

Dr. Balboa's Kansas All-State Viola Audition Tips

Preparing for an audition is about more than playing the right notes and rhythms. It's about developing consistency, confidence, and musical intention. The following tips will help you approach your scales and excerpts with greater efficiency, technical ease, and musical expression.

Before You Begin: Make the Metronome Your Best Friend!

The metronome is the keeper of truth! It keeps us honest about our rhythm, tempo, and consistency. Make it your best friend throughout the preparation process.

However, don't feel pressured to play at performance tempo right away. Start at a tempo where you can play accurately and comfortably. Be patient, and gradually increase the tempo as you develop consistency and confidence.

Remember: Accuracy first. Speed later!

Part I: Scales

E Major & D Melodic Minor

Intonation & Ear Training

- Practice with a drone! Use the tonic (E or D) or the tonic and fifth together (E–B or D–A).
- Listen to how each note relates to the drone. Trust your ears, not just your finger placement!
- In D melodic minor, pay attention to the changing sixth and seventh scale degrees when ascending and descending.

Bow Control & Sound Production

- Think legato! Maintain a beautiful, connected sound, even during shifts and string crossings.
- Use consistent bow speed and weight for an even, resonant tone.
- Think of one long crescendo as you ascend, allowing the sound to grow naturally toward the top of each scale.

Left-Hand Technique & Shifting

- Keep your fingers close to the fingerboard, avoiding unnecessary lifting.
- Allow your thumb to travel with your hand during shifts. Avoid squeezing or leaving it behind.
- Shift as one unit, initiating movement from the elbow hinge so the arm, hand, and fingers travel together.
- In higher positions (especially beyond fourth), bring your hand and arm around the upper bout of the viola for comfortable reach.

Part II: Orchestral Excerpts

Brahms | Symphony No. 4, Movement II

Musical Focus: Phrasing, rich tone, rhythmic precision, and orchestral awareness.

Phrasing & Musicality

- **Think in long phrases.**
Although the large phrase markings require multiple bow strokes, the music should sound like one continuous gesture. Keep the bow moving and avoid unnecessary interruptions.
- **Feel the music in a slow two.**
Although written in 6/8, think of two larger beats rather than six individual eighth notes to create natural flow and direction.
- **Keep the music moving.**
The winds and brass have active sixteenth-note figures underneath the viola part. Let this activity encourage forward motion without sounding heavy or stodgy.
- **Shape the phrase.**
Use dynamic shaping to bring the musical line to life. I've included suggestions in the provided part.
- **Listen to recordings.**
Notice how the viola part fits into the orchestral texture, including the beautiful harmony that creates a duet within the viola section.

Tone & Vibrato

- **Dolce means sweet.**
Use consistent vibrato from finger to finger for a warm, connected, singing sound.
- **Piano doesn't mean timid!**
Maintain a rich, resonant tone even at softer dynamics. This is Brahms, after all!

Dynamics & Orchestral Awareness

- **Measure 8 — Diminuendo: Don't fade away too much.**
You're passing the musical material to the horns, so think of a natural handoff rather than the end of a phrase. Continue supporting the tone and musical line as the dynamics decrease.

Pizzicato & Rhythmic Precision

- **Don't overlook the pizzicato.**
It may seem like the easy section, but it deserves just as much preparation as the lyrical opening.
- **Find your pizzicato sweet spot.**
Pluck where the string produces a warm, round sound. Avoid the "rosin zone" near the bridge, where the sound can become metallic or tin-like.
- **Keep the sound rich.**
Even at softer dynamics, aim for warmth, clarity, and resonance.
- **Watch the rhythmic pattern.**
The recurring eighth-note rests continue until the second-to-last measure. Avoid early entrances, and practice with a metronome to maintain a steady pulse.

Tchaikovsky | Symphony No. 6, Movement I

Technical Focus: Spiccato, intonation, string crossings, bow distribution, and physical ease.

Slow Practice & Building Tempo

- **Be patient.**
This is our most technically active excerpt, filled with sixteenth notes, accidentals, and challenging string crossings. Resist the temptation to rush toward performance tempo.
- **Practice with a calm mind and body.**
Learn the excerpt slowly and without unnecessary tension. The way you practice is how you train your body to perform.
- **Check in with your body.**
Are you breathing? Are your shoulders relaxed? Are you squeezing anywhere? Can you play with less effort?
- **Speed comes from efficiency.**
As your movements become smaller, more coordinated, and comfortable, increasing the tempo becomes easier.

Physical Awareness & Releasing Tension

- **Balance, don't squeeze.**
Allow the natural weight of your head to balance comfortably on the instrument without clamping with your jaw or neck.

- **Check your left thumb.**
Keep it soft and flexible rather than squeezing against the neck.
- **Check your right thumb.**
Maintain a naturally curved, flexible thumb without locking or becoming rigid.
- **Keep both thumbs relaxed.**
Tension in either thumb can restrict movement and make fast passages more difficult.

Bow Stroke — Spiccato

- **Let the bow bounce.**
Spiccato is an off-the-string bow stroke that begins on the string. Allow the natural elasticity of the bow to create the bounce rather than actively lifting the bow for each note.
- **Keep the stroke close to the string.**
Spiccato doesn't require a large bounce. Aim for a small, controlled motion that allows the bow to return to the string naturally without sacrificing rhythmic precision.
- **Keep the articulation fluid.**
Although every note is marked with a dot, the spiccato should still feel connected and have a sense of musical direction. Avoid overly short or clipped notes that interrupt the musical line.
- **Let the wrist lead.**
Collé and finger articulation exercises can help, but I prefer thinking of the wrist as leading, with natural elbow movement and flexible fingers.
- **Avoid leading from the shoulder.**
Excessive shoulder movement creates tension and slows the stroke. Keep movements small and efficient.

Intonation & Left-Hand Coordination

- **Practice in quarter notes.**
Turn each sixteenth note into a quarter note to hear intervals, check finger placement, and establish reliable intonation.
- **Connect the notes.**
Practice legato to hear the relationships between pitches, prioritizing accurate intonation over simply placing your fingers.
- **Watch the accidentals.**
Pay attention to chromatic intervals and how your hand frame adjusts throughout the passage.

String Crossings & Bow Placement

- **Practice on open strings.**
Remove the left hand and focus on bow stroke, string crossings, and rhythmic consistency.
- **Explore the lower part of the bow.**
Experiment with playing closer to the frog, especially during the large string crossings in measures 3, 9, and 11.
- **Watch your bow placement.**
Large crossings, especially from A to C in measure 2, can pull you toward the upper half. Try staying in the same area or moving slightly toward the frog.
- **Give lower strings time to speak.**
The C and G strings may respond more slowly. Prepare your bow level early without disrupting the pulse.
- **Experiment with flatter bow hair.**
This can encourage a fuller, more immediate response on lower strings. Find what works best for your instrument and bow.

Bow Distribution | Measures 1, 3 & 11

- **Watch the three-to-one bowing pattern.**
Three sixteenth notes on a down bow are followed by one sixteenth note on an up bow.
- **Use less bow than you think.**
Too much bow on the down bow can create awkward placement or an unintended accent on the single up bow.
- **Keep the articulation balanced.**
The single up-bow note should remain light and controlled.

Dynamics & Musical Shaping

- **Measures 6–9 — Remember the diminuendo.**
We often remember to crescendo but overlook the diminuendo. Make both directions of the phrase audible.
- **Watch the subito dynamics.**
Sudden dynamic changes should be intentional and contribute to the musical character.
- **Soft doesn't mean weak.**
Although the highest marked dynamic is mezzo-piano, maintain a beautiful, resonant viola tone with clarity and core.

Part III: Final Audition Tips | Prepare to Perform!

You have put in the work learning your scales and excerpts. Now it's time to practice performing them! Remember, performing is a skill that takes practice, too. Practice for ease. Practice for consistency. Practice for musicality.

1. Record yourself.

Listen critically to your rhythm, intonation, dynamics, and musicality. You may notice things you missed while playing.

2. Listen to professional orchestras.

Explore different recordings of your excerpts, paying attention to tempo, phrasing, articulation, and how the viola part fits into the orchestral texture.

3. Perform for others.

Play for family, friends, teachers, pets, or even stuffed animals! Get comfortable performing with an audience.

4. Change your surroundings.

Practice in different spaces, including those with occasional distractions, to strengthen your focus.

5. Mix up the order.

Ask someone to choose the order of your scales and excerpts. This helps you practice switching between different musical and technical demands.

6. Simulate the audition.

Perform each selection without stopping or starting over. If something goes wrong, keep going! Recovery is an important performance skill.

7. Be intentional with your practice.

How you practice matters just as much as how much you practice. Approach each practice session with a purpose, listen carefully, and make thoughtful decisions about what needs improvement.

8. Be patient with yourself.

Progress takes time! Give yourself permission to work through challenges at your own pace. Focus on developing good habits rather than rushing to achieve results.

9. Aim for progress, not perfection.

No performance will ever be perfect, and that's okay! View every audition as an opportunity to learn, grow, and become a stronger musician.

10. Trust your preparation.

On audition day, focus on making music rather than controlling every note. You've done the work, so enjoy sharing it!