

How Should I Best Prepare to Enter a Conservatory, College or University as a Music Major?

Acceptance to an undergraduate program in music is based on many considerations. These vary widely among institutions. For example, some have stringent audition requirements prior to admission while others have open admission policies followed by thorough examinations at some point in the program to determine whether the student may continue as a music major. For specific application requirements, contact NASM accredited institutions directly. The suggestions below indicate how you can best prepare during the high school years, not what you must achieve to apply or be accepted. The advice provided describes two things: first, an ideal set of knowledge and skills goals for college-level applicants; second, competencies needed by musicians as they practice the various aspects of the profession in college and beyond. In brief, you should learn as much as you can as early as you can.

Take responsibility for your own development.

Each musician brings a unique set of talents, aspirations, and abilities to the musical scene. Although you are in school and probably studying with a private teacher, it is important to take increasing responsibility for developing your particular abilities toward your specific goals. Begin by obtaining the admission requirements of schools you may wish to attend, the earlier, the better. Ultimately, you are responsible for choices about how you use your time to prepare for your future. For most musicians, that future involves music at the center, supported by many other capabilities.

Practice, practice, practice.

Whatever you do or intend to do in music; try to practice it as much as possible. This applies not only to your instrument and/or voice, but also to other types of musical work. For example, composers should practice composing, prospective teachers should try to observe and gain teaching experiences under appropriate supervision, those interested in music scholarship or criticism should practice writing and speaking on musical topics. No level of knowledge or skill that you can attain will be too high.

Perform alone and with others.

Performance ability is essential for all musicians. You should be a competent performer on at least one instrument or with your voice whether or not you intend to have a performance career. Keyboard ability is important for the life work of most musicians. Students with keyboard skills have a head start as music majors. Ensemble experiences of all kinds should be sought. Work in large and small ensembles develops different kinds of musical skills. Fine ensemble playing comes primarily through practice.

Master the basics.

Be sure that you can read both treble and bass clefs, that you know key signatures, the major and minor scales, and how to write basic notation. Knowledge of musical terms and usage is important, as is the ability to recognize intervals and basic chord types.

Develop your ear.

Take every opportunity to train your ear by taking courses or studies in musicianship that include sight-singing, ear-training, sight-reading, rhythmic and harmonic dictation, and so forth. Developing the ear is a lifetime job. The earlier work is started, the better.

Hear as much music as you can.

You need to be familiar with far more music than that which you perform. Try to hear as much music from as many historical periods and cultural sources as possible. Ask your teachers to recommend a listening list for you that covers the various solo, small, and large ensemble repertory in your performance area. Try to make sure that you have heard the major works of all types in the particular area of music that interests you. Listen more to learn the breadth and depth of the repertory than to enjoy what is already familiar. Whenever possible, follow the score as you listen.

Learn how music works.

Take opportunities to learn the basics of musical structure, including studies in such areas as form, harmony, counterpoint, composition, and improvisation. Like so many other things in music, this knowledge is developed throughout a lifetime. Those who are able to get started early have an advantage. Work with your music teachers, enroll in an AP music course if it is available in your high school, take classes at your community music school, and otherwise explore opportunities to gain initial acquaintance with this material.

Become a fluent, effective English speaker and writer.

As a musician, you will communicate in music, but you will also rely heavily on your ability to communicate in words. Everything from rehearsals to teaching, to writing grant proposals, to negotiating, to promoting your musical interests relies on fluent English skills. Focus attention on learning to speak and write effectively.

Study one or more foreign languages.

Musicians practice their art internationally. You are likely to perform music with texts in foreign languages, and to work with musicians from all over the world. Significant musical scholarship and criticism are in foreign languages. If you seek advanced degrees in music, reading fluency in one or more foreign languages is often required. Since foreign languages are difficult for many people, you should begin acquiring knowledge and skills in at least one foreign language as early as possible. Consult with your music teacher about which languages are best for you.

Get a comprehensive high school education.

Music both influences and is influenced by other fields of study: the humanities, mathematics, the sciences, the social sciences, and the other arts – architecture, dance, film, literature, theatre, and the visual arts. For entrance into college-level study, you are encouraged to gain a basic overview of ancient and modern history, the basic thought processes and procedures of math and science, and familiarity with works in as many of the other arts disciplines as possible. Most professionals who work with music comprehensively develop a particular sensibility about the connections among music, history, and the other arts. Understanding the basics of math and the sciences support future work in music technologies. Social studies are related to understanding the context for various musical endeavors.

Think of everything you study as helping you become a better musician.

As we have already said, the best musicians continue to learn throughout their lives. They are always studying and thinking, always connecting what they know about music with their knowledge of other fields. Since you never know the direction your career will take, it is wise to spend your high school years gaining the basic ability to understand and work in a variety of fields beyond music. Keep music at the center of your efforts, but accept and enjoy the challenge of gaining the kind of knowledge and skills in other areas that will support both formal studies at the college level and your music career beyond.