

REGIMENTAL DRUM MAJOR ASSOCIATION



HIGH SCHOOL DRUM MAJOR AUDITIONS

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By

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INTRODUCTION

Congratulations for considering an audition for the Drum Major position.

The Drum Major is primarily a position of leadership within your band and will be a welcome addition to your college or work application. To achieve this position there will often be an audition or “try-out”.

There is quite a bit of preparation needed for the 15 to 30 minutes of actual audition performance including the practical portion (conducting, mace, or baton; and marching demonstration), oral presentation, interview, etc. This will be perhaps the most stressful portion of your Drum Major career, early and thorough preparation will make it easier.

Following are my recommendations from being on both sides of the process over the years. I have seen what successful candidates have used and what areas other candidates could have improved upon to have a strong presentation.

I hope you will find this guide useful.

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Drum Major Selection Process

Before the Audition:

Evaluation: You are being evaluated as a candidate for Drum Major the first day of being in the band. The Band Director, current Drum Major, and band leadership will be reviewing Freshman for those that exhibit the leadership traits as a future Drum Major. If you are in High School, this means your first day of band class as a Freshman. Your director and band leadership will be noticing how you conduct yourself both in and out of rehearsal, at performances, and how you interact with the band. If you cause trouble, are unreliable, or have a poor attitude, you will not likely be successful Drum Major candidate.

Leadership: Aside from being proficient at your instrument, you will need to start developing a presence as a leader in the band. You can do this by being proficient on your instrument, or being section leader. You may volunteer to learn an instrument that is needed by the band, but isn't your principal instrument (clarinet to bass clarinet, trumpet to French horn or baritone, etc.) This will give you much more exposure to your director. Volunteer for other positions in the band. If your band has a Quartermaster (tracking and issuing of uniforms and equipment) or a Librarian (tracking, storing, and issuing of music), these are excellent positions to have you start working with your director. Some bands have a Band Council made up of band members, you may seek out one of those positions. Being active in the band structure will show your director that you are serious about and committed to the success of the band. Make sure that you perform this job at a very high standard. If you do not perform well, this will also reflect on you and your chances for being selected as Drum Major.

Skills: To learn how to use the baton or mace you will need to find an instructor. Seek your current or past Drum Major from your school to coach you. You may also seek the best Drum Major in your area for tutoring. There may be an experienced instructor in your area that gives lessons. Most current or past Drum Majors are very supportive and will be willing to assist you.

There are several summer camps that specialize in Drum Major classes. Check with your Band Director to see whether your band will sponsor you (i.e. pay for the class.) There are many classes offered throughout the United States. You will need to start working on your baton/mace work as soon as possible and not a few months before the audition. Marching technique, baton/mace signals, and flourishing are the areas that you will need to develop. To be successful, you will need to be expert at all three.

If your band Drum Major is a field conductor, you will need to work on conducting skills. Start with conducting band tunes and learning the basic conducting patterns. After you have mastered this, increase the complexity of the music you are conducting by practicing with recordings of orchestral music.

Symphonies by Richard Strauss, Rimsky-Korsakov, Aaron Copland, Tchaikovsky are good pieces with which to work on your conducting. These pieces will also allow you to work on advanced conducting skills: instrument cues, dynamics, phrasing, etc. Be sure to let your director know you are working on conducting. Your director may be able to give you lessons on the basics. If you are having difficulty with a particular technique or passage, get your director's advice. Once you are proficient at conducting, you may ask your director whether you could conduct a tune at rehearsal.

Advise of your Intentions: Let your director know that you are interested in auditioning for Drum Major. Ask your director for any advice they may be willing to share. Chances are many of their suggestions will be noted above. As has been noted above, you need to start working with your director and develop a rapport. The more you trust each other, know how the other thinks, and know what is expected, the more valuable a leader you will be to the band.

Timing: Start your training the minute you are thinking of auditioning for Drum Major. Do not wait until a few months before the audition to start. Baton/mace work and conducting takes a lot of practice. The more practice you have the more confident you are. Ideally, you will have started before High School. However, most Drum Majors start training their Freshman or Sophomore year with the goal of becoming Drum Major no later than their senior year. If you wait to train until your senior year, it is not impossible, but it will require a lot of intense training and others that are better trained will have a definite advantage over you.

The Audition:

Preparation: Find out as much as you can about the audition process as early as possible. You may not have as much time as you like to develop a routine to the selected music. Do the best you can. Early preparation will make the process easier. Get plenty of sleep the night before the audition.

Dress and Grooming: It is unlikely that you will auditioning in a uniform. It is recommended that you dress better than what you would normally wear at school. "Business Casual" would be appropriate attire. Preparing for the audition would be a perfect time for a trip to the barber/hair salon. This event should be treated like a job interview. You need to make a favorable visual impression.

Music: Find out ahead of time what music will be used. Will the music be next year's march, will the audition specific music be selected by the director or Drum Major Selection Committee, or will you select your music? If you select your music, find a march that is similar to what your band recently used for its march tune. Avoid non-marching band music. Use the selected music as a guide for your routine, using your flourishes to highlight musical dynamics, crescendos, accents, etc.

Demonstration: This is the most common selection component of the drum major audition. If your school uses a corps style Drum Major then you will be asked to demonstrate your conducting skill as well as your vocal commands. You may have to go through a drill down to display your marching skill.

If your school DM uses a military baton or a mace, then in addition to the above you may be asked to demonstrate your skill with the baton or mace in a parade pattern (the competition "L" or other pattern) and/or a short field show routine. You may be asked to conduct a tune or two.

This portion of the audition may be in front of the band, the selection committee, or just the director.

Interview: Very often you will be interviewed by the incumbent Drum Major, the band council, section leaders and/or the band director. You may be asked several open-ended questions as well as given one or several scenarios.

Typical questions may include:

- Why do you think you are qualified to be drum major?
- Describe a situation where you have demonstrated leadership.
- Describe a tense or crisis situation and how you dealt with it. What was the outcome? In retrospect, would you have done anything differently?
- In what areas do you think you could improve?
- What is your assessment of the band and what improvements do you think should be made? How would you implement those improvements?

Scenarios are things that could possibly go wrong in a rehearsal or performance setting:

- During field rehearsal, a trumpet player faints [substitute any illness or injury]. The band director is unavailable. What do you do?
- You have just started a tune and half the band gets distracted. Now half of the band is three beats off from the other half. What do you do?
- You are in a parade and, against parade rules, the group in front of you has turned around and is heading right for the band with no intentions of stopping. What do you do?
- While spinning your mace or baton you knock your hat/shako completely off your head. What do you do?

Oral Presentation: Some auditions require a speech. Remember that this is an excellent opportunity to display leadership. If your technical skills on the mace/baton or conducting are similar to other competitors, this may be the tie-breaker. Spend time developing your speech.

First write everything you can think of on paper, tablet, etc. Keep adding items until you can't think of anything else. Then start editing. Remove items that are repeated, or are not relevant to the band or the position of Drum Major. Add new items that you may have thought of and then start the editing process again.

When speaking do not read your speech from paper, tablet, etc. Develop your speech, then make an outline of the key points. Use the outline for your speech delivery. When speaking, look at your audience. Speak loudly and clearly. Direct your attention to the middle of the room for your opening, then shift the focus of your speech to the left side of the room, then shift the focus to the right side of the room, then conclude your speech to the center of the room.

Things to consider when developing your speech:

- 1) Avoid "thanking the Academy", director, section leaders, instructors, family, friends, pets.
- 2) First draft – PUT EVERYTHING ON THE PAPER/TABLET.
- 3) Organize the content.
- 4) Edit, Edit, Edit.
- 5) Second draft.
- 6) Reorganize the content.
- 7) Edit, Edit, Edit.
- 8) Start and end strong (primacy and recency).
- 9) Be honest even if it is not positive news.
- 10) Keep the speech between three and five minutes long. Less is often more.
- 11) Perform your speech to someone you trust for their honest feedback. Make adjustments as necessary.

Suggested format:

- 1) Why are **YOU** here? "I am auditioning for the position of drum major." Shortly describe what **YOU** believe the Drum Major position is.
- 2) Short bio: year in school, instruments played in the band, prior leadership positions (section leader, quartermaster, librarian, etc.)
- 3) Brief overview of the year. How the band performed, grew as a unit. List three highlights.
- 4) What are the band's strengths? How are **YOU** going to grow these strengths within the band?

- 5) What are the band's opportunities? What more can the band do? What do **YOU** recommend: more rehearsals, more performances, more recruiting, something else?
- 6) What are the band's challenges? How are **YOU** going to help the band work through these issues? Set **ACHIEVABLE** goals.
- 7) What is **YOUR** plan to take the band to the next level?
- 8) Strong conclusion and wrap up. You may put some quick thank-you's here. Thank you for considering me for the Drum Major position.
- 9) Ask whether anyone has any questions.

Common Band Issues that you may address:

- Recruiting – how can **YOU** assist?
- Tuning – How can **YOU** help improve band tuning?
- Camaraderie: How will **YOU** improve the morale of the band?
- Communication: How will **YOU** improve communication between the Section Leaders to address performance issues of the various sections.
- Write articles for the school newspaper to promote the band (have Director approve copy).
- What performance or rehearsal improvements can be made?
- How can the band leadership structure be improved?

Attributes band directors seek:

Confidence: Are you exhibit confidence in your presence in front of the band?

Command of the group: How well can you get the band to perform? Will they follow you?

Command of the room: How well can you control the environment outside of the band members? Can you answer any question, react to any situation that may occur in or out of a rehearsal or performance setting?

Conducting: How easy is your conducting to follow? Does your conducting have a distinct beat. Is your tempo consistent? Are your section, phrase, volume cues accurate and easy to follow?

Crowd Response: How well can you work the audience? A successful drum major develops a rapport with the crowd once they take the podium. They can get the crowd to become active participants in the band's performance. This causes a synergistic effect on the band. Ask yourself this: would you rather play to an audience that is very subdued and quiet, or one that is going wild over your band's performance?

What criteria would eliminate you from consideration?

Being unreliable: The drum major needs to be the most reliable person in the band. Remember, you are the example the rest of the band must follow. Your attendance, your marching skill, your uniform must always be impeccable. You should embody everything that you want your band to project.

Dealing with problems with a negative attitude: You are the leader of your peers. For your band to be competitive, you must remain positive in every situation both on and off the field. Even in the most dire of circumstances, look for a positive aspect. Remember that a problem is merely an opportunity for improvement!

Being a Prima Donna: There is a very fine line between exuding confidence and thinking you are better than everyone else. Confidence inspires others. Being a Prima Donna will turn the band against you. Remember, you are there to make the BAND look good not the other way around.

I have been selected as Drum Major!

Congratulations! But now your work has just begun. You will need to meet with your director to discuss your and the band's plans and goals for the coming year as well as your specific duties. Start building your rapport as Drum Major with the band. Meet with the various sections to discuss the plans and goal of the band and where they fit in. See whether they have ideas that will assist the band. You will find that many great ideas will come from those in the band ranks. Keep all lines of communication open - you are now the band's eyes and ears.

I was not selected as Drum Major.

Do not despair. Remember that there is an element of luck that goes into being selected as Drum Major. Some years you will be auditioning against many candidates and other years just a few. Over the years, many talented candidates have been passed over. If you want to be a Drum Major, there are other groups that you can work with: Drum Corps, Pipe Bands, Fife Corps, military bands, city bands are searching for good, well trained Drum Majors. Note that many DCI Drum Majors were never Drum Major of their High School band. Seek these groups out! Also, many Scottish Games have Drum Major competitions. There are no age restrictions and you do not need to be affiliated with a band.