

# FAQs: Best Practices on Studying Music in the U.S.

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Feature

**T**he beauty of U.S. education is its diversity: programs at U.S. institutions prepare students for all walks of life, including careers in the performing arts. As someone who has experienced the process both as a student at a music conservatory and now as an EducationUSA adviser, I hope these answers to FAQs will help your students find their way in studying music.

## Q. Which degree should I pursue: a Bachelor of Arts in music, or a Bachelor of Music?

**A.** The “performance factor” is the key to deciding between these two U.S. degrees. The Bachelor of Music focuses on training for live musical performances, while the Bachelor of Arts in music is a more academic degree, emphasizing such topics as music history, music theory, and musicology.

The **Bachelor of Music (BM)** specifically prepares students for performance careers, or for professions that are directly involved with musical performance in some way, whether at schools, recording studios, production companies, arts promotion agencies, or in therapeutic settings. Roughly 75 percent of the degree consists of practical training in instrumental/vocal technique, secondary instrument study, musicianship skills, ensemble playing, and live performance. Institutions granting the BM include independent conservatories and institutes of music as well as schools or colleges of music that are part of a larger university. Most students who pursue a BM have been studying music privately for many years and have had experience performing in orchestras, choirs, or bands, probably with solo experience. These students should not only be sensitive and creative, but they must also be determined, disciplined, entrepreneurial, and comfortable promoting themselves. In fact, many BM programs now encourage their students to take courses focused on the “business side” of music.

Only about 25 percent of the **Bachelor of Arts in music (BA)** consists of performance-related training; the majority of study is similar to a liberal arts approach within music. The BA in music may be offered through a music department, which is generally smaller than a school or college of music and less “intense” than a conservatory. This degree may be well suited to students who are latecomers to their instruments, who are unsure about becoming professional musicians, or who want to fully experience a liberal arts education.

For those who are passionate about *both* a liberal arts degree and a music performance degree, there are some excellent music schools/universities that offer double degree programs, such as the Peabody Institute of the Johns Hopkins University, the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, Eastman School of Music–University of Rochester, and the Yale School of Music.

## Q. Is it really necessary to audition in person at a U.S. campus?

**A.** Most music schools organize live auditions shortly after the early-December application deadline. The audition generally takes place on campus at a specific date and time set by the music school. Despite advances in technology, the live audition is still a decisive factor in music school admissions, and, if performed successfully, it offers the student the greatest chance of being admitted. Students with the necessary financial means should make every effort to travel to their top-choice music schools for live auditions.

At highly competitive music schools, candidates may be required to submit prescreening material as part of the admissions application due in December. This CD or DVD is the key to qualifying for an audition, and high school grades and SAT scores may also be considered. International students should remain flexible in their U.S. audition trips, as personal audition schedules may shift on short notice, based on prescreening results.

The audition itself may last from 10–15 minutes, after which the student may leave; alternatively, the student may be required to be on campus for a period of time before and after the audition, in some cases up to a few days. International students may want to combine the audition trip with a general visit to the institution, and some music schools offer organized visits scheduled around audition days. Students on budgets may wish to prioritize a live U.S. audition trip to their top-choice music schools only, leaving the rest to

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## Online Resources for U.S. Music Education

### National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) Performing & Visual Arts College Fairs

Includes tips for performing and visual arts students, FAQs, and a schedule of performing arts fairs in major U.S. cities in October and November

[www.nacacnet.org/EventsTraining/CollegeFairs/pva/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.nacacnet.org/EventsTraining/CollegeFairs/pva/Pages/default.aspx)

### National Association of Schools of Music (NASM)

Listing of U.S. programs with NASM accreditation, including FAQs about selecting music programs

<http://nasm.arts-accredit.org>

### Unified Application for Music & Performing Arts Schools

The equivalent of the “Common Application” for about 10 U.S. music programs

[www.unifiedapps.org](http://www.unifiedapps.org)

recorded audition submissions, as feasible.

A music school may also offer auditions through regional tours to designated U.S. cities. Regional auditions do not necessarily include teaching staff or decision makers, and so this option may be a less effective choice for international students, considering that travel to the continental U.S. already represents a significant investment. Check with the music school on the specific format and delivery of regional auditions.

Some music schools offer auditions in major cities outside the United States. For example, Eastman, the University of Miami, Oberlin, and Peabody organize an audition tour in Asia every year, which allows students to perform at one common audition that is valid at all four music schools. Check individual music school websites for audition tour schedules and formats.

Some music schools accept recordings in place of live auditions. Students should submit the highest quality of sound recording possible (CD or tape), whether recordings are self-made or professionally produced. DVD and video recordings may not be accepted because of lower sound quality, except in areas where visuals or playing technique are decisive (e.g., conducting, opera). Check music school websites for detailed information about submitting CDs or DVDs in place of live auditions. Please consider the possibility that if a student has serious issues with live performance nerves, submitting a recording to avoid a live audition may only cloud fundamental career questions.

One strategy that helps students make contacts before auditioning is to enroll in a pre-college summer program at the prospective music school, or at a music camp where a prospective instructor is teaching. This way, the young musician can gain valuable experience working with a specific instructor well before the admissions process begins. Needless to say, it can only help an application if one of the three required recommendations comes from a music instructor who teaches at the prospective music school!

## Q. How should I prepare for my live audition?

A. Most music performance programs have published guidelines for audition repertoire, which may include specific works, types of compositions, composers, and historical periods selected to showcase musical technique and instrument mastery. Audition repertoire

guidelines must be followed, regardless of the type of audition (e.g., on-campus, regional, recording). Students should always discuss specific audition repertoire with their current instrumental or vocal teacher.

At auditions, students should not obsess about technical mastery, talent, or “sound” at the expense of other important factors, such as musical interpretation and expressiveness, student potential, performance skills, and professionalism. Some auditions include tests of musicianship through musical exercises (scales/arpeggios), sight-reading, and ear-training skills; improvisation may be required for jazz programs. Students should perfect these skills with a musical coach, in a musical ensemble, or through group lessons at a music center. Vocalists, in particular, should ensure that a

piano accompanist is provided at the audition; if not, the candidate needs to make independent arrangements. The school may provide names of staff, local accompanists, or advanced students willing to accompany.

Punctuality at auditions is very important, so warm-ups and travel to the audition must be carefully planned. Candidates should arrive at the audition already warmed up, if possible. If warm-up rooms are available on site, there may be a line, or they may be shared with other auditionees.

A music theory test may also be a part of the audition process. Any such music-based test will be more decisive than the SAT or TOEFL for admissions and placement purposes. Some music schools offer English language programs for talented musicians who present slightly lower TOEFL scores; others insist on university-level TOEFL scores regardless of musical talent (e.g., 79–90 iBT minimum).

## Research and Conversations

Music is a career that requires an extraordinary amount of honesty and soul-searching. In addition to consulting the wide array of EducationUSA advising resources, students are encouraged to combine online research with frank conversations with professional musicians who can comment on music schools and programs and provide practical insights into the challenges and joys of a musical career. Thorough research and networking are essential first steps to finding the best program and pursuing a rewarding career in music.



Jeannette Law presents to students at the U.S.-Italy Fulbright Commission

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