



Audition 101 (Transcript)

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Robert Uchida (00:00): Well, so the first thing I think after you've won the audition is you go up for a beer. And if you didn't win the audition you go out for a beer. [laughs]

Max Cardilli (00:10): It's like curling. [laughs]

[MUSIC - 00:11]

Max Cardilli (00:12): This is Robert Uchida the Concertmaster of your Edmonton Symphony Orchestra. As part of his leadership role, he sits on every audition committee. Musicians in the orchestra come from all walks of life but one thing that we all have in common - auditions. Welcome to *ESO: Offstage* and to our “*Behind the Screen*” series. This series will be looking into the fascinating world “*Behind the Screen*” to give you a glimpse into the past, present, and future of orchestral auditions. This episode we look at what musicians must go through in order to win a seat in the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra.

Robert Uchida (01:00): We keep the screen up for all rounds of an audition. If the anonymity isn't there - if the screen isn't there - we end up listening differently. We end up listening with our eyes as well as our ears and so having the screen off allows us to focus solely on what we're hearing without any other kind of stimuli. For example, people have different feelings about how much or how little someone should move in an orchestra. In Europe, people tend to move more and tend to be a little bit more free in terms of how much or how little someone moves, whereas in North America the tradition is on average, I would say, to move less within an ensemble. So, if someone were to come in play brilliantly and move a lot it could distract some and so not seeing that movement gives that person a fair shot.

Kathryn Macintosh (01:59): Before the audition starts, each candidate draws a number and that's the only way that the audition committee identifies them. So, they don't know who anyone is until or if there's a winner and then it's like a “ta-da” moment and they open the curtain “oh, that's the winner!” and all the unhappy losers slink out the back door and no one has to know that they were even there.

Max Cardilli (02:25): This is Kathy Macintosh, Assistant Principal Trombone in the orchestra since 1983. She has served as proctor on many auditions over the years. So, what is a proctor?

Kathryn Macintosh (02:36): The proctor is basically the go-between between the candidate and the committee. In order to keep uh anonymity if there's any question or clarification needed from the committee by the candidate then they go through the proctor - they whisper in my ear and then I convey their question.

Max Cardilli (02:59): Can you give us your best proctor voice?



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Kathryn Macintosh (03:03): Candidate number one! Curtains are positioned in such a way that they can't see anybody walking on stage. There's a carpet that goes from the backstage area out to the middle of the stage so that if anybody has characteristic sounding shoes, they won't be able to be identified. We have separate entrances for the committee and for the candidates - the backstage area is off limits to other musicians from the orchestra when there's an audition on.

Max Cardilli (03:35): As proctor, Kathy has seen countless people walk on stage - only a few of whom have been successful.

Kathryn Macintosh (03:42): Well, it's a pretty intense process and I know how much work goes into preparing an audition and how much money it sometimes costs people to do it and I feel complete sympathy for people's plights. So, I kind of feel like I want to just channel the best energy that I can when I'm out there serving as proctor. It can be really frustrating, it seems like such a fickle thing - you show up you've done all your preparation and for whatever reason you have a great day or you don't have a great day you miss one note and it's like "okay that's it, I just I just cacked one note and that I just wasted you know a thousand dollars."

Max Cardilli (04:27): Let's talk about that money for a second. The cost to attend an audition can add up very quickly and it's the applicant that is expected to cover these costs. The audition itself is free, but depending on where you live you may need to factor in a round-trip plane ticket. If you have a larger instrument, like the double bass for instance, that means extra oversized baggage charges - sometimes even an extra seat in the cabin. Let's not forget about hotel accommodations, meals, car rentals, or taxi fares that could easily exceed the thousand-dollar mark. Not to mention the added burden of possibly having to take unpaid time off work for the trip, countless hours of immersive practice in the preceding months go into being well-prepared for the day, and you might have spent all that money and invested all that time and energy to play five to eight minutes and be dismissed after the first round. With all that on the line we want to ensure that the process is as fair as it can be.

Robert Uchida (05:26): Our orchestra is pretty much the most democratic you can be in in terms of the panel itself because everybody has one vote, that's it. A lot of orchestras the Music Director might have a veto or the music director might not even enter the process until the final stage, but in our orchestra we usually, it's usually a committee of nine and everyone has one vote. The Personnel Manager usually says "okay, we need to have a vote" and if it's at the end of the first round we're going to have a vote on which candidates - if any - we would like to hear in the next round. You know, as we get on in the process, the question may become "which candidates, if any, would you like to offer the job?" If there's one candidate left it might be "would you like to offer the job? Yes or no" and then often we'll do another ballot of "would you like to hear more?" because maybe you don't want to offer the job yet, but you do want to hear them



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again. It gets kind of complicated - it's a lot of wasted paper. [laughs] You know, we're trying to be as thorough as we can.

Max Cardilli (06:29): There are a lot of variables - we're talking about humans who might hear something one way on a particular day, and hear the exact same thing differently on another day.

Robert Uchida (06:39): Well yeah, one of my friends used to say “you know, a jury can have a totally different view depending on what they had for lunch.” I think that there's some element of truth to that - at the same time I think that really, really fine playing and preparation tends to do very well. One of my old teachers used to say “if you play an audition, your goal should be to make the panel embarrassed not to hire you”. You know, when I try to coach someone for an audition, I always say that it's really important - you never know what the committee's thinking, so all you can do is go out and do what you think is right with the music. Put your best foot forward and don't worry about anything else. For me, it's so much more important to try and be convincing than to try and say “oh well, I think that this orchestra likes to do this excerpt in exactly this tempo”. You know if an orchestra doesn't like the tempo, they can always ask for it a little differently, but they won't if they're not convinced by the playing.

Max Cardilli (07:54): So how many auditions have you attended?

Rafael Hoekman (07:56): A lot. Once I got the job here, we counted it up - my wife and I - and I had taken 42 auditions.

Max Cardilli (08:03): This is Rafael Hoekman. He's been the Principal Cello in the orchestra since 2015. We had the chance to sit down and talk about his journey to the ESO.

Rafael Hoekman (08:13): Looking back, I think I fared pretty well. It can really wear you down. What's really difficult is when you have to travel and spend money and invest money and time - maybe give up work or give up some other sure gig for the chance of playing an audition. So, for instance, at one point I think I traveled to Seattle and gave up a week of TSO work and then I didn't advance past the first round and I was completely devastated. You know, that sort of thing and I think if other people depending on you financially that can be incredibly stressful. If you have children or if you have a wife or or husband or whatever you're supporting bills to pay it can be really um frustrating and devastating in that sense. So, you have to sort of figure out a balance of what you can do, what you can stand and but of course you know if you give up then that's then it's over. I felt the pressure at one point where I had, I guess, I was first on the list in Toronto for sub work and then I wasn't first on the list anymore and I had a kid. I was like “oh boy, this - I really gotta get this going” and that's when I won a job in Windsor and then shortly after that, I won a job in Winnipeg and that was where I



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was like “okay, I’m gonna I’m gonna get out of here”. Once I got to playing section in the Calgary Philharmonic - I had my tenure there - I felt like the pressure was a lot easier.

At one point during my time in Calgary, I auditioned for the Assistant Principal position and I didn’t win. That was probably one of the toughest things actually, emotionally speaking. I went back to square-one, you know, with my playing and I was like “I’m gonna improve, I’m gonna get better now”. I was already like 37 years old at that point, right, there was no way I was going to, like, go study with somebody, so I just had to start doing the research and get into the zone of improving. And that’s ultimately that’s the best way to win an audition is to actually get better and present yourself in that way. So the guy that won the job - the Assistant Principal - he ended up getting another job later and so I had a second chance at my Assistant Principal audition. I had done all this work leading up to that and so I finally got back in there and I won the audition for Assistant Principal and then one month later I won this job and I didn’t expect that!

On the day that I won the audition I could see it I could see it there, right there, in front of me. I knew I was playing well enough but you just never know whether a committee is just going to decide to say “no” or “yes”. Having sat on committees now I can see how you know one person’s expectation of the result can really differ very much from what the other people on the other side of the screen are thinking of you. So, it was an incredible day and - I mean this is kind of embarrassing - but I kept saying to myself afterwards, I was like “I’m Principal Cello! This is me - I’m now this person”. It was as if part of my brain was doubting it, you know, and it had been a long road. I felt like I was a little bit “always a bridesmaid, never a bride” you know sort of thing - but finally I was the bride.

Robert Uchida (11:42): Anyone sitting on the other side of the screen knows how difficult it is to be playing. The thing that I find the most challenging - and I kind of something I tell myself at the beginning of every audition - is anybody can count mistakes, can come to a concert and say “oh yeah, that that note didn’t sound right. Oh - there’s a mistake there. Oh yeah, something happened there”. To me that’s not a skill. Tell me specifically what did someone do well. As far as I’m concerned one mistake doesn’t kill an audition - but I want to be able to say you know what I really like about this person, why I want to hear more. You’ve got to go in with open ears. Be understanding of the difficulty of the process while at the same time having to balance the fact that it has to be in tune, has to be a beautiful sound, the dynamics, the articulation, the control and - of course - having a sense that whoever is playing knows what else is going on in the orchestra at the time. So, I’m not interested in just hearing someone play a perfect Schumann Scherzo- I want to know that after the *poco rallentando* they know that the Second Violin is coming with the 16th notes and that the eighth notes have to accompany them. How does that all fit together? It’s so interesting because you can really feel that, when someone has studied the score, when they know intimately the music, not just their part. So, that kind of debunks the myth that you have to play a perfect audition to win a job. I don’t think that anybody plays perfectly. I



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certainly don't. [laughs] So, you know, I think we all aim to get as close as we can - but what is perfection, anyway? One person's perfect - someone else may not feel so strongly about.

I think making a musical statement - showing poise and control and an understanding of different musical styles and understanding the score is very important - but for the record, I'm not sure I've ever heard a really, completely perfect audition. But that doesn't matter. Sometimes I feel that we can't always measure what we really care about in an audition setting so we end up caring about what we can measure. Playing very cleanly is extremely important, doing everything on the page is very important. Some of the things we can't test is - how well does someone adjust in an ensemble, how free is someone, how flexible are they to different musical considerations. These are some of the things sometimes we cannot test in an audition setting. So then, you know, we have a trial process or we have a 10-year process. It's a kind of a trial period or probation period that takes place over many months and then there's a time at which a decision is made somewhere down the line. In our orchestra it's not that long - it's maybe half a season, sometimes more. The panel will meet and discuss feedback and observations and then make a decision.

Max Cardilli (14:42): Are the skills required for winning an audition the same skills required for playing in the orchestra day-to-day?

Robert Uchida (14:48): Right, so some of the skills are the same when you play an audition. You need to play really cleanly; you need to observe everything on the page, you need to have an awareness of style and excellent rhythm. We make use of all those skills in the orchestra. Those are very, very extraordinarily important skills to have. Then comes an evaluation of some of the things we were talking about earlier - how aware is a person? So you can have excellent rhythm but what if the Conductor takes a little time- just a little bit - it's not written down anywhere, it's not a *poco rallentando* - it's less than that. Do you adjust? Do you hear what's happening around you and you adjust to it? Or do you barrel through? What if the clarinet plays a solo and on a particular night Julianne plays even more beautifully and quietly than she normally does and then you have the next entry - do you take that dynamic? Or do you play the dynamic you always did? Being part of the music as it's unfolding.

[MUSIC - 15:56]

Robert Uchida (16:13): We get a lot of instruction from different conductors who have different vocabularies and different ways of asking what they're looking for. Often there are different ways to interpret that. So sometimes I feel like I'm a bit of a translator. So, if the conductor says "oh, I want a kind of more wispy color here" or "I want something that's like the fog over the horizon" or something else okay, well - why don't we try playing *sul tasto* over the fingerboards, or something like that. [laughs]



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Max Cardilli (16:45): Puts it into the musical terms.

Robert Uchida (16:46): Exactly. Put it into a kind of practical way that we're all on the same page and able to kind of realize the Conductor's vision.

Max Cardilli (16:52): Is there a common thread among audition winners?

Robert Uchida (16:56): I think the common thread is that in addition to being outstanding instrumentalists they are outstanding musicians who understand the role that they are auditioning for. It's not just playing the instrument well but doing something more. The easiest way to make an orchestra better is to hire well - that person becomes a part of the family and then we embark on a journey together to try and work and improve as an ensemble. The easiest part is to hire the really great player, but then, to be a unified ensemble and to grow and to develop our interpretations or our approaches to different composers - that's when the work really begins.

[MUSIC - 17:41]

Max Cardilli (17:47): In this episode, you heard Robert Uchida playing the Allegro from [Bach's Violin Sonata no 2](#). You can find this and more by following the link in the show notes or by visiting winspearcenter.com and clicking on the virtual tab.

Thank you to all of our wonderful guests who shared their time and voice for this episode including [Robert Uchida](#), [Rafael Hoekman](#) and [Kathy Macintosh](#). In the Show notes you can find links to their bios on the Winspear Centre where you can learn more about them.

This episode was produced in amiskwaciy-wâskahikan, also known as Edmonton, on the traditional lands referred to as Treaty 6 Territory - a place that has been a meeting ground, travelling route and home for many Indigenous Peoples since time immemorial including the Cree, Métis, Dene, Nakota Sioux, Saulteaux, and Blackfoot whose histories, languages, and cultures continue to influence and enrich our vibrant community. The Edmonton Symphony Orchestra is dedicated to ensuring that the spirit of Treaty 6 is honoured and respected.

This episode was written and produced by me - ESO double bassist Max Cardilli. If you ever want to connect with me about the podcast you can write to me at eso.offstage@windspearcentre.com

[MUSIC - 19:11]