

6 WEEKS to FINALS

The Complete System for Audition Success

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Detroit Symphony
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“Words can’t express how thankful I am to have used Sharon Sparrow’s book, *6 WEEKS TO FINALS*, which resulted in me winning the 2nd Flute position with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. This method helped me to feel more confident than ever, knowing that I had prepared in every conceivable way. Sharon’s triathlon approach guides the reader through meticulous practice routines, numerous mock auditions, and the often undervalued component of mental training. The latter component especially helped me to overcome an emotional attachment to the job, resulting in three rounds of auditions, a trial week, and a job offer with the DSO. I cannot praise Sharon’s book enough!”

—*Amanda Blaikie*
2nd Flute, Detroit Symphony Orchestra

“Auditions present so many challenges and hurdles to conquer that preparing in a really organized and methodical manner is the only way to approach them and hope for a successful outcome. Sharon Sparrow’s six-week method for audition preparation is such an amazing tool to add to anyone’s routine. Offering solutions to everything from excerpt organization to the scheduling of mock auditions, it helps put you in the correct mindset for the various stages of the process, which is a vital part of being as successful as possible on the day of the audition itself. I believe that using Sharon’s process was essential and pushed me in the right direction in the preparation of the first orchestral audition that I won, and I would do the same for any future auditions!”

—*Zachariah Galatis*
Solo Piccolo, Oregon Symphony

6 WEEKS TO FINALS is a must-read for anyone taking professional auditions. Sharon Sparrow’s insight to the process opened a whole new approach for me. Using her techniques, I quickly won a regional orchestra position. Fast forward three months, and I went from prelim to extended final rounds, to 2-week trial, to winning a year-long contract with the San Francisco Symphony! I could not have achieved my current successes without her advice.

—*Steve Sanchez*
Clarinet, Monterey Symphony
Extra Clarinet, San Francisco Symphony

“Sitting on countless audition committees in the past 25 years, only two performances stand out in my memory as being nearly flawless. Each excerpt was executed note perfectly with musical intention in every note and phrase. As each excerpt passed, my mental checklist of what I was listening for was completely satisfied, which is rare! I came to find out later that both performers used the *6 WEEKS TO FINALS* preparation method, one of whom was Ms. Sparrow herself at her first successful audition here in Detroit!”

—*Jeffery Zook*
Piccolo, Detroit Symphony Orchestra

FOREWORD

by Jeffrey Barker, Associate Principal Flute, Seattle Symphony

A few months ago, I reached a life-long goal, landing a dream job playing in the Seattle Symphony, my hometown orchestra. This wonderful outcome came at the end of a strenuous and challenging process, including a four-day long audition and trial week rehearsing and performing with the orchestra. The path that led me here was, of course, much more complicated, involving many years of hard work, invaluable guidance from teachers and mentors, countless failures and frustrations, and a long, personal evolution in my mindset and strategy for auditions.

When I first began taking orchestral auditions, I had a negative outlook on the challenge before me, one that was shared and reinforced by many other aspiring orchestral musicians I knew. We viewed auditions as a necessary evil, a flawed process that's costly and demoralizing to the participants and that often fails to result in hiring the best candidate for the position. I gradually learned that this way of thinking was depressing and counterproductive. Before I was able to find any success in auditions, I had to change my outlook. I began to see auditions as a chance to tap into enormous sources of motivation and inspiration, an opportunity to achieve a higher level of musicianship than would otherwise be possible. I started to realize that despite all the frustrating and flawed parts, much of my success or failure in an audition was still under my direct control, and that I owed it to myself to focus all my energy on preparing myself to perform well. Perhaps most important, I began to understand how vital it was to have a clear and effective plan that I could follow in the weeks leading up to an audition, in order to feel confident that I was putting myself in the best possible position to succeed.

The plan that raised me to a higher level of competitiveness and changed the way I think and feel about auditions is Sharon Sparrow's *6 WEEKS TO FINALS*. I first encountered Sharon's plan in a condensed form, through an e-mail circulating among musicians on the audition circuit. It was a brief summary of Sharon's method that described the basic philosophy of the plan. Around the time a friend shared this e-mail with me, I got to know Sharon personally when I began subbing with the Detroit Symphony. There was a principal flute audition for a very good orchestra coming up soon that I badly wanted to win. Sharon was kind enough to coach me through my preparation, and she gave me much more detail on her six-week plan. I decided to follow her plan 100%, to dive right into it wholeheartedly and see what happened.

Preparing for this audition was exhilarating and transformative. I found that Sharon's method organized my time in such a productive and efficient way that I never doubted I was making great progress toward my goal. The plan required me to be completely honest with myself about all the weaknesses in my playing and the flaws in my excerpts, which wasn't always easy. But after six weeks of thorough, diligent work, I could feel I was much better prepared than I'd ever been before. I was mentally focused and felt confident I would be able to walk on stage and play

the way I intended. The anxiety and restlessness I normally felt in the days leading up to an audition were replaced with excited anticipation. I couldn't wait to go play this audition.

I didn't end up winning the job, but after a few days of being sad about that, I quickly recognized this audition as a success. The hard work I had done in my preparation had paid off in tangible ways throughout the process. I walked into each round with an unfamiliar feeling of confidence and freedom, rather than struggling through mental battles like I often had in past auditions. And my preparation proved itself in the results, too. Over the course of two days, I advanced through the preliminary, semifinal, and final round, all the way to a super-final round with just me and one other candidate. I wasn't perfect in any of these rounds, but I was proud of how I played in each of them, even in the super-final round that I didn't win. I knew I had accurately represented who I was as a musician, and I had great confidence that I would be able to replicate this type of preparation and performance in future auditions.

I have followed Sharon's plan diligently for all the auditions I've done since, including my recent successful one in Seattle. I know of many other musicians who have found similar success with this plan. If you are motivated to succeed in auditions but find that you consistently underperform your potential, following 6 WEEKS TO FINALS for your next audition is very likely to have a huge impact. The tremendous motivation and discipline required to win an audition comes from within, but the plan laid out in this book will channel your efforts into outstanding results better than any other method I've seen.



Jeffrey Barker with the Seattle Symphony

photo credit: Brandon Patoc

INTRODUCTION by Sharon Sparrow

I took my very first orchestral audition one month after I graduated from Juilliard, having little clue of the arena I was about to enter for the next 25 years! Since that first audition, which I did not win, I've taken countless auditions, studying the art of achieving success at them along the way. I landed my first job as Principal Flute in the Memphis Symphony on a one-year position, and after that year won a permanent position as Principal Flute in the Fort Wayne Philharmonic. I continued taking auditions regularly, always trying for that "bigger" job, usually getting close but never winning the position.

Meanwhile, life continued and I married the Principal Clarinet of my orchestra and started a family. Just after finishing my ninth season in Fort Wayne, my life took a sudden twist as I contracted a severe case of encephalitis (inflammation of the brain) resulting from chicken pox. I lost almost all motor function and the ability to form words and sentences for many months. But luckily, the virus slowly began to reverse itself, and little by little, I regained all my facility.

It was at this time the audition for 2nd Flute in the Detroit Symphony was announced, and I saw that audition as a perfect opportunity to test my resilience and ability to take an audition again. At the time I had a 3-year-old and a 1-year-old at home, so time management was of the essence. It was in these two months before the Detroit audition that my initial "6-Week Plan" was conceived.

Always being a very organized person, I wanted to design a practice method that I could follow and stick to during these very important weeks. I needed a detailed plan to stay on task and not be distracted by my daily duties and along with the illness that was thankfully getting better each day. I approached this audition quite differently from the many I had taken before, replacing my usual outcome goals with some basic performance goals, spending much more time exploring the mental aspect of auditioning as well as just practicing the flute. This new strategy along with the detailed, methodical, and thorough preparation plan I had devised and stuck to ultimately won me the 2nd Flute position at that audition in Detroit!

I jotted down notes from this plan, and eventually came up with a specific outline which I presented at the National Flute Association Convention in NYC in 2009. It became very clear to me that I was not alone, and that many flutists struggled with finding an organized method to prepare for orchestral auditions. Following this NFA presentation, I began getting many calls and requests to share my plan, and was beyond thrilled when people I was coaching began reaching the finals and even winning some of the open positions! By this point I had not only taken more auditions, having a great deal of success at each one, but had also been able to serve on many orchestral audition committees. I had so much new information to add to my original outline, and I felt ready and eager to help the many people taking auditions with my plan for organizing their time and practice routines leading up to the audition day.

By sharing my experiments and insights to this very specific task of auditioning, I've had the great pleasure to watch many who were struggling with auditions

finally break out of preliminary rounds and even more importantly gain immense confidence through the discipline and structure it provides. I know that when approached with great discipline, these pages will provide you with a new set of tools and extra confidence to achieve success on a whole new level at your next audition!

I strongly recommend that you read this book from beginning to end, jotting down some notes along the way, and then return to **SIX WEEKS AND COUNTING** (page 10) to begin your training.

A CHOICE

I love college basketball. Growing up in Syracuse, NY, it was difficult not to be swept up in the energy, madness, and pure enjoyment of the college basketball season year after year. The excitement was intoxicating, and the passion of the coaches and teams was pure inspiration. This is why a few months before one of the most important auditions I'd ever take, I stumbled across a life changing book written by University of Kentucky (now University of Louisville) basketball coach Rick Pitino entitled "*Success is a Choice*." I'd always been fascinated by Coach Pitino, and even something about the title of his new book intrigued me.

Choosing success was something I'd never really thought about. It inspired me to re-evaluate the whole idea of taking auditions. Honestly, *auditions are a choice*. No one ever forced me to take an audition. Auditions were a means to an end that I knew I wanted, so more often than not, I made the *choice* to take audition after audition. It was a very freeing thought, knowing that everything I would need to do in the ensuing weeks until audition day was purely and entirely *my choice*.

After committing to this choice, I decided to study Pitino's book to learn that since I had made the choice to audition, I needed to shift my thinking and also make the choice to succeed!

So as you begin this book and commit to the many steps, countless hours of practice, breaking new records of personal growth, remember that this is *your* choice. And now you will be presented with the many tools you will need to turn your choice into success!

CONDITIONING

I've spent countless hours watching Grand Slam tennis tournaments. Pete Sampras, Andre Agassi, Serena Williams, Rafael Nadal, and Roger Federer, just to name a few, have spent many hours flashing across my TV screen in hundreds of matches and tournaments. I'm in awe of their focus, stamina, athleticism, passion, drive, and power. It's as if by just watching them, I could absorb some of their mojo into my flute playing purely by osmosis!

I took my last audition right after the 2015 French Open, having again spent many hours watching the tournament. When I didn't advance to the final round, I really began to question myself, as I thought I'd developed a tried and true method for taking auditions. However, I felt I could not possibly validate this method anymore, as I hadn't reached the final round of this audition.

Thinking back to the tennis matches I'd just watched, suddenly a light bulb went on! I had prepared for the "match" itself, but skipped the all important steps that should have come even BEFORE the 6-week plan began... *conditioning!* Even freshman football players in high school know about this; they spend two weeks in "conditioning" camp before actual football practices even begin. Conditioning for tennis players involves weight training, running, muscle strengthening, hand-eye coordination drills, and sprints, and every new tournament begins with several weeks in the gym for them far in advance of tournament date, before even stepping foot on the court or hitting a tennis ball.

Conditioning for flute players involves scales, arpeggios, double-tonguing exercises, triple-tonguing exercises, scores of difficult etudes, long tones, breath control exercises, diminuendos and releases with the tuner just to name a few. I was lulled into the false belief that because I play a high-level job every day, have little problem executing anything on my stand, and am on the stage day after day, that my audition preparation could begin directly with the excerpts. *Lesson Learned!* Imagine if my tennis idols thought and prepared this way, skipping all of the conditioning before ever setting foot on the court for their practice? I doubt they would be the ones reaching the finals year after year!

Think about it – the excerpts that are placed on audition lists are likely the most difficult, most technical snippets we'll ever play in the chair. And in auditions, there is very little margin for error. I believe college students have a slight advantage here, as they are afforded the time and encouragement to follow a weekly conditioning routine, sometimes even guided by their teachers. Looking back over the last 6 months before this audition, I admit, although almost embarrassingly, that I could not even remember the last time I played through an entire etude or spent more than 15 minutes repeating my Taffanel/Gaubert, Maquarre, or Reichert. I relied daily only on my "conditioning bank," the one I built up in college, grad school, and the ensuing years post-grad in the private studio of the technical master Geoffrey Gilbert.

I had convinced myself I didn't have time for new conditioning, with all the notes in the many folders, and pieces on my practice stand, week after week needed for the job I was being paid to play. *I couldn't have been more wrong!* Just like athletes, when you choose to enter the competition or audition ring, you must be in the best shape of your life for that moment! You *must* take the time to rebuild, re-hone your basic foundation and skills, no matter how solid you think or believe they may be. You must be able to master the flute with complete ease, having retrained and solidified all your muscle memory. This can take anywhere from a few weeks to many months before you hit the audition stage or begin the 6 WEEKS TO FINALS training plan, so it's best to start conditioning TODAY, whether an audition is in your near future or not!



(Opening of Andersen Etude Op. 60, No. 3)

MENTAL CONDITIONING

A large part of the 6-week plan involves the extremely important, yet often overlooked, element of mental preparation. You can begin to “condition” for this as well as you condition your fingers. If you are already seasoned in the art of meditation, you may want to begin incorporating this to your daily regimen with the tools you already have. If you are a novice at this, I can share a couple of things that I use to get started and have found extremely helpful.

Each day I set aside anywhere from 6 to 15 minutes for what I call “positive meditation.” This is a time where I am alone and in a quiet space so I can shut out all the outside disturbances and voices, and listen to my inner voice in a calm and relaxed state. I use both meditative music and a timer for this. For music, I love the tracks of the CD titled “Dreamland” by the wonderful Canadian flutist Laura Nashman. This and other meditation CDs are available on the *spa-la-la.com* website. For me, meditation begins with breathing, so once the music begins playing I take many full and relaxing breaths, inhaling and exhaling very slowly. Next I begin to incorporate my list of positive suggestions, taking time to breathe with every suggestion I feed myself. Everyone’s positive suggestions will and should be different and very personal. But you may need some audition-specific ones to get you started in your conditioning regime. Try the following, or any variations of these that resonate with you:

“I am worthy, I am strong.”

“I am capable of working very hard toward my goals.”

“I look forward to the challenge of becoming the best player I can possibly be.”

“I am grateful for this challenge and all that it entails.”

These, of course, are just suggestions and are meant to stimulate your own creative positive thoughts for your endeavor. Once in place, set your timer for anywhere from 6 to 15 minutes, and begin to incorporate this into your daily regimen. Not only will it begin to have an effect on how you feel every single day, but it will be conditioning you for the more intense mental training and visualization exercises explained later that you will incorporate into your 6-week program for a successful audition!

Once you are “conditioned,” you’re ready to begin the 6-week training that will lead you to the final round!

Six Weeks and Counting

WEEK 6

EQUIPMENT

YOUR FLUTES: Your audition is six weeks away, so now's the time to make sure your equipment is assembled and that your instruments are in the best shape possible. Hopefully you have not been putting off that overhaul, as your flute will log a ton of mileage in these next six weeks, and you must be confident that it's up to the task. If you notice ANY leaks, worn or torn pads, mechanism sluggishness, or it's just plain dirty, take the time *right now* to get it in the best working condition possible in the least amount of time. I am definitely guilty of putting off scheduled maintenance and ignoring little glitches, but when it comes down to it, you have the Indy 500 only six weeks away, so you want your car to be able to perform at its highest level!

If you have put off or are in need of a COA (clean, oil, adjust), 10 weeks out is an ideal time. At 8 weeks you will need to engage in some pretty hefty "conditioning," and once the 6-week plan begins you won't want to be without your flute for a minute!

TUNER: I am a huge fan of any Korg chromatic tuner which registers pitch with a moving needle, and where the fixed pitch is adjustable (A=440, or 441, etc). Many musicians have tuner apps on their phones, but there are two reasons I don't recommend this while doing audition prep work.

- 1) Some phone tuner apps have trouble deciphering the high partials of the flute sound, and register incorrectly. Recently a student was playing one note, while the app tuner registered a totally different pitch.
- 2) In all honesty, phones are distracting. Even if you are "only" using it for the tuning app, there may be the possibility of it distracting you with calls, texts, etc. I have found I do my most focused practicing when my phone is not in the room with me. Tuning is such an important part of your preparation, so please take this suggestion while picking out a tuner for your 6-week program.

METRANOME: For some of the exercises in this book, the best choice of a metronome is one with a dial. I have not had the same success with phone app metronomes, the "meeping" metronomes, or the ones that you increase digitally and decrease digitally one number at a time. I've personally found the most helpful

metronome to be the Wittner MT-50, or any similar metronome. They are simple, loud, can easily be changed with the dial, readily available at local instrument stores, and extremely inexpensive.

RECORDING DEVICE: I've been happy for many years using the Garage Band app on my Macbook. I can't tell you how many students I've asked to record themselves who tell me they do NOT own any recording device. I then ask if they have a smartphone, tablet, or computer of any kind, because they all have microphones (or input jacks) and all have recording apps. They always say yes, but most didn't realize how useful Garage Band or other apps can be, or even that they already have recording apps handy. There are many tutorials on YouTube that explain how to use these very useful tools. Even the "voice memo" on most phones will be acceptable for practice, although upgrading a bit from that could definitely not hurt. Many students prefer pocket-size digital recorders. It does not need to be recording studio quality, but it is most useful if you can evaluate your true sound, and especially different levels of sound, ranging from pianissimo to fortissimo in all registers!

BLANK STAFF PAPER: You may want to use staff paper to design your own personal warm-up for a specific audition, as explained later in the "Useful Warm-up" section.

INDEX CARDS: That's right! Your average pack of drug store blank index cards. Believe it or not, these are *just as important* as all other things on this equipment list!

PORTABLE LISTENING DEVICE: One of your first tasks in Week 6 is to make a playlist of all of the excerpts on the audition list. It will be useful to listen to many recordings of each excerpt, as tempos will vary significantly with each conductor. If the orchestra you're auditioning for has a recording with the current conductor, *use that one!*

With so many internet streaming options now available, it's much easier to find multiple recordings than it was even a few years ago. One of the best resources that we often forget about is the local library. Even in my current small town of Grosse Pointe, Michigan, there's an overwhelming abundance of amazing classical CDs available there to listen to, and for *free!* Be careful not to rely entirely on YouTube, as there are many recordings there that you should NOT be getting ideas from, as they are pretty misleading as far as tempo and quality of performance. One tip that I tell students who ask what is an "appropriate" tempo for a particular excerpt is to listen to five different recordings of the excerpt, making a note of each tempo (using your metronome) and then take the exact average of the tempos. Believe it or not, this always works!

If this is your first time doing so, do not become discouraged with the amount of time making this playlist takes. Keep in mind that many flute audition lists are very similar, so after you make this one, each new one will only take a few more minutes to update!



My “equipment” table all ready to begin Week 6!

AUDITION LISTS: These are typically accessible on the orchestra’s website up to 2 months before an audition. Your task at the beginning of this week is to assemble every excerpt on the upcoming audition. Get each excerpt organized so you can travel to your nearest office-supply store to make your necessary Audition Booklet! Every single note that you might play at the audition (except sightreading, of course) needs to be in this Audition Booklet!

If the orchestra lists “entire piece,” as sometimes is the case with Ravel’s *Daphnis et Chloe*, or Prokofiev’s *Classical Symphony* to name a couple, then you must have the entire part for these in your booklet! Don’t cut corners! I’ve heard many audition horror stories where the candidate either forgot or ignored a tutti section that was on the list, and never practiced that section thinking it wasn’t important and would never be asked. I confess, this happened to me once as well many, many years ago... I was in the final round for a job that I really wanted. *Daphnis (entire piece)* was on the list. I prepared the solo, the opening, the ensuing noodles, and the treacherous part at the end that begins at m.214. However, I always stopped my practice at m.221. I never thought any committee would be interested in that little part filling in m.221 to the end of the piece, so I never even played through it. At this point in my career, I hadn’t yet performed *Daphnis*. At this audition, I was thrilled to have advanced through the preliminary and semi-final rounds. In the finals, however, one part near the very end of the round was marked to play “*m.214 to END OF PIECE.*” Uh oh! I confidently and accurately strode through measures 214-221 like a champ, then when I hit those triplets, started fumbling like a football player running with the ball toward the goal line on the 5 yard line who suddenly had butter all over his hands! By the third measure in I’d become completely derailed and couldn’t go on. There was silence from the committee, probably a bit of disbelief! After what seemed like an eternity, a voice said “Could the candidate please repeat m.214 to the end?” Whew! A second chance! Again, sailed through like a champ, and again, fumbled equally badly when hitting the triplets! This time it was like someone running gracefully then hitting an unexpected patch of ice! And again, I could not even get to the end! Once again, total silence for what seemed like forever. Then a