Demystifying the College Teaching Job Search Process

Last week, the percussion studio was packed with YSM students who were eager to learn how graduates of Yale could successfully compete for a college teaching job. The presenter was Percussion Professor Robert Van Sice who over the years has helped 78 of his students obtain college teaching jobs in universities and conservatories in the US and Europe including Princeton, Peabody, Cornell, NYU, the Geneva Conservatory in Switzerland and the Oslo Conservatory in Norway. With such a great track record, Professor Van Sice was the ideal person to talk our students through the process.

There were a number of themes that pervaded the discussion.

First, winning a college teaching job is a serious undertaking. The field is highly competitive, with anywhere from 40-200 people applying for a job. Therefore, Professor Van Sice counseled students to have a sense of urgency around the process since they have no time to waste. As he so crisply put it,

“Your options are either to get a nice job that will afford you a home and benefits or you go back to your student apartment.”

A second theme in this wonderful lecture was that you are applying for a job every day of your life. You will meet colleagues all your life and you make your reputation by virtue of the way that you interact with people. Moreover, the music world is a small world and people have long memories. If you have made a good impression on someone at a summer festival or on tour, that will help you a lot. By contrast, if you exhibit arrogance or are otherwise not an easy person to work with, that too will follow you around and your past behavior may very be the reason that you do not win a job.

A corollary of the foregoing is that relationships and personal connections matter a lot. You will need the help of your current teachers and other people who know you well to advocate on your behalf.

Finally, as a young person graduating from Yale who is applying for these competitive positions, you are being compared with applicants who will have more experience and who already have their doctorates. Therefore, you need to present yourself impeccably and show that you try harder.

The good news is that there is a process for obtaining a job and with a lot of preparation and knowledge, young people graduating from YSM could successfully win a college teaching job. Here's how!

1. JOB ADVERTISEMENT

Professor Van Sice's first observation is that college teaching jobs will not come to you since once you leave school, the professional world will not hold your hand. Instead, it's up to you to find these jobs.

Start by scouring the two principle databases for college teaching jobs:
- The Chronicle of Higher Education, a free service; and
- The College Music Society, which costs $35/year for students and $75/year for graduates. This is where large universities post their jobs.

Then, look at the individual websites of smaller colleges and universities who typically cannot afford to advertise in the two databases. Professor Van Sice's general advice to our students was to start with a smaller institution where you can get experience and then work your way up to a position at a larger university. In order to get experience while you are still in school, draw a circle of 100 miles from where you are at school and look at the institutions of higher education located within that circle. Check their websites for open positions and you may be able to get a teaching job. This is how you will get your
Finally, instrument-specific websites and Facebook pages also are a source of teaching jobs.

2. THE APPLICATION PROCESS

- **Carefully analyze the job description**
  Once you have found the job description, review and analyze it carefully. Professor Van Sice's advice was to apply for the job that you are realistic to your current level of experience. He suggested printing out the job description and then use a colored marker to indicate everything you have done and use another colored marker to flag what you have not done. If there are two or more job requirements that you do not possess, do not bother applying for the job.

- **Levels of College Teaching Jobs**
  There are four levels of college teaching jobs:
  1. Lecturer
  2. Associate Professor
  3. Assistant Professor
  4. Professor

As a graduate of YSM, you should aim for Lecturer or Associate Professor, depending on your college teaching experience.

Also, note if the job is a tenure-track position. Typically, if it is not, the job is unlikely to lead to a tenure-track job.

You should also pay attention to what degrees the job is looking for. “Master’s degree required, Doctorate preferred” means exactly that. If you do not have your doctorate, it’s not worth applying for a job where a doctorate is required. Note that the Yale DMA has a 2-year on-campus requirement where our students write a thesis and undergo an examination, after which they build their portfolios for a number of years before coming back to campus for a final recital and examination. Students in the past have gotten college teaching jobs when they are in the portfolio phase of their DMA's.

- **Responsibilities of the position:**
  Now, carefully read what the responsibilities of the position entail. For a typical percussion teaching job, the responsibilities can include:
  - Private lessons: find out how many students are in the studio
  - Percussion Ensemble
  - World music component
  - Marching percussion
  - Methods class:
    In methods class, instructors know how to play a few different instruments so that they can instruct other performers on a variety of instruments. This can be a huge part of the portfolio. If the job asks for you to reach a Methods class, prepare a sample curriculum of how you would teach that class.
  - Secondary subject teaching:
    Very rarely does a small university have a lot of theory and history teachers. If you go to Yale, chances are you were TA for hearing or for music history and therefore, you are the experience to teach a secondary subject, which enhances your profile.

- **Profiling the University**
  - School of Music that is run by its own Dean or Department of Music which is run by a revolving Chair who reports to the Provost. Thus, a Dean of a music school has a lot more latitude than the Chair of a Music Department
  - Location is critical!
If you are applying for jobs in Mississippi, Oregon, and New York, these are 3 very different jobs. For example, a small university may not have a large orchestra but they may have a wind ensemble. So read the website! Read the resumes and bios of all of the faculty members. For example, a Midwestern university will be looking for band experience and they don’t really care about your East Coast pedigree!

3. APPLICATION MATERIALS

Your application materials are of the utmost importance since they are the first contact you will have with the Search Committee. Be sure that all materials are organized and comply with the job description. Chaotic materials may even disqualify you right from the get go! Do exactly what is required. Here are Professor Van Sice’s top tips for great materials.

- **Cover Letters**
  The goal of a cover letter is to get the search committee to read your CV. Your cover letter answers the requirements of the job description and should be 1-1/2 page long. Professor Van Sice indicated that most CVs do not get read so a cover letter is a great opportunity to present yourself and your experience in such a way that the Search Committee will want to review your CV.

- **Academic CV**
  An academic CV should detail the experience that qualify you for teaching at the college level. This would include college teaching experience, private teaching, master classes, performance experience, grants that you have received, awards, honors and commissions, media, recordings, professional affiliations, community service as well as your education and principal teachers.

  If you already have college teaching experience as an instructor or TA, private teacher, begin with your teaching experience. Otherwise, start with your education since Yale is an impressive credential to search committees.

  Never lie in your CV. You cannot fake a credential and do not pretend to have experience that you do not have. This is a very small world and it is too easy to pick up the phone or do a quick google search to verify some unusual bit of experience in your CV!

- **Demo Video**
  Follow the guidelines of the job description and be sure to present a variety of repertoire. Represent the breadth of your skills, from Bach to Berio! High quality of the video makes a big difference. If you have beautiful materials, it tells people that YOU TRY HARDER!

  Make it easy to navigate the tape. Provide cursors to mark where you want the auditors to listen so that they can jump in and out of the tape. Forget Vimeo and YouTube since it too long to access materials on those sites.

- **Letters of Recommendation**
  Professor Van Sice recommended that you include the names and contact information of your principal references. If the Job description asks for 3 letters of recommendation, supply a letter.

  The first reference should be your current teacher and if he or she is not listed, that may be a flag for a problem. You should also have diverse recommenders who can speak to your experience in a variety of contexts. The quality of the recommendation is also paramount and is more important than “star power”. Just because you attended a master class with Yo Yo Ma does not make him a better recommender than someone who knows you very well but does not have Yo Yo Ma’s reputation.
4. THE SEARCH COMMITTEE REVIEW PROCESS

• **General Comments**
  The Search Committee is comprised of 5-9 people, not all of whom will necessarily be in your
  discipline. There are typically 40-200 applicants for these jobs and the initial screening aims to get the
  pool down to 6-10 candidates.

The Committee sorts applications into 3 piles:
  1. The candidate has a job
  2. The candidate has DMA and is looking for first job
  3. The candidate has no job and no DMA

Personal Connections are essential

Around the table of the Search Committee, contacts and past experience really matter. This is where your
reputation really matters. If someone on the Search Committee met you at a festival and you made a great
impression on her, that will go a long way in the job search process. It is also essential to have your current
teacher reach out to the institution because that helps to differentiate your competitors.

• **Phone Interview**
  If the committee likes your profile and you are lucky to be in the list of people whom they want to
  interview, the next step in the process is the phone interview where the committee interviews the
  smaller applicant pool of 6-10 people and then selects 3 people for an on-campus interview. Your goal
  in the phone interview is to get to campus. To quote Professor Van Sice, “You have to nail the phone
  interview or you won’t be invited to campus.”

Typically, these interviews take place by Skype. It is essential to prepare so you need to do the
following:
  1. **Research the members of the Search Committee**
     Read their bios and know EVERYTHING you need to know about them. See if there are any
     Yale connections or if they have relationships to other people who could advocate for you
  2. **Mock Skype Auditions**
     When Professor Van Sice’s students are interviewing, he does mock Skype auditions and tapes
     them in order to learn how to conduct the interview, present yourself well and answer the
     questions that they are likely to ask. This is a skill that you have to practice!
  3. **Dress appropriately! Since you are very young so you have to look grown up.**
     Men: wear a shirt and jacket but not tie
     Ladies: look grown up but not like your mother dressed you for the prom
  4. **Speak like a grown-up**
     The members of the search committee are going to be the age of your teachers so speak like a
     grown-up! And social media means that everything is traceable. People will check your Facebook
     and Twitter account.
  5. **Prepare for the most common questions**
     Professor Van Sice advised students to prepare answers to typical Skype interview questions.
     Here were some of his suggestions:
     • What is your teaching philosophy?
       I am 23 years old and I don’t have one. My teacher has one. But I have some ideas. (I am
       not so pretentious as to have one.)
     • What is your recruiting strategy?
       International tours. I would talk to local high school teacher who sends people to Eastman
       and I would get them.
How will we be able to get tenure for you?
As the Dean of a Music School or Department Chair, how can I justify tenure if you only have a masters degree. Answer: I will grow the department and train your students to be amazing performers.

How will you reconcile your performing career and a teaching career?
If you are teaching in NY, a big performance career is great. But in other parts of the country it could send a signal that you don’t care. How do you reconcile those two things?
Answer: I will try to limit my performances in the first 2 years to 10% because my first priority is to my studio. And my touring can be a great recruiting tool

What makes you a good fit for our institution?
Read the website and convince the committee that you fit all of their criteria.

5. CAMPUS VISIT

- **Early morning breakfast with Dean or Department Chair**
  Read the resumes very carefully
  - 30 minutes
  - He/she will inform you about the school
  - SHOW MATURITY! Speak only when spoken to.
  - Regional nuances matter. In the SOUTH: Yes, ma’am. Shake the Dean’s hand. Look him or her in the eye. Close by saying, “Thank you, sir, for the opportunity.”

- **Play a recital: 30-45 minutes**
  The recital portion is open-ended and you can play whatever you want. Many of these recitals are public concerts.

  Choose repertoire vis-à-vis the job posting. EG, world music ensemble= steel drum
  Baroque ensemble
  You might be able to play chamber music if there is a serious chamber music department. Offer to do so! They agree 1 out of 3 times.

- **Orchestral excerpts**
  Include them in your recital and enhance the recital with videos or slides.
  One student who was playing the timpani part of Beethoven’s 9th highlighted the score to show what he was listening to when he played his part.

  While playing the Rite of Spring excerpts, the same student showed a tape Michael Tilson Thomas’s lecture on the work that showcased the ballet. A Messiaen work had videos of individual birds

  These videos say: I TRY HARDER

  These videos also engage the students and give the message that as a teacher, I will make learning excerpts more interesting!

  Orchestra and wind ensemble conductors are often on search committees so they want to know if hiring you will help their ensembles. Therefore, when you play excerpts and present them creatively, it shows that you will work hard to make the ensemble better.

- **Scores**
  If your music is complex, bring a score and you can offer it to the jury. Otherwise, don’t bring scores because if you hand a package of scores to the search committee, it screams STUDENT. This is about
the possibility of your becoming their colleague.

- **Lunch with the search committee**
  You won’t win a job over lunch but you may lose it! Here are some ways to enhance the lunch experience:
  - *Do not be overly casual.*
  - Do not drink alcohol
  - Don’t eat pasta (it’s messy).
  - *Know your CV*
    Know your CV backwards and forwards. They will have your CV on the table.
  - *Be yourself*
    In a small university town, who you are as a person is as important as who you are as a musician. These people will be your social circle and they are looking for a colleague.
  - *Make your enthusiasm for teaching apparent*

- **Coaching the ensemble** (this is where Bob’s students ace it)
  Chamber music is the essence of musicianship and this is where Professor Van Sice’s students shine thanks to their experience in YPG. Therefore, you need to make the most of your experience coaching various ensembles in the course of your interview.

  The Search Committee will want to see how you teach at 3 different levels: college, master’s and doctorate. You will have 90 minutes in all. That means you only 30 minutes with each group. Here is Professor Van Sice’s advice on how to make the most of your time:
  - *They will send you scores in advance so be sure to study these pieces in advance.*
  - *Focus on Big Picture and show students how to live inside the sound. Don’t PECK. Don’t focus on small things and make little comments.*
  - *Make sure that the students play WITH you, not FOR you.*
  - *Play, listen and share your comments. You want to convey to the Search Committee that you can make the students play and listen to each other.*
  - *You are the underdog since you are young so talk less, play more! Learn integral places*
  - *Finally, this is an opportunity to put your people skills to work.*

- **Public Master Class: 90 minutes**
  It’s 4pm. You may be tired! But this is where the interview gets real. You will probably be asked to teach at 3 levels: college, master’s and doctorate. Show versatility in dealing with the different age groups.

  Be prepared: know the repertoire and know the problems of the particular pieces. Professor Van Sice’s students do a lot of mock teaching. They film the sessions and talk about pedagogy so they are very well prepared for this part of the interview.

- **Meet with the students**
  This is an informal Q&A chat with the students. The search committee members will not be present. Be firm and behave like a faculty member. Don’t buddy up. Don’t fake an answer.

- **Public Lecture**
  This is a new requirement and is increasingly common. With university budgets getting cut, you are going to have to teach in the classroom. Prepare a topic with which you are very familiar.
Professor Van Sice's students prepare by doing a 20-minute teaching demo that is filmed and then debriefed.

- **Drinks with the Committee**
  This is where you get rid of business clothes and have an informal session with members of the committee. Wear jeans and a nice shirt. Have ONE drink. This is when they tell you about real estate, schools, why you want to work here (or not!).

  They are still evaluating you so you need to continue making a good impression. Do not complain or speak negatively. Remember, these encounters are meant to size you up as a future colleague!

FINAL WORDS: THE MUSICIAN’S MANTRA

You are auditioning every day, all the time!

Every rehearsal counts. Everyone remembers if you are unprepared, if you play spectacularly, if you yell at people.

You are constantly building your reputation of who you are.

And you don’t know the results because the decisions are made behind closed doors. You can’t make up for your bad reputation.

In closing, be sure to practice for the interview.

Use the assets available at YSM.

Ask for help!

This is doable!