

Conservatories: College for Serious Musicians

INTERVIEW WITH JOHN HULING

Director of Admissions, Peabody Conservatory

by Melissa Hartman



JOHN HULING STUDIED TROMBONE AT THE NEW ENGLAND CONSERVATORY OF MUSIC IN BOSTON BEFORE EMBARKING ON A PERFORMANCE CAREER THAT INCLUDED 5 YEARS WITH THE BOSTON POPS AND 22 YEARS WITH THE NATIONAL SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA IN WASHINGTON, DC. NOW DIRECTOR OF ADMISSIONS AT THE PEABODY INSTITUTE OF THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY, HULING MEETS HUNDREDS OF ASPIRING CONSERVATORY STUDENTS EACH YEAR. WE CAUGHT UP WITH HIM DURING

ADMISSIONS AUDITION WEEK TO ASK ABOUT WHAT IT TAKES TO GET IN TO A TOP-NOTCH CONSERVATORY, WHAT IT'S LIKE TO ATTEND, AND WHAT STUDENTS DO AFTER THEY GRADUATE.

How might a student know if conservatory training is right for him or her, versus majoring in music at a college or university?

Students who opt to attend a music program at a university are usually interested in the university experience for any one of several reasons: They might be looking for the opportunity to explore other majors in addition to music. They might want the huge, sprawling campus university experience instead of the smaller, more intimate environment offered by conservatories.

In many cases, but not all, the level of excellence required to get into university music programs would be lower than what is required to be admitted to a conservatory program. Students who are highly skilled and want to focus their studies primarily on a music degree will usually look to the top music institutions.

What are some characteristics that successful Peabody applicants have in common?

Students who attend Peabody come in at a very high level of musical ability. They will have already had years of musical training, ensemble experience, private lessons, and often academic classes in music theory, history, composing, etc. Students with this experience know the competitive nature of music, and a successful student will thrive

on that healthy competition. Peabody students have a reputation for being able to walk the fine line between competing with each other, which is critical to keeping their musical development at a high level, and being collegial and supportive of each other.

Are there common errors or omissions that students make in the application process?

Students who are accepted to Peabody will not only have attained a high level of musical ability but are expected to be strong academic students as well. The curriculum for a music degree candidate requires academic skills above and beyond musical talent. Before they consider applying, students should research the high-caliber music schools in which they are interested and know what is expected of them. Sometimes students apply and audition who are considerably below the acceptance level because of a lack of appreciation for the standards, both musically and academically, at a conservatory like Peabody.

How are auditions for conservatory admissions different from other auditions, such as for high school honor orchestras or state-level ensembles?

I would say the biggest difference is that the faculty are looking not only at their current level of ability but at their potential for growth and



ability to withstand the demands of a conservatory program. Desirable attributes in a Peabody candidate include teachability, musical IQ (can they hear the music rather than just the notes when they work on a piece), ability to respond well to one-on-one instruction, which is paramount at a conservatory, and self-motivation and discipline since music students will spend many hours a day alone in a practice room refining their skills.

Some students will be admitted to more than one conservatory. What do you think are the most important factors to consider in making a decision?

First, who is your private instructor going to be? That relationship is so critical because a studio teacher should not only instruct you on your instrument but also guide you about careers in music and the challenges of the real world after college. They will also care about you as a person, making sure that your health (physical, mental, and emotional) is fully taken into account during your term of study. Successful musicians invariably look back after graduation and credit their private studio teacher as playing a huge role in their life. Second, conservatory curricula can vary quite a bit, so students need to make sure the programs offered match their career or other long-term goals.

Many conservatories offer both degree and diploma/certificate options. Why would a student choose one or the other?

In a nutshell, diplomas focus on the instrument or specialty area and have fewer academic requirements, whereas the degree programs come with up to eight semesters (undergraduate) or four semesters (graduate) of academics such as music theory, music history, ear-training, humanities, etc. When pursuing careers not strictly in performance, a degree will give a graduate more options for teaching or pursuing graduate degrees.

Peabody allows students to earn double degrees through Peabody and JHU. What are the advantages of a double degree?

Both JHU and Peabody have international reputations for excellence. A student who successfully completes a double-degree program will have countless opportunities to use his or her education in top-tier careers. The challenge of the DD program is that to be accepted into it, a student needs to be accepted separately into JHU and successfully pass an audition for Peabody. There are no shortcuts. All students accepted have to meet the exact same high standards as all other applying or auditioning students for both JHU and Peabody. The demands on a student doing the DD are quite high; only a small number qualify, but those students fare very well in the world after graduating.

What do you think are some of the biggest adjustments new students have to make when they begin their studies at Peabody?

If they are an undergraduate, they have the same challenge any student does who leaves home and sets out on their own in the world. Great care is taken at Peabody to be highly sensitive to the emotional needs of students who are not only leaving home but are now in a very focused environment where expectations are high. For international students, all those same challenges apply multiple times over as they adapt to a significant cultural change and possible communication hurdles.

Peabody students are tremendously creative and have a great deal of fun here, but students don't come just to party or take their education lightly. They come to train to be outstanding in their field. The good news is that Peabody has many wonderful programs, faculty, staff, and administrators in place who are committed to helping them achieve their dreams.

What professions do Peabody graduates pursue?

Peabody graduates who succeed in music-related careers are too numerous to list but include members of every major orchestra in the world, faculty members and composers at the most prestigious music conservatories around the country, music critics, agents, business managers, and recording arts and computer music graduates who work at the highest level in industries where technology and music overlap, which is happening more and more in this century.

Graduates who don't end up in careers in music use the high-level skills learned at Peabody to build and run numerous types of industries and businesses. Peabody trains its students to be self-driven, visionary, out-of-the-box thinkers, team players (think section violins) as well as leaders (think concertmaster or principal trumpet). Peabody is currently instituting a forward-thinking curriculum redesign that will emphasize the art of "building" a career, using all the skills necessary to be a 21st-century citizen artist. ■

Learn more about the Peabody Conservatory at peabody.jhu.edu.