



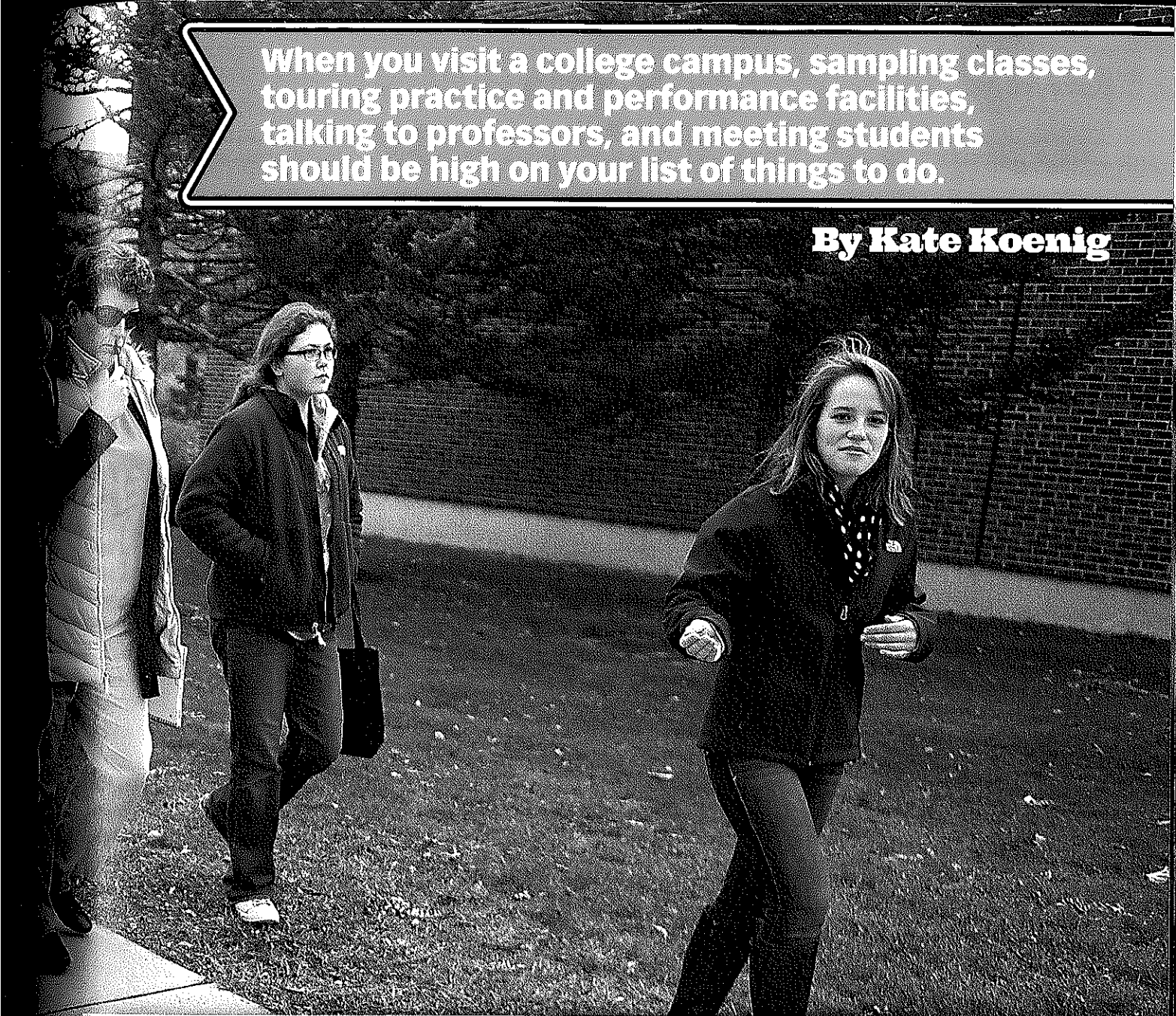
## PART 2

In the second part of In Tune's Best Music Schools special report, we focus on a critical step in the college decision process: visiting campus.

# The VALUE of the VISIT

When you visit a college campus, sampling classes, touring practice and performance facilities, talking to professors, and meeting students should be high on your list of things to do.

**By Kate Koenig**



## CHOOSING THE RIGHT COLLEGE

may seem like an intimidating task. The years you spend in higher education can shape countless aspects of your life and are the stepping-stone to the professional world. How can you make such a big decision with confidence that you've chosen the school that's right for you?

The answer is complex, but one way to start is to visit the schools you're considering. You can read books and do online research, but there's nothing like seeing a college's classrooms, dorms, instructors, dining halls, and students in person. If you're interested in music,

you'll want to check out performance, rehearsal, and recording facilities, too. And you don't have to wait until you're a high school junior or senior to visit a campus. "Students should visit with plenty of time before they're ready to apply so they can take in [the experience] without feeling pressured," says Dr. Joseph Pignato, Associate Professor of music at the State University of New York at Oneonta.

If you're planning a campus visit, you may have some questions. When is the best time of year to visit? How much time should you expect to spend on campus? Should you go on a scheduled tour or just walk around? Who should you meet with when you're there? How many schools should you visit per trip? There's no "one size fits all" answer to any of these questions, but one



thing is certain: The better you prepare, the more valuable your visit will be.

Alan Watson, an Administrative Coordinator at New York University's Clive Davis Institute of Recorded Music, advises students to start by exploring each school's website and writing down some specific questions for the faculty, tour guides, and students. "It helps you get a deeper experience when you visit," he says. "Knowing the [school's] mission, and that of other similar institutions, really helps an applicant get perspective on the best fit for you."

Start by investigating the degree programs, courses, and ensembles that make up the music department and see how they line up with your study interests. Maybe you want to major in classical and do jazz on the side; are there ensembles you can join? If you want to focus on performance but are also interested in composing, will the program allow you to do both? There are other fields to consider as well, such as music business, audio engineering (recording and production in the studio), musicology (the study of music and culture) and more. Research the school website and familiarize yourself with the

Vandercook College of Music



course catalog, then make it a point to meet with faculty and/or students in the relevant departments on your itinerary. "Even applicants who already believe [a school is] their top choice can benefit from taking a look at the courses offered," Watson says. "It's a great quick way to gain more perspective than the average visitor."

But the course catalog won't tell you everything. Learning about the people teaching the classes can be even more important. "Research the department and even the faculty [you] want to meet with," Pignato advises. "The more you know, the better you'll feel about your decisions."

You may also want to look beyond the

class offerings and explore student clubs, ensembles, and off-campus opportunities to listen to and play music. Dr. David Fish, Chair of the Music Department at Catawba College in Salisbury, North Carolina, recommends that you try to schedule your trip so that you can attend some student performances. "There's no substitute for seeing students who are engaged in the creative process," he explains. "You can also see how they put what they're learning in class into practice and get a sense of the level of equipment that's available to them."

### THE TOUR AND BEYOND

For most high school students, the campus visit centers on a guided tour, typically led by a highly enthusiastic student at the college. Most schools like to keep tour groups to a manageable size (like 10-15 students and their families), so it's best to contact the school and schedule a time for your tour.

A typical campus tour will show off the school's high points and offer some insight into the campus culture through the eyes of its students. While most tours are scripted, they also leave room for individual visitors to explore their interests. "You can always ask to take a look at specific departments—including the music department," says Yolanda Sun, who led campus tours as a music business major at SUNY Onondaga.

Don't hesitate to ask questions of your



Yale School of Music



## PART 2

guide or any faculty, staff, or students you meet along the way. "There's no such thing as a dumb question," says Andrew Watson, Admissions Liaison at Chicago's VanderCook College of Music. "We are expecting to be drilled with questions—and those questions tell us that the student is engaged."

Prepare to do a lot of walking: Wear comfortable shoes and dress appropriately for being outside for several hours

to aid music students and their parents. "They won't necessarily give you a good sense of who teaches at the school, what the atmosphere in the classroom feels like, or how students relate in class and in ensembles. Sitting in on classes and getting a lesson are really important ways to get an insider's view of a school."

"Group tours are great," adds Watson, "but sometimes a student coming on their own will get more personal time with teachers and in classes."

If you plan on attending a class, scheduling ahead of time is especially important. "You can contact the admis-

performers, clinicians, and adjudicators; they travel frequently."

If possible, Pignato suggests visiting early in the week, "when most students, faculty, and classes are around and in session." While most colleges hold night and early morning classes, midday and early afternoon sessions usually have the most activity.

Another advantage of visiting classrooms is that you give people in the music department a chance to know you. When you meet, be respectful, but don't worry about trying to impress everyone you see. "Faculty and admission officers aren't looking for perfection," Weidlein says. "They're seeking students who are open to feedback and show signs of being able to learn and grow at their school."

Of course, you and your family will have its own calendar to consider, and it's not always possible to visit when classes are in session. Many colleges, universities, and conservatories also offer summer music programs for high school (and sometimes middle school students). Though they won't give you access to regular college classes, these programs can be valuable for the music lessons they provide and the experience of spending time on campus—especially when combined with a visit during the academic year.

### ON THE ROAD

As you start to map out your travel plans, you may discover that several schools on your list are in the same area. It's tempting to try to cover them all in a single day, but it's not always practical.

A campus tour can take two or three hours. If you want to have any time to walk around on your own or visit classes, that's another two to three hours. And if you hope to see some student performances or other extracurricular activities, you'll probably need to be there in the evening, too. If the school is more than a few hours drive from home, talk to your parents about staying overnight. But remember, this not only adds cost; a weekday trip



Catawba College student Damon Atkins headlines an Artist Development Program showcase.

in whatever the climate may be. And if you're traveling with someone who might have trouble with the walking distance, see if the school offers wheelchair loans or rentals. Bring snacks, but try to sample the food at the campus student center or at a dining hall, as well.

### IN THE CLASSROOM

Even if your tour guide shows you the music department's facilities, simply walking through the rooms will only tell part of the story. "Don't limit yourself to the tours," says Barbra Weidlein, founder of MajoringinMusic.com, a site designed

sions office about tours and special events, but call the music department directly when arranging to meet faculty, attend classes, or hear ensembles," Pignato says.

The school's academic calendar, which is usually available online, can help you schedule your visit. Obviously, you should try not to go during school breaks, but it's also best to avoid visiting when school is in session but classes aren't—for example, the weeks devoted to midterms, finals, and orientation. "Always check with schools before you visit," Weidlein says. "Find out if the classes and faculty you want to see will be available to you. Most faculty members are also active



may mean your missing school and your folks taking time off work.

Whether the trip is long or short, the last thing you want to do is get lost on the way. GPS or online directions will usually get you to the campus gates, but may not help once you're on school grounds. If you've never visited a campus before, you may be surprised by the sheer size and complexity of some colleges and universities. Buildings can be miles apart. Get a copy of the campus map and study it before you leave home. If you've set up several appointments, budget time to make the required trips across campus.

You should also consider bringing your instrument, especially if you've arranged to sit in on a rehearsal or scheduled lesson. "Music students should always bring their instruments for visits," Watson says. "You never know who you will get to play for!"

Although some high school students may feel shy about doing so, Weidlein recommends trying to jam with some enrolled students. "[It] is a great way to learn more about how students relate at any given school."

Carrying an instrument is easy if you're driving to the campus. If you're

flying, confirm the airline's rules for bringing instruments onboard. If you play a large instrument like a double bass, baritone saxophone, or tuba, speak to the music department to see if you'll be able to rent one for the day (but don't forget to bring your own bow or mouthpiece).

If you plan to live in the dorms, your school of choice will not only be your center for education but also your home for a few years. In addition to school housing and campus facilities, a good portion of your time will likely be spent in the surrounding area.

Are there places for students to hang out that align with your interests? Are there a variety of music venues and stores? Live music venues can range from coffee shops to theaters and concert halls, and can serve as a source of entertainment, a potential performing spot, and a place to socialize with other artists and musicians. If your school has a strong music program, odds are it will show itself in the community, so it pays to get a glimpse of the local scene when you're in the area.

### AFTER YOU GET HOME

With so much to do and see, spending a day—or even a few hours—on a college

campus can result in sensory overload, especially if you take the tour, visit some classrooms, and check out the surrounding area. After visiting a couple of colleges, the details can start to blur when you get home.

"Bring something on which to take notes about your experience, including your gut reactions," Weidlein advises. "Review those notes when you get home and add anything that will be helpful for later on." She also recommends taking pictures of the places you visit on campus, which can help jog your memory as you evaluate your notes.

### DOUBLE BACK

How many times should you visit? Some administrators say a single visit is enough, but if you're really interested in a school, a second trip can offer more detail and can be a signal to the admissions board that you're really excited about going there. "Multiple visits are definitely recommended, but not always necessary," Watson says. "Visiting multiple times just gives a more clear idea of whether the college is the right fit."

Although a second visit can mean more expense (especially if the campus is far from home), it is especially valuable if you've already been accepted. "Compared to what four years will cost, it can be worthwhile and even cost-effective in the long-run," Weidlein says. "Many schools offer a weekend for accepted students and provide overnight lodging in a dorm with a student in a similar area of music. Some schools will actually help pay your way [if you've been accepted]. Think carefully about what you hope to gain by going back, so that you return home with the kind of information that will help you make your final decision."

Finally, try to give each campus you visit an equal chance. You may find that a school that wasn't very high on your list before your visit may become one of your top choices after you've spent some time on campus. "Keep an open mind," Weidlein concludes. "You'll learn much more that way." **T**