive musician, not just a jock on your instrument!

8. Play with your peers! Form a chamber music group or play duets with a peer as much as you can. Chamber music empowers each of us to make musical decisions without the input of a director, which is a critical skill. Playing chamber music will also help grow your ears in a dramatic way.

9. Be serious about your pursuit of excellence. Set the bar high and work hard to be the best that you can be. Music is an extraordinarily competitive field—remember that there is always someone somewhere that is working harder than you are and someday you will meet them at the audition or the interview. You owe it to yourself to be the best musician that you can be. You will only be great in the field of music if you are first a great musician.

10. Know that every great musician in the world still considers himself or herself a student of music. Wynton Marsalis is a music student. Evelyn Glennie is a music student, as is Yo Yo Ma, Simon Rattle, Wayne Shorter, Emmanuel Ax and Lil' Wayne. Make lifelong improvement and lifelong learning your goal. When the great cellist Pablo Casals was asked why, at the age of 93, he continued to practice three hours a day, he said "I'm beginning to notice some improvement." Use this opportunity that you have as a full-time music student to your advantage. Your hard work will pay off in the end!

The last thing that I want you to consider as you begin the year, is what each and every one of you can do to create a higher culture of music at UIC. Our students are strong and the faculty are some of the best musicians in the country, AND remarkably, both groups get stronger every single year! The difference between us and the X School of Music or the University of Y is not nearly as great as you might think. What we have not yet achieved at UIC that those other schools already have, is a climate where hard-nosed serious work by ALL of the students is the norm. Where the attitude is "we are here to get something done." How can each of you help to move the ball forward in this regard?

It is cool to care. It is cool to work hard. It is cool to watch your peers accomplish great things. It is cool to over-achieve. It is cool to have pride in your work and it is REALLY cool to feed off the collective energy of a colony full of worker bees. Remember, only in the dictionary does success come before work.

Have a great year. Work hard. Play hard. Make these the years that you will remember, for all the right reasons. Go Flames!

- José Oliver Riojas, Director of Bands, Assistant Professor of Music
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