

EPIISODE 3 (Graduate School) START

{Intro Music}

This is the Institute for Music Leadership

Stephen: Hello everyone, and welcome to minisode number 3 with Dr. Blaire Koerner. Maybe we'll start calling this Koerner's Corner or something fun like that, but for now it's just minisode number 3. And today we're going to talk about something a lot of students have questions about which is grad school. Should you go? How do you choose where to apply? How many schools? What are some do's and some don'ts? Well, Blaire is going to talk all about it. Well, maybe not about everything because it's a really big topic. In fact, there are plans to do a much bigger episode about grad school because it can be so involved. But here, Blaire and I talked about some of the big picture things that go into choosing and applying to a grad school. So. Where to begin?

Blaire: OK, so if you're thinking about graduate school, the first question you have to ask yourself is, "Why?" And a lot of people just... it's a natural step. You know, they go from undergraduate, they go straight into graduate and they don't even think about the reasons why. And that needs to be the first question, because that's going to help you decide which schools to go to.

Stephen: The why could be different depending on what you want. It could mean you want more teaching experience, or to get better at auditioning, or you might want more ensemble experience, to learn about technology, maybe you want leadership experience. All of these are valid, and all of these sort of dictate what schools you end up applying for, because you want a school that highlights and supports those goals. What's more, these goals may determine whether you need a master's or maybe just an artist diploma.

Blaire: So there's a difference between artist diplomas and graduate schools. Artist diplomas are simply... you just want to get more practicing in and more opportunities to play. And believe it or not, that's what most people want. But they go for a master's degree and then realize they still have to take extra theory and history and other things as well. And they're not invested in that because it's not the actual contents, but they want to do performances. So you have to think about that and balance it.

But I also challenge you to think outside of school because graduate school, you have one foot in the door as a student and one foot out the door as a professional, because to be a full time graduate student, you only need 10 credits at most universities, which is a lot less than having, you know, 20 credits -- a lot of undergraduates are used to doing, right. So you have time to practice. You also have time to have a job, to gig, to start a chamber ensemble, to do some commissioning, to network, to go to conferences, to present, to do a lot of those experiences.

And so when you think about that, what does the school offer in those areas, right? So can you do more recitals? Is there a gig service that you can connect with the local community and do gigs with? Do they support, with funding, professional development opportunities? So you can

go to a conference and play or present there. Do they have extra training opportunities? And also, what's their location? So is this an area that you want to stay in? Because with graduate programs you blink and they're done. Doctor programs; that's another story.

But with masters and artist diplomas, you blink and they're done. So are you planning on this just to be a step in step out situation or are you planning on staying in this local area for a little while and building your networks and building opportunities and so forth?

Stephen: And that's another thing to think about with a grad program. It can be a situation where you swoop into a school for a year or two and then swoop back out. But it could be that you have your eye on staying put wherever the school is located. And if so, you need to ask yourself: is that city affordable? Are there enough opportunities?

Blaire: Eastman's very, very arts centric and very, very... well... has lots of music and arts and everything, but in a very small city. So we just saturate the local area to the point where there aren't as many opportunities simply because it's just too tiny. So people can't stay here forever with just a small thing here and there gigging. But they could stay in New York, gigging forever. But then, there's the flipside of how expensive it is.

Right, so you have to consider all of these things because it does go by quickly and you need to use your time 100 percent wisely. You need to go in knowing exactly what you want to get out of that program, out of that school, out of that area, et cetera.

Stephen: Ok. Why should be the first question you've asked. And once you identify the why, that should help narrow down where you apply.

Blaire: Well, you only apply for the ones that are going to help you fill in those wide buckets. It's not just blindly applying for everything. And, of course, similarly to the application fees, one of the reasons why we don't apply blindly and just to as many as possible is can you honestly audition or spend enough time on your personal statements or ask your letters of recommenders to send 12 different letters? You know, let's start to get to a lot of work and prep. And so you really have to think about that as well and make sure it's a good fit for you to help narrow it down so you're really committing to the schools that you can really feel like you're going to be successful and have answered those "why's" and fulfill your needs.

Stephen: And then, of course, there's paying for grad school.

Blaire: ...because with masters and doctoral programs, some places can offer full rides with stipends, but a lot of places don't, and the financial system is a little bit different than undergraduates where there aren't as many FAFSA loans and other things like that. It's a different setup. And they aren't giving out as much money as... you have to really figure out how to pull it all together.

Stephen: So, let's say you figure out the why, you find the schools that support that, you prep your auditions and you're only applying to as many schools as you can handle so you're not spread thin, and you've even got a financial plan in place. But, what happens if you don't get in? Or, maybe you don't even get invited to audition? What's next?

Blaire: Yeah, I mean, in general, whether you apply to a school and don't get in the first time or when you're starting to apply for the first time, you take the application process seriously. I work with a lot of students that will come to me right before the deadline and I see their resume for the first time or see their personal statements for the first time. And we've got a lot of work to do because people assume that what they've submitted to a festival for a resumé or something would apply for graduate school. And they're not the same thing.

Stephen: Again, pulling from my admissions background, I can tell you from my old school that based on data we could observe, we could see that not only did the majority of applicants submit their application either the day before or on the deadline; but also, a disturbingly large number of applicants only started their application the day before the application was due. These applications take time, and you want to put in lots of care and attention to the things like essays and personal statements, because we do look at them, and they do matter. And some of the requirements for your application may not be things you're used to doing. Like writing a personal statement.

Blaire: How often do we really write about ourselves right? We've talked, we've written lots of things about Mozart and Beethoven and Schumann and like, 19th century, you know, symphonies and all this other stuff. But when do we often write about ourselves right? The last time we probably did that was when you applied for undergraduate, right? And your goals have changed, the expectations for what schools are requiring these days have changed... Hint, hint. A lot of personal statements are actually being more mindful about the music industry in the 20th century and the 21st century, which might mean online, which might mean being more diverse, which might mean removing barriers. And so suddenly they're asked questions that they never asked before and trying to do that on the fly. As to "What would you bring that diversifies our cohort?" and that might be experiences, that might be, you know, background, that might be knowledge, it might be identity. And people stumble because they don't anticipate some of these questions. So take your time on your applications.

Stephen: In a previous podcast episode with Rachel Roberts, I asked her why it's important to practice salary negotiation, and she answered with, "As a musician, would you walk onstage and sight-read a performance?" And that totally applies here. You should take time on each aspect of your grad school application. There's this idea - and it's an incorrect one - especially when applying to conservatories, that it's all about your audition. And yes - your audition is an important part. But, I've been in admissions meetings where there's someone with an outstanding score, but their grades are terrible, they phoned in their essay, they have bad letters of recommendation, and their resumé is bare - it just doesn't add up to a good overall picture. And there were times when those applicants were straight out denied, in spite of their playing. But even if their score was too good to ignore, so to speak, the bigger picture affected their

admissions offer. Sure, maybe they'd get admitted, but we didn't offer any money - or much less than they could have gotten had they spent time and paid attention to their application.

Ok. So we were talking about what happens if you don't get into a school the first time.

Obviously paying attention to the application is key - whether it's your first time, or you're trying again. But you'll also want to prepare for auditions, especially if you've been out of school for a little while.

Blaire: Know what you need to play, prep it, do auditions, understand what it's gonna be like traveling around and doing auditions again in different locations. Get ready to do some recordings and get good recordings of yourself, practice recording so you can send things in for the pre-recordings if necessary.

Stephen: Another thing you should do?

Blaire: ...reach out to the professor not, only to get a few lessons, but just to see if they have any openings. A lot of schools are limited in how many people they take for master's degrees and so are doctorates even. So, they only take two or three people or they only have their one doctorate person. And that might be for a variety of reasons, funding, how big their studio is, the time commitment. And if they don't have an opening and you're applying for a doctor position and they know there's not gonna be an opening for another two years, don't apply because you're not necessarily going to magically win them over. So you have to have an honest conversation because a lot of times that's what ends up making you not go, is because there isn't an opening and they're not advertising that and they won't not accept applications. They still will, so you might wanna just ask, do you have an opening spot before you apply? And they might say, "Not this year." OK, cool. Wait for another year if you're seriously interested in the organization and maintain your connection with that professor in that year. Continue going to lessons, see if they go to a summer program, you know, follow up with them on a few things, continue that network because you want them to be a support of yours and that you want to get accepted. So, you know, build that connection and build that relationship. So that's another thing that contributes. Most people don't realize it's not like undergraduate where they accept a lot of people and then expect a few people to leave. They'll accept very few, and they'll have a few on the waitlist, but they'll only take two or three per studio. So it is even more competitive just because of the space.

Stephen: Now, I just want to say, that is great advice, but it can be a fine line to walk with faculty. Remember that faculty may have some pull when it comes to admissions, but not always. Just because a faculty member likes you, doesn't mean you'll be accepted into a program. It's very often a committee of people who review your audition, and then a separate committee reviewing your application and audition score. I've unfortunately seen situations where students end up taking private lessons, going to festivals, enrolling in workshops with a particular faculty member thinking that this connection and all the training they're getting will guarantee them a spot once they apply again. And then when that doesn't happen, they're left sort of unmoored. So remember, taking a few lessons can be a great way to build a connection

and find out if a professor or school is a good fit, but it's just one tool, one aspect of the whole process.

You need to remember all the other parts of the application puzzle. Like, letters of recommendation. Blaire has a whole thing on letters of recommendation.

Blaire: I have a whole thing on letters of recommendation, if you would like me to share. Yeah, OK, so first and foremost... those support people.

Stephen: Remember support people from the networking episode? These are people who know you and have a current relationship with you. If you didn't listen to the networking episode, check it out - we go into much more detail - but, let's get back to Blaire.

Blaire: So you need to have at least six people on your support list and they need to be from various different opportunities. Obviously, there's going to be a performance and faculty in there, but they could be from jobs. They could be from when you shadowed with something, they could be a T.A., I mean, they could be a boss. There's a variety of friends and you might need them for different things. So realize that there's a few different ways that the letters can be written.

One is a professional letter, and one is a character reference.

Stephen: A professional letter might reference your performing ability, your teaching ability - it highlights what you do and talks about how good you are at doing it while a character reference, well, references your character. Are you a team-player, a good leader, do you communicate well? That sort of thing. So, how do you go about getting these references?

Blaire: Ask first, "Would you be willing?" And hopefully the answer is yes. If the answer is yes, Check! Great, step two. If the answer is no, then we're gonna have to look somewhere else. And depending on the relationship, you can ask. Sometimes the answer is no, because they are simply too busy. And sometimes it's no because they don't feel like they know you as well anymore. And you need to fix that. Or sometimes it's no because they don't feel like they could give you a good recommendation. That might be interesting feedback right there.

Stephen: And step two - if they say yes?

Blaire:...send them a list of the schools and programs and the deadlines of what you're applying for well in advance. So if it's due in November 15th or December 1st, you were sending this to them in October because you need to give them enough time because you are not the only one most likely asking for recommendation and you want them to be able to give you the best recommendation you possibly can.

Stephen: You can also highlight specific parts of your résumé when you send it to help make the letter more specific to the program you're applying to. So like, if you're going into a

contemporary music program, highlight some recitals or concerts you did that focused on new compositions and works with electronics. It helps to guide the letter so it better showcases who you are and why you're a good fit.

And also, be sure to give your recommenders plenty of time.

Blaire: So a month before, 15 days before: "Hey, I just want to send this." "Oh, I just submitted." -blah blah blah. Also, please realize that they can not submit anything until you've done your part. Most people just think that they miraculously just go in some place and upload. No, you have to go into the application and fill in their contact information and press a little button and then they will get a notification that says, please submit your materials. So if you do that two days before the deadline and you expect them just to magically upload and have the time to do that, that's not fair either, and that would really tick them off. I know I've had that happen to me, and it really made me mad because I might have other things planned.

Stephen: The other thing is, sometimes it might be as simple as uploading a letter, but more and more applications have a form or a space to type the letter. And this can cause formatting issues or the form requires more time and short answers and...it can end up being a real pain to submit last-minute. And that's frustrating for your recommender.

Blaire: And now, I have to spend twenty five minutes on a form that I wasn't anticipating. And that really gets me frustrated when I know it's due the next day. So, you were just as responsible for them getting the recommendation as they are. So give them enough time to do it properly.

{outro music}

Stephen: Hopefully that demystifies grad schools for you and helps you in your application process. Remember you can always make an appointment with Blaire to review your materials or answer specific questions you might have. The link to Handshake will be in the show notes.

Thanks again to Blaire. There are a bunch of episodes on the way. The next minisode will be about how to become a faculty member at a university, so be on the lookout for that. Remember that you can follow us on SoundCloud, or follow the IML on Facebook to get updates about upcoming episodes and podcast news. If you liked this episode, or one of our older ones, it would be a huge help to share with a friend, or colleague. We would really appreciate it.

Today's minisode was mixed by me, and I also provided some of the incidental music and intro music. The outro music was composed by Alexa Silverman. Thanks also to Emma Gierszal and Frances Inzenhofer for helping to prepare a lot of the content for these conversations. Contact info for the show is in the show notes, as well as a full transcript and other helpful links. As always, if you have an idea for an episode, any comments, complaints, or kudos - let us know.

Now, go out. Make art. Do good work. From the IML, I'm Stephen Biegner. Until next time.

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