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Surviving the cut: Jessica Sindell goes up against 105 others for Oregon Symphony principal flute

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By David Stabler, The Oregonian

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PORTLAND, OREGON - January 16, 2012 - Jessica Sindell practices for hours at a time in her spartan apartment in downtown Portland. Sindell, 22, just started as the Oregon Symphony's new principal flute. Just out of college, she's the youngest principal here in 25 years. Beth Nakamura/The Oregonian

22-year-old Jessica Sindell is the Oregon Symphony's new principal flute gallery (11 photos)



Jessica Sindell was about to step on a treadmill at a San Francisco gym when her phone rang. She saw the area code: 503.

Portland, she thought.

Her heart pounded. "Hello?" she said.

Weeks earlier, over four intense days in September, Sindell had competed against 105 other flutists from around the nation for the coveted position of principal flute with a major orchestra, in this case, the **Oregon Symphony**. As the leader of a three-person section, the chief flutist gets the solos and the bows, the money and the kudos. The orchestra has 16 section leaders, or principals.

Fresh out of music school, Sindell had never auditioned for a professional orchestra, and the odds of her landing a principal job were slim. Not unheard of, though. Orchestras large and small, including those in Philadelphia, Cleveland and St. Louis, follow a tradition of hiring graduates straight out of conservatories.

But if she got it, Sindell, 22, would be the youngest principal the Oregon Symphony has hired in 25 years.

A lot of job interviews are grueling -- fielding questions, thinking quickly and clearly, appearing confident. Orchestra interviews are grueling in a different way. Employers don't care how well you speak or manage a potential crisis. It's all about your instrument. Serious contenders will have practiced thousands of hours. They possess the concentration of a sniper and the nerves of an aerialist. And they must convince a handful of unseen critics -- listening behind a screen -- that they need look no further. You are the answer to their prayers.

Out of 100 candidates, two or three may be worthy of the job. Besides flute, the most exposed and pressure-packed chairs in an orchestra tend to be concertmaster, principal trumpet, principal

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horn and principal percussion. These positions have the greatest number of fast, delicate, difficult or dangerous solos.

Tradition says it takes 10 years to become a good principal. Tradition also says your first year feels like 10.

Sindell -- blond, outgoing and quick to laugh -- wanted the job, badly. She grew up in Cleveland, and chose the flute because she loved to sing and the flute sounded closest to her own voice.

She decided to audition for the Oregon Symphony and its adventurous music director, Carlos Kalmar, after reading the [rave reviews for the orchestra's debut in Carnegie Hall last May](#). Suddenly, the orchestra was hot on a national level, but she was competing against many more seasoned flutists, some with dozens of auditions under their belts.

Playing in an orchestra was the goal she kept her eyes on through high school and four nerve-racking, undergraduate years at the prestigious [Eastman School of Music in Rochester, N.Y.](#) Her teacher at Eastman, the acclaimed Bonita Boyd, told her school can teach only so much. Experience comes from an orchestra. You're a principal player, she told Sindell. Audition only for those jobs.

Still, her aunt, Carol Sindell, a former violin prodigy, student of the legendary Jascha Heifetz and a longtime professor at Portland State University, counseled her niece to keep her expectations realistic. If the audition doesn't lead to a job, she said, think of it as good experience.

A piece flutists fear

At 11 a.m. Sept. 13, Sindell walked into the sanctuary at First United Methodist Church in Southwest Portland. Black screens blocked her view of a committee of orchestra players. Sindell was careful to stay on the carpeted path to a music stand on the platform. Carpeting muffles the sound of heels, preventing listeners from detecting the candidate's gender. Blind auditions are routine in the early rounds.

On the music stand was a piece many flutists fear: "Prelude to the Afternoon of the Faun" by Claude Debussy. The music begins with a slow, soft, descending chromatic scale that conveys the feeling of a faun playing his pan-pipes alone in the woods. On paper, it looks childishly easy, but it has to sound delicate and improvised, a hush of perfectly even notes that reveals a player's ability to control tone, vibrato, pitch and breath.

She played it once. A voice asked her to repeat it, differently, with less vibrato, the wavering of pitch that adds richness to the tone. She played it again, plus a few other short excerpts from well-known orchestra works. She played a total of five minutes. Professionals can tell within seconds if a player has promise.

Sindell waited in a hallway with four other flutists in her group to hear whether she'd made the second round. The administrator called out a single number and name. Sindell tried not to yelp with joy. She was moving on to round two with 24 others.

Two days later, she played the flute excerpt from the slow movement of Sergei Prokofiev's "Classical Symphony." The passage begins on a quiet, high note and proceeds to a series of difficult octave jumps. Again, tuning and breath control are keys to nailing it.

More waiting to see whether she was one of six finalists. Again, they called her name. The pressure increased.

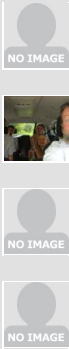
For the finals, they moved to the Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall, the orchestra's home, and removed the screens. Only at this point did Kalmar join the other listeners. As she stood in the spotlight, Sindell tried not to look into the vast, dark hall. She didn't want to see who was out there.

The next few minutes were a blur, she says, but an exciting blur. She loved the thrill, playing on the edge, the attention under pressure. But when it was over, nothing. No applause, no leaping up, no bravos.

Her head whirled. She knew she'd played well, but the committee's silence baffled her. That's it, she told herself. She wasn't getting a call back.

The super finals

But, they did call her back, one of three in a not-unusual "super final." They wanted to test her ability to sight-read, that is, play music she hadn't seen before, to test her musical reflexes. Orchestra rehearsals move quickly and players need to process an enormous amount of music from concert to concert. Sindell isn't experienced at sight reading, she says, but she got through it without major mishaps.




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More waiting. Then Kalmar walked in.

Nobody won, he declared, but he was interested in two people. Sindell was one. He asked her to come back to Portland in a few weeks to sit in the orchestra and play two concerts. It's not an unusual request and happens when there's a dead heat and the committee wants to know things that can surface only by sitting in the chair, such as matching pitches with her woodwind colleagues and how a player responds to the conductor and to pressure.

Sindell thought the concerts went well.

She returned to the San Francisco Conservatory, where she was enrolled in a master's degree program in flute performance. More weeks passed. Every day, she called her parents. Do you think I got it?

And then, just before Thanksgiving, came the phone call in the gym. In her workout clothes, she held the phone to her ear.

"Hello?"

"Hello, this is Carlos."

"Wait, could you hold on?" She ran to the end of the gym where it was quieter. He asked whether there was a better time to talk.

"No! No! This is just fine."

"I want you to be my principal player."

A "killer talent"

Sindell fits Kalmar's pattern of shaping young players to his taste in sound and musicianship.

"Jessica is an absolute killer talent," he says. "Great musical skills, good instincts and her technical capabilities are ready for prime time. The reason I chose her was the same reason I chose (former concertmaster) Jun Iwasaki several years ago. The possibilities I see in Jessica developing together with her colleagues are excellent. It's good to have such a talented 'baby.'"

Since arriving in Portland earlier this month, Sindell has rented an apartment within walking distance of Schnitzer Hall and has three concerts behind her.

"Carlos knew exactly what he wanted from the flute in terms of when I should take out vibrato, what kind of colors and effects I should have in my solos," she says of last weekend's performances of Franz Joseph Haydn's "The Creation." "I am feeling so at ease as I work on blending with the wind section players."

"She has a captivating sound above all else," says Niel DePonte, the orchestra's principal percussion. "As she grows as an artist, just like all of us, she will have more and more to say. Her upside potential as an artist is off the charts."

Sindell realizes she's young, she says, but hopes that's a strength.

"I'm open-minded," she told Kalmar on the phone that day. "My job is to do what you want. I want you to mold me into your own principal player."

-- **David Stabler**

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