

Choosing a Teacher

When searching for a college, perhaps *the* most important aspect to consider is the teacher. Granted, program offerings, professional opportunities, location, and campus life are also highly important. But, know that if you do not get along with or are not inspired by your applied teacher, there is a major problem.

So how do you go about finding the perfect teacher for you? Here are some things to consider.

Note: Any of these methods can work perfectly well with a good combination of student and teacher. There is truly no single right way to teach or to learn. You must, however, find the combination that works best for you.

How does the teacher balance technique and interpretation?

- Does the teacher insist on a rigorous technical training (scales, arpeggios, long tones) first and then follow that with interpretive training?
- Does the teacher teach primarily interpretation and trust technique to develop out of a need for expressive tools?
- Does the teacher hybridize the two concepts and teach both technique and interpretation at the same time?

How does the teacher sequence instruction?

- Are all students required to follow the same exact sequence of etudes and solo repertoire?
- Or, does the teacher design or alter pacing and materials for each student's needs?
- Does the teacher adhere to a specific etude collection (Milde, for example) for all four years of training?
- Do all students learn orchestral excerpts? If so, when?

What is the teacher's energy level?

- Do you prefer a teacher who is boisterous or more sedate?

What is the teacher's personality?

- Since teachers are people just like anyone else, they come in a wide variety of flavors.
- Are they extremely serious? Humorous? Are they awkward? Grumpy? Loud? Sarcastic? Foul-mouthed? What works best with your personality?
- A note: a teacher need not be your best friend. In fact, it is often best that they are not. That way, they are not overly concerned with your feelings and are sure to tell you how things stand. No one needs a teacher who is going to sugarcoat reality.

Does that teacher inspire respect?

- Do you feel they know what they are talking about?

- When that teacher asks you to change something about your technique or interpretation, how likely is it that you will trust them and attempt to make a change?

How does the teacher explain concepts?

- Do they tend to use one method (analogies, playing demonstrations, technical explanations) more than anything else?
- Does the teacher require extensive listening or analysis?
- Are you required to compose?
- Does the teacher incorporate singing or movement into lessons?

How do you feel when you leave a lesson?

- Are you inspired, depressed, excited, shamed, exhausted?
- Do you feel you deserved what you got?
- A good teacher will know how to encourage you in your studies. At times this includes praise and at other times it includes gentle or pointed reprimand. If you leave every lesson feeling like you did everything correctly, then a) you are the best bassoonist ever, b) you are delusional, or c) your teacher has low expectations.
- My personal opinion: students should leave lessons feeling tired but inspired. A lesson should *not* be easy. A lesson should also *not* be scary...unless, of course, you didn't practice.

Do you feel like the teacher is helping you improve?

- Does the teacher push you or do you feel that you have to drag information out of them?

What are the teacher's attitudes concerning solo, chamber, and orchestral playing?

- Does the teacher favor one over the others?
- If so, why?
- Does that affect how and what they teach?

Does the teacher encourage students to take lessons from other professionals?

- If not, why?

What are the teacher's expectations for students of different majors?

- Are non-performance majors held to significantly lower musical standards than their performance major peers?

Does the teacher encourage collegiality amongst their students?

- Is there a competitive feeling? Is it a healthy competitiveness or does it feel cutthroat?
- Is there a feeling of community among the studio members?
- Do studio members routinely converse or hang out?

Is the teacher available?

- Does the teacher live in town or commute?
- Is the teacher at school every day or only a few times a week?
- Is the teacher flexible with scheduling recitals and juries?

What about reeds?

- Is reed making instruction handled by the teacher or a teaching assistant?
- Does the teacher make reeds for students?
- Is reed making taught at all?