



*... dedicated to the
promotion, composition,
performance, understanding
and dissemination of
new and contemporary
music ...*

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Six Tips for Your Graduate Interviews

By Curtis Nathaniel Smith

You've done it all. You started early and prepared a professional portfolio, cast a wide net, polished your CV and tailored your statements of purpose, filled out all the online portions, shipped your materials, and even called to clear up any lingering questions. Then one day you get a letter in the mail that begins "Congratulations..." Now what? Sometimes we get so caught up in the minutia of applications we forget or fail to prepare for the crux of the whole process—the interview. Having just finished an intense round of interviews, I'd like to offer a few tips.

First, be prepared. Find out as much as you can about the program. Typically, your day will have a few separate interviews, a tour of facilities, and more casual meetings with students, faculty, and other applicants. Much, but certainly not all, of this information will be provided or available online, but don't be afraid to contact faculty and current graduate students early in the process. For example, try to find out who will be in your various interviews. This way you can have scores on hand for everyone in the room and greet faculty with names as well as handshakes. The more you know about the program, the interviewers, and the interview, the

less surprise—and anxiety—you'll encounter.

Second, understand the purpose of the interview and act accordingly. Think of the interviewers as employers. An employer hires someone because they have a job they need done. They want to ensure that their investment in you—in this case their grants, scholarship funds, assistantships, time, their program's good name, etc.—will yield returns. Returns in this case are success as a student composer and professional musician. This doesn't mean the interviewers are not interested in you personally; on the contrary, they are very interested in your likes, dislikes, etc. They are just interested in you as you relate to their program.

Third, know yourself and prove it. Almost every interview I did started with the treacherously simple "Tell us about yourself" or "Tell us about your music" prompt. The first time I tried to respond to it, I fumbled. As passionate artists we could ramble ourselves right out the door of a fifteen minute interview and leave the faculty unconvinced of our ability to yield returns. Instead, you should be prepared to

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About the Newsletter

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Newsletter Contact Information:

Benjamin Williams
1221 Cliffdale Dr.
Clinton, MS 39056
(330) 268-2590

newsletter@societyofcomposers.org

For other SCI business:

Society of Composers, Inc.
P.O. Box 687
Mineral Wells, TX 76067-0687
secretary@societyofcomposers.org

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How to Submit Items to the Newsletter

Articles: The Newsletter welcomes submissions of articles to run in future issues. Articles, if accepted, may be edited for length and content. Please include a photo with all submissions if possible (photo may be of author).

Member News + Photos: Please send all member news and activities with a photo. Submitted items may be edited.

Ideas/Suggestions: The Editors welcome any other ideas or suggestions.

Submit to the newsletter via email at: newsletter@societyofcomposers.org



Upcoming SCI Events

2013 Region I Conference August 15–17, 2013

Portsmouth, NH

Hosted by PARMA Recordings as part of the PARMA Music Festival

2013 Region IV Conference October 17–19, 2013

Eastern Kentucky University
Richmond, KY

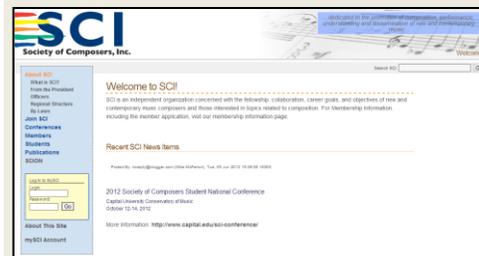
Host: Thomas Couvillon
Thomas.Couvillon@eku.edu

2014 Region VIII Conference March 7–8, 2014

University of Puget Sound, Tacoma, WA

2014 Region V Conference March 27–29, 2014

Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo
Hosts: Christopher Biggs and Lisa Coons



Internet & Email

www.societyofcomposers.org

- Conference dates and submission guidelines
- Contact information and links to member web-pages
- Student chapters and opportunities
- CDs and journals produced by SCI
- Details on SCI such as membership, contacts for officers, regional structure, by-laws, newsletter archives and more...

SCION

SCION is a listing of opportunities on our website exclusively for members. It is updated on a continual basis so that it may be checked at any time for the most current notices. In addition, members are emailed on the first Monday of each month to remind them to visit the site for new or recent postings. The large number of listings is easily managed by a table of contents with links to the individual notices. In-depth coverage; contest listings in full; all items listed until expiration; this is a valuable resource that you may print in its entirety or in part at any time.

John Bilotta, SCION Editor
scion@societyofcomposers.org

scimembers

scimembers is a member-driven e-mail mailing list that is intended to facilitate communication between members of the Society on topics of concern to composers of contemporary concert music. It conveys whatever notices or messages are sent by its members, including announcements of performances and professional opportunities, as well as discussions on a wide variety of topics. For more information, including how to join and participate in the listserv:

<http://www.societyofcomposers.org/publications/listserv.html>

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Membership Information

For complete details, please visit
<http://www.societyofcomposers.org/join/membership.html>.

Full Membership (\$55/year): Eligible to submit scores to the National Conferences, regional conferences, SCI Recording Series, SCI Journal of Music Scores. Access to the SCI Newsletter in electronic form. Optional subscription to [scimembers], the SCI listserv and all other SCI publications. Eligible to vote on Society Matters and in elections for the National Council.

Joint Membership (\$75/year): Same benefits as full members

Senior Membership (\$27.50/year): Open to those 65 years of age or older, or retired. Same benefits as full members.

Associate Membership (\$27.50/year): Open to performers and other interested professionals. Receives the SCI Newsletter in electronic form and can participate in national and regional conferences.

Student Membership (\$27.50/year): Eligible to submit to national and regional conferences and to vote in society matters. Access to all SCI publications.

Student Chapter Membership (\$17.50/year): Same benefits as student members, but only available on campuses having Student Chapters.

Institutional Membership (\$25/year): Organizations receive hard copy of the SCI Newsletter and other mailings.

Lifetime Membership (\$1100 or \$120/year for 10 years): Benefits the same as full members, for life.

Executive Committee

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Six Tips for Your Graduate Interviews

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tell “about yourself/music/influences” in a succinct, 30–60 second statement that includes a brief introduction to yourself, three or four recent accomplishments, and a few character traits that set you apart from the crowd.¹ Preparing this in advance will warm you up for other questions about your influences, motivations, and strengths that are sure to come your way during the interview process.

Fourth, show your competence through concise, real-life examples. Along with the ubiquitous opener, there are many questions you are likely to be asked. While I can’t list them all, I can give you a way to respond well to just about any question an interviewer might throw your way. It’s called the SARA story.² No, I didn’t make it up. I learned it at an employment seminar. **S**—explain the *situation* where you exhibited the strength. **A**—show the *action* you took. **R**—give the *results* of your action. And **A**—*apply* these results to the program you’re interviewing for. An example, apropos in this case, can show this best. You’re in a group interview and the faculty member closest to you smiles and says, “Tell us about your greatest strength as a composer.” You’re tempted by platitudes and want to shout, “I’m a team player!” but you remember practicing SARA stories and instead you say:

“During my capstone project (SITUATION) I worked with visual artists, dancers, and theater technicians. Our different mediums often made it difficult to communicate our artistic ideas. So I (ACTION) decided to learn all I could about each member’s art form. Once I began to understand their traditions, motivations, and even jargon, I could express my musical ideas in a way that all could understand. The project (RESULTS) resulted in several successful concerts and lifelong colleagues. I will (APPLICATION) bring this ability to actively collaborate as a composer wherever I pursue graduate studies. It is a strength that keeps me learning and growing as a composer and colleague.”

You might be saying, “Yeah right, that’s an impossibly canned response.” Absolutely. You shouldn’t memorize and recite your stories. Instead, think of every project you worked

on, every challenge you surmounted, the big pieces, the collaborations (the returns they are looking for), then write out a little outline with Situation, Action, Result, and Application. Practice telling these stories in one to two minutes as responses to common interview questions³ out loud with a friend or a mirror. It won’t be wooden; it’ll be clear, on topic, concise, and powerful.

Fifth, learn. Treat each interview as a practice in interviewing. Keep a notebook and pen with you—even during the interview. Jot down names of people in the room to keep them straight. Maybe crib a few notes to jog your memory. When it’s over, sit down and write out everything you can remember. When did you shine? When did you meander? Which question left you nonplussed? This is the best way to improve every time you interview. It’s also therapeutic to lay it all out and let go of any stress or regrets you might have.

Lastly, follow up. Be sure to send a brief hand-written note to your interviewers within a day of interviewing. Use your notes to give each letter a personalized touch. And, keep up with faculty, interviewees, and graduate students you met during the process. Your interviews can be one of the most active “networking” points of your career. When you think of the interview experience as an opportunity to make new friends it puts the process into a different perspective. Regardless of the outcome, those you meet can enrich your life, music and career.

Best of Luck!

Curtis Nathaniel Smith
curtisnsmith.net

Notes:

¹ idsjobs.org

² idsjobs.org, see also STAR method (Situation, Task, Action, Result)

³ [64 Tough Interview Questions](#)

SCItings

Member News and Activities

Performances, Awards, Commissions, Honors, Publications and other Member Activities.

David Vayo

Vayo's premiere of *Welsh Incident* (on a text by Robert Graves) for French horn, trombone and narrators was given at the Grand Teton Music Festival on July 14, 2011. Vayo was also in Rio de Janeiro in mid-August for a residency and a performance of his composition *Poem* by Ensemble GNU at the Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. On November 10 and 11, 2011 the Orquesta Sinfónica de Galicia, Spain, gave the premiere of Vayo's *Wellspring* under the direction of Michal Nesterowicz.

Paul A. Epstein

On October 13, 2011 Epstein presented a lecture-recital together with pianist R. Andrew Lee as part of the Third International Conference on Music and Minimalism in Leuven, Belgium. Entitled "Drawings (after Sol LeWitt): A Neo-Minimalist Tribute," the presentation included first performances of Drawings Nos. 3, 4 and 5 for piano as well as a talk detailing the techniques used in the Drawings series.

Philip Bradbury

Bradbury's *Back to the Basics* for jazz ensemble was premiered at Northwestern University in Natchitoches on November 9, 2011.

Mark Wings

The premiere of Wings' *Canticles of Rumi* was given by Volti on December 2, 2011 at Mt. Tamalpais Methodist Church, Mill Valley, California.

Allen Cohen

The premiere of *Lion Songs and Dances*, for two cellos, was performed by Duo Cellissimo (Maxine Neuman and Mark Humburg) during the Winter Festival Concert at Fairleigh Dickinson University's Dreyfuss Theater in Madison, New Jersey on December 5, 2011.



Composer Paul A. Epstein.

Jessica Rudman

Daniel D'Addio, faculty member of Central Connecticut State University, premiered a commissioned work by Rudman entitled *My Father Was a Ventriloquist* on December 6, 2011. The work is for trumpet and electronics and includes an original text.

Luke Schwartz

Quiet City premiered Schwartz's *Atlas* for two guitars, cello and percussion at Vaudeville Park in Williamsburg, Brooklyn on December 11, 2011. The ensemble includes Steven Cohen/and Schwartz, guitars; Sarah Mullins, percussion and special guest Mariel Roberts, cello.