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Summer Study Guide 2010: Ace the Summer Study Audition

How to take your best shot at a fulfilling summer.

By Lauren Kay

After hours of researching summer ballet programs, you've finally settled on your top choices. Now only one thing stands between you and an inspiring, worthwhile summer: the summer study audition. You know you have what it takes, but how can you make sure the panel knows too? As with any audition, your success comes down to more than good, solid technique. The impression you make also depends on your attitude, presentation, and state of mind, since panelists look for strong dancers who are also promising students. DM spoke with pros from three top ballet academies for advice on getting ready, staying confident, and letting your potential shine.

Gearing Up: Primed and Prepared

Before the day of the audition, a few practical steps can set you on a positive path. Shelly



Power, associate director of Houston Ballet's Ben Stevenson Academy, advises reading and completing all application materials well in advance, so that you don't arrive flustered or distracted by last-minute logistics. "Having all photos, forms, and fees ready sets the tone of your audition," says Power. "We can see how serious you are about our program." You can also show that you're an invested, informed student by thoroughly researching the program of your choice.

The way you present yourself sends a message about your overall attitude, so consider your appearance carefully. Denise Bolstad, administrative director of the Pacific Northwest Ballet School, advises pulling out your neatest, most professional—and perhaps most traditional—attire. "What dancers wear to an audition is very important," she says. "It should be an outfit that's put-together and clean. And it should make the dancer feel good about themselves." For

Bolstad, that outfit would include pink tights, slippers, and pointe shoes; a well-fitting colored leotard for girls; and traditional black bottoms and a white top for boys. Jewelry and hair clips should be kept to a minimum. “Neatness reflects that you’re an eager student,” says Power, “and someone who understands that a summer ballet program is probably a stricter environment than an open studio or home school.”

Polishing your technique for the audition should be a long-term process, not a down-to-the-wire scramble. Waiting until the week before to brush up will only put you into a panic. “Every day of the school year counts,” says Bolstad. “That technique class on September 1 is as important as the one on January 1.”

Learning the “why” of technique, in addition to the “how,” should also be an ongoing process. “In our auditions, we ask questions like, ‘What is a fondu designed to help you do in center?’ ” says Michael Owen, director of the ballet department at Walnut Hill School. “Young dancers need to know why they’re doing what they’re doing.” By gleaning this knowledge through your continual studies, you’ll walk into the audition confident in body and mind.

In the Room: Staying Centered

Once you enter the audition room, put your training to work—not your imagination. “Students sometimes observe the panelists when they’re speaking with other dancers,” says Power. “They’ll make up stories in their minds as to what we think about them, or why we aren’t treating them the same way. They don’t realize that perhaps we’re discussing something that’s not pertinent to them.” Instead of dwelling on what other people are doing, Owen suggests, “Put on blinders. Just think about yourself in that moment.”

This kind of confidence in your own capabilities—and honesty with yourself about your personal strengths and weaknesses—will be your most helpful tool. “Know yourself,” Bolstad says. “If you’re a quick learner, don’t be afraid to go with the first group in the center. But if you need more time, it’s OK to wait. We’d rather you know what you’re doing.” Owen notes that whether you’re dancing in the center or standing on the sidelines, your demeanor won’t go unnoticed. “Try to put yourself forward and present yourself with assurance,” he says. “If you’re hanging in the back cautiously the whole time, we’ll be suspicious. Are you displeased with your work? This doesn’t reflect well.”

At the same time, overconfidence can also stand in your way. Even if you’re a risk-taker, summer intensive auditions aren’t the place to show off or try out new skills. “Summer study is training, and in that training is control,” Owen says. “Throwing yourself around doesn’t demonstrate clean strength. Less is more here. I’d rather see you do two clean, focused pirouettes than wind up and try for more than what you’re capable of.” Power adds, “We’re looking for quality. Pay attention to what’s being asked and get the combination quickly. Don’t do things that you’re not used to doing, especially younger students newly on pointe. Show that you’re gutsy—but responsible.”

Promising, Not Perfect

On the whole, panelists are looking for potential, not perfection. Their goal in taking you on for the summer is to help you grow; show them that you have the same commitment to yourself. “If I see facility and an eagerness to learn, I’m going to take a chance on you,” says Power. “We may look at the body and say, ‘The feet aren’t great, but what a beautiful artist!’ Your eye is drawn to that person. Beyond anything, show that you love what you are doing.”

Quick Tips for the Summer Study Audition

1. Warm up before the audition: “Depending on how many people are there, we may not do a long barre, so be ready to dance at the get-go,” Shelly Power says.
2. If you’re injured, mention it quietly to the panelists before the audition. Adjust or avoid steps that could worsen your injury. An audition is not worth risking your health for.
3. If you know the panelists, it’s fine to say hello politely, but they won’t have time for an in-depth conversation. Don’t take their professionalism as an insult.
4. When it comes to asking questions, pay attention to the panelists’ vibe. They may ask at the end of each combination if you “have it.” Raise your hand then, not later on.
5. Fulfill the simple tasks asked of you, like staying in numerical order or being ready to go in two counts of eight.
6. Be respectful of other students auditioning.
7. Don’t hang on barres or stand behind another group of dancers while waiting for your turn.
8. Don’t talk during class. “If someone is talking in an audition, taking it casually, you can tell that they won’t work hard during a summer course,” says Denise Bolstad.
9. Thank the accompanist and panelists.
10. “It’s hard, but try to approach class from a relaxed point of view,” says Michael Owen. “It’s just a class! Dancers get so worked up that they don’t clearly demonstrate what they’re capable of.” —LK

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Pictured: Students at an audition for Houston Ballet’s Ben Stevenson Academy. Photo by Bruce Bennett, courtesy Houston Ballet.