

The Audition

Mike Tetreault has spent an entire year preparing obsessively for this moment. He's put in 20-hour workdays, practiced endlessly, and shut down his personal life. Now the percussionist has 10 minutes to impress a Boston Symphony Orchestra selection committee. A single mistake and it's over. A flawless performance and he could join one of the world's most renowned orchestras.

BY JENNIE DORRIS

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Photo by Sean Hagwell

It's close to 5 o'clock on a late afternoon in January when Mike Tetreault, a tall, lanky redhead, turns off Massachusetts Avenue and enters Symphony Hall through a side door. He checks in with the security guard and then heads for the basement, wrestling with more than 150 pounds of gear (mallets, snare drums, tambourines) in a backpack and a roller bag. The rest of the instruments he'll need tonight will be supplied by the Boston Symphony Orchestra. He's an hour and a half early.

The basement of Symphony Hall is nothing like the velvety opulence upstairs. It's cold down here, with concrete walls and harsh fluorescent lights. As Tetreault signs in at a table and waits to get into a practice room, he notices the oversize instrument travel cases that are strewn everywhere, ready to safeguard harps and timpani during symphony tours. Tetreault, a Colorado-based percussionist, has already survived a

nerve-wracking round of cuts to get this opportunity tonight to audition for one of two openings at the world-renowned BSO. He reads the list of the other contenders and is pleased to see a bunch of names he doesn't know. *Younger*, he reassures himself. *Less experienced*. Hopefully that's an advantage for him.

Tetreault has been working and practicing for this audition ever since Facebook, the online message boards, and the trade magazines began buzzing a year ago about *two* BSO spots opening up at the same time, one because of a retirement and one because a percussionist had been denied tenure, a polite way of saying he'd been shown the door. Tetreault knew all about this second opening, because the guy who'd gotten the ax was actually his former schoolmate. Now, in his friend's misfortune, he saw the opportunity he'd been working for his entire career.

At 33, Tetreault was putting in 100-hour weeks on a patchwork of gigs he'd pieced together — simultaneously serving as the music director at the Galilee Baptist Church in Denver; teaching at the University of Colorado; and working various gigs with the Boulder Philharmonic, the Fort Collins Symphony, the Colorado Ballet, the Colorado Symphony, and Opera Colorado. Yes, he was doing what he loved for a living, but when he added it all up, it was barely a living at all. He'd made \$55,000 the previous year, pretty good — until you factored in all the hours, and the fact that the salary had to support two since his wife, Rachel, had been laid off in 2010 from a communications job with the Colorado Symphony. The couple was living in a 625-square-foot one-bedroom apartment.

Waiting for his practice room in Symphony Hall, Tetreault reminds himself that if he can win a spot with the BSO, his very existence will be transformed. He's aware of the challenges — the selection process is brutal, and even if he lands a job, there's no guarantee he'll keep it (as his former schoolmate learned). But the orchestra is a godsend for the very few who make it. The positions pay more than \$100,000 a year. You get health benefits. You get vacation. You get to lead a normal life. Which is why the BSO is one of the handful of orchestras for which musicians the world over will drop everything to scramble for a job. Like Tetreault, they'll practice endlessly for months, sacrificing family and personal time. They have to.

The classical audition ranks among the world's toughest job interviews. Each applicant has 10 minutes at most to play in a way so memorable that he stands out among a lineup of other world-class musicians. Tetreault has prestigious degrees from the University of Rochester's Eastman School of Music and the Royal Academy of Music in London, and he's studied under the world-renowned performer Christopher Lamb, but at his audition, the only thing that will matter is how he performs in the most pressure-packed few minutes of his life. If he squeezes his glockenspiel mallet too hard, choking the sound, or if he overthinks the dotted rhythm or fails to adjust to the BSO's oddly scaled xylophone bars and misses a few notes, the whole thing will be over. Mark Volpe, managing director of the Boston Symphony, sums up the audition process this way: "I want someone to be so brilliant that there's no question."

At last, a practice space opens up for Tetreault. Percussionists warm up on a glockenspiel for 10 minutes in one practice room, then move to the next for the xylophone. As they get ready, the auditioners are battling their nerves. The calmest eat bananas, which are supposedly full of natural beta blockers. Some are buried in headphones. One viola player swears a secret weapon helped him win a place in a prestigious orchestra — masturbating immediately before his performance.

When Tetreault's turn to audition finally arrives, a proctor appears and leads him upstairs to the stage, where the lights are hot and bright. The first thing he notices is that the floor slopes slightly forward. The second thing he notices is the sound he hears. There's a lot of rustling — the jury is restless. But he can't see anyone. A screen is separating him from the audition committee, concealing his identity to ensure impartial judging. This anonymity has helped women and minorities break into the field, but now, up on stage, Tetreault finds it disconcerting. The proctor announces his assigned number and Tetreault quickly studies the mallet instruments he'll be playing. Though the symphony has previously sent an e-mail telling him the width of the bars, he doesn't know how they'll react when he strikes them.



Pressure cooker: Generations of musicians have warmed up for BSO auditions in Symphony Hall's tiny basement practice rooms. *(Photo by Matt Kalinowski)*

Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Cleveland, and Chicago are the country's five most historically important symphony orchestras, but even among them, the BSO stands alone. With a budget of roughly \$80 million, and a staggering \$387 million endowment (about twice New York's), the BSO might be America's most financially stable orchestra.

The BSO was founded in 1881, and, of course, owns Symphony Hall, one of the world's finest acoustic spaces. No matter how softly the 94-member orchestra plays or how far back you're sitting, the sound

blooms warm and clear. There's the BSO's Tanglewood Music Center, which has taught 30 percent of the musicians who currently play in the bigger American orchestras. Its Boston Pops, meanwhile, has not only a national audience, but also a number of lucrative national sponsorships. In sum, the BSO is a destination orchestra even for musicians already working in the Big Five. This year alone, a violist left the Philadelphia Orchestra and a bass trombonist departed the New York Philharmonic to take jobs in Boston.

And for percussionists like Tetreault, the BSO is the home of legends. Those classic drumsticks that students get for their first lesson are stamped with the name of Vic Firth — Boston's timpanist for 50 years. The white-felted mallets perched atop the bass drum in every band room in America bear the name of Tom Gauger, the BSO's bass drum player for 45 years. Those crisp castanets that run \$140 and can cut through an entire opera orchestra to accompany the sultry *Carmen*? They're Frank Epstein's. He played with Boston for 43 years.

Mike Tetreault found out about the BSO openings in early 2011. From that point forward, he prepared for his audition obsessively. During one 10-day stretch, he practiced 20 hours a day. Because he and his wife, Rachel, didn't want to waste the precious few minutes they got to see each other during the week, they arranged regular meetings to deal with everyday concerns like finances and schedules.

Tetreault couldn't rehearse in his tiny apartment, so he took over the Baptist church where he worked, splitting up his collection of instruments — glockenspiel, xylophone, marimba, three differently sized snare drums, four pairs of crash cymbals, a bass drum, eight tambourines, four tom-toms, four timpani, and three triangles — among the chapel, the choir room, and a smaller classroom. Each space had different ceiling heights, enabling him to hear his sound in different ways.



"Give me success or take this desire away from me. One of the two." — Mike Tetreault, Percussionist (Photo by Sean Hagwell)

The physical demands of preparing for the audition were intense, and Tetreault ate like an athlete: protein drinks with kale, lots of brown rice and vegetables, no caffeine despite rarely getting enough sleep. Then there were the hand stretches he'd do before picking up a stick in the morning and going to bed at night.

Throughout that year, almost every night was the same for Tetreault: After a full day of work that also - included a practice session or two, he'd arrive at the church and turn off his phone (thereby frustrating Rachel, who couldn't get in touch with him). Then he'd begin his practice, watched constantly by two people — the church's first-ever pastor and the pastor's wife, whose portraits hung side by side on a wall in the chapel. When things went well, Tetreault felt he could see the pastor smiling. When he missed a note, he found himself sneaking looks at the wife and her furrowed brow.

At 7 p.m., he'd carry his 5-inch-deep snare drum into the church's classroom. There, he'd pick up a pair of hickory drumsticks and tap softly on the drum head, making the bottom snares buzz. Sometimes his right wrist would flick slightly harder than the left, producing a sound not unlike a woman limping in high heels. Tetreault concentrated harder, straining to catch and then eliminate these imperfections from his playing. When an accent popped too much, cracking and towering over the other notes, he'd release the weight of the stick as though dribbling a basketball. And just in case he was missing something, he'd record his practices, listening to each of them three times to make sure he was slicing the beats into precise halves, quarters, and sixteenths — slicing like a surgeon rather than a butcher.

During rest periods he'd continue practicing in his mind — singing excerpts and visualizing his hands executing a perfect xylophone lick. In the quiet moments, he discovered an unwanted accompaniment — the buzzing of fluorescent lights. *Concert B-flat*, he thought to himself.

At 9 p.m., he'd change drums and change rooms, going for a higher ceiling to let his tones expand, more like how the stage sounds, echoes and all. He'd switch off the snares, turning the drum into a hollow tom-tom, and use thicker sticks to balance the drum's hollow ring with a groovy, swinging sound.

At the end of each night, he'd record a batch of excerpts that he'd eventually send to Christopher Lamb, his teacher and the principal percussionist of the New York Philharmonic. Lamb would then follow up with e-mailed notes, such as — in the case of Ravel's *Boléro*, a piece with a famously repetitive snare-drum part — "You're too young, this is too fast for this old guy ... relax, be more inviting."

At midnight, Tetreault would arrive back at home. Rachel would be sound asleep, and he'd sink into bed beside her. A few hours later he'd rise and begin the day with a 3-mile run. And the whole cycle would start again.

One reason there were two openings rather than just one at the BSO was the retirement of percussionist Frank Epstein, who joined the orchestra in 1968 at the age of 26, which was then considered extremely

young. Most members back then had at least five years' experience with an orchestra before making it to Boston.

After more than four decades with the BSO, retirement crept up on Epstein. He'd begun thinking about it in 2010, but it wasn't until 2011 that he finally got tired of fighting the pain he felt while performing — it moved through his feet and knees, up to his wrists and shoulders. His last two concerts that year looked perfectly programmed for a percussionist's farewell — one, Beethoven's Ninth Symphony at Tanglewood, the other, Berlioz's *Requiem* at Symphony Hall. But the Beethoven concert was canceled because of Hurricane Irene. And then a conductor fell ill and the Berlioz program was changed to an evening of Mozart, meaning Epstein wouldn't be needed.

Epstein has visited Symphony Hall only once since his 2011 season, and for just one piece, the premiere of John Harbison's Sixth Symphony. "I haven't gone to a concert, because I couldn't bring myself to go back to that," he says. "I still need the space. I couldn't stand it if someone picked up the cymbals and didn't do a good job. It kind of terrifies me."

Some of that may simply be professional pride, but some of it may reflect his belief that younger musicians are moving the music in new directions. Epstein says the current audition process rewards a different kind of player. There used to be at least a little room for flair while auditioning, he says. Back when he went before the judges, he got creative and performed a piece he'd composed for bass drum and cymbals.

These days, he says, "The technique on the instruments has grown, but what hasn't grown is the innate musicianship, the interpretive abilities of players. Sometimes that is the most difficult thing to measure in an audition."



want someone to be so brilliant that there's no question." — Mark Volpe, BSO managing director (Photo by Michael J. Lutch)

And the audition process isn't the final time a musician finds himself judged. A player who wins an audition is put on a one-year probation period. At the end of that year, the committee that hired him reconvenes to evaluate his performance and vote on whether to award tenure. From September 1980 to March 2010, the BSO held 119 auditions, and more than 90 percent of the musicians hired from them wound up receiving tenure.

"No one wants to go through a probation trial period and not give the guy tenure," Volpe, the BSO's managing director, says. "You want to avoid that. That's why the audition is almost sacred — it's almost a sacred ritual."

Mike Tetreault attended the Eastman School of Music from 1996 to 2001, and for two of those years he shared an 80-square-foot practice room with Lee Vinson. The two friends spruced up their space with a mini fridge and a lounge chair, and in their spare time they hung out with the same crowd. They were also unusually serious about their careers. In 2007, two years after graduating from Eastman, Vinson won a percussion job with the BSO. Though reserved by nature, he couldn't help feeling as though a dream had come true.

Vinson moved into a \$1,900-per-month, two-bedroom South End brownstone, a fourth-floor walkup with hardwood floors and a view of Boston's skyline. He lived with his girlfriend, Tamsin Johnston, an oboist. He loved the history in Boston. He loved walking past the row homes, so different from his native Alabama. He was 28, and he had the best job in the world.

But almost immediately there were problems. "In the beginning, I was a deer in the headlights," Vinson says. He was stung by some of the criticism directed at his playing. He tried to block it from his mind, but found it difficult. "Then the performance anxiety comes back because these people aren't telling me what they think," he says. "They just want to glare at you. I mean, really, you just want to turn around and scowl at me and that's supposed to help fix this whole thing?"

At the end of Vinson's first year with the BSO, he fell one vote shy of earning tenure, so he was put on another year of probation. He started asking his colleagues how to "fix" his playing, but one person would tell him to try one thing and another would suggest he try something else entirely. "You'd add it up and it didn't make sense," he says. BSO timpanist Timothy Genis says, "During this time we're talking with him, no one really knew what to tell him. Instinctually, it just wasn't quite there. It wasn't ever like, 'That sounded incredible. That was perfect.' Which you should be able to say about your colleague at least once in his career."

At the end of his second year, the audition committee met again, but by then, two of the members who'd supported Vinson's hiring in the first place had retired. He again wound up one vote short, and was again put on probation. "There was something so finite that wasn't quite right about what he was doing," Genis

says. "His timing wasn't quite right on this one. His balance wasn't quite right on this one. It confused a lot of people."

At the end of his third year, in 2010, there was another meeting, this time at Tanglewood during the summer. Vinson's friend Dan Bauch, another percussionist, was granted tenure that day, and everyone was offering congratulations. Then Vinson was brought in, and a few members of the percussion section and the personnel manager were waiting for him. Vinson remembers someone saying they would help him during "this transition period." He hadn't made the cut.

Mike Tetreault was one of 294 percussionists who sent a résumé to the BSO in the fall of 2011 for the two openings. Rumors circulated that the applicant pool included a number of heavy hitters, including two candidates from Big Five orchestras, former players from Chicago and Cleveland.

That October, the BSO contacted Tetreault with instructions for preparing for his live audition in January 2012. But first, he'd have to make the preliminary cut. He was given a month to submit a videotaped recording of 14 musical excerpts, all of which had to be recorded without a break, and without him leaving the frame of the camera during the take. He could make no mistakes during the 10-minute-long segment. If the BSO was suitably impressed with his offering, he'd be allowed to formally audition in person.

For about a week around Thanksgiving, Tetreault rehearsed eight hours a day with the Colorado Symphony, then drove 30 miles to practice at the university in Boulder. He would use the university's recital hall from 6 p.m. to 3 a.m. to work on the excerpts. After a week of recording, he was at last satisfied with his audition tape, and sent it off to Boston.

On December 3 he got the e-mail he was hoping for: Of the 74 people who'd sent in tapes, 35 had been invited to audition, and he was one of them. In a little more than a month, he'd be auditioning live in Symphony Hall.

As he neared his visit to Boston, Tetreault scheduled a "hard day" to simulate the audition. He didn't eat at all. He moved heavy things around in order to wear out his shoulders, back, and hands. Then he played through all of his music without warming up.

It was in the last week of August 2010 that Lee Vinson, unsuccessful in three tries at tenure, lost his job with the BSO. Unfortunately for him, he'd just signed a yearlong lease that started on September 1. The symphony offers a final year of performing to players who don't make tenure, so Vinson, unsure of how to make the rent otherwise, took it.

When his final season ended on August 31, 2011, Vinson packed up everything in his brownstone and moved to Alexandria, Virginia, where he now lives in a modest two-bedroom apartment. The second bedroom is full of instruments, including two snare drums, a xylophone, a glockenspiel, and a marimba. He has neighbors above and below him, but thankfully, they don't mind his constant practicing.



Happier Days: From left, Lee Vinson with BSO double bass player Lawrence Wolfe in 2007.

It's March when I visit Vinson at his apartment, and the place is impossibly clean. Sliding doors lead to a concrete patio that shows no signs of use. For a musician, his home is strangely quiet. There's no background music, and he doesn't play a single note during my time with him. When there's a break in the conversation, we listen to foot-steps and the children playing on the sidewalk outside.

He tells me that he hates the small chandelier that hangs over the dining room table because it blocks the view of his antique drum collection, then he begins to pace all around me. There's an edge of panic and uncertainty to his voice, but for the most part he's remaining calm. It's when we start to talk about the audition committee that he quickly loses his composure and heads to the bathroom. I hear him crying. The idea that he was betrayed, that his dream was taken away from him, still affects him profoundly. He comes back, visibly shaken. "I'm not going back up there," he says when he recovers. Then, in the next beat, he says, "I miss Boston dearly. I worked harder than anybody there..."

The time he spent with the BSO after being told he'd lost his job with the orchestra was "the worst year ever," he continues. "I was like a fetus on the couch. Balled up bawling for weeks on end."

He's had six auditions since then, but during all of them, his focus has slipped and the negative voices have crept in. He'll look down at his five-octave Yamaha marimba and not even see it. When he's given three

minutes of Bach to play at an audition, he pays attention not to the simple, beautiful chord changes, nor to the way the dark rosewood resonates so earthily on the low notes, but to the voices in his head: *What if I mess up? What are they thinking? What am I thinking? Is this what they want to hear? Is this going well? What if I missed a note? Oh God, I'm lost. It just fell apart. I'm done.*

He's aware of what's happening. He knows his nerves are affecting his playing. But once the doubt sets in, it messes with the most fundamental part of his job: his timing. Like a baseball player who can no longer throw accurately, Vinson's the victim of "yips" that attack his basic execution. With each audition he worries that he's out to prove something, to prove that even though he was fired from the BSO, he's better than everyone else. "That's some dangerous stuff. I try not to admit that some of that exists, but I think it does." Dangerous? "I don't have any hair left. I feel like I'm 40," he explains. "It takes that level of pouring your life into it for what feels like a lottery sometimes."

Anonymous behind a screen, Mike Tetreault readies himself to begin his Symphony Hall audition. But just before he starts playing, he's overcome with a sense that something's not right. He doesn't like being alone on the stage, behind a screen, without being able to see anyone else. He can hear people shifting impatiently in their seats. As a seasoned auditioner, he's always found this moment to be the most unnerving. It's not how he experiences music. It should be collaborative.

It's time to begin, so he tries to shake these thoughts from his mind, focusing instead on the music he's come so far to play. He makes the Delécluse snare-drum etudes as inclusive and expansive as they can be. He goes for crisp and clear with the light snare-drum excerpt of Prokofiev. Each piece, he knows, gives him an opportunity to project a feeling, to tell the jury who he is. But then comes the marimba solo by Akira Miyoshi. Suddenly a thought enters his mind: *I really don't want to screw this up.*

And at that very moment, he does. "It wasn't terrible," he says later. "I missed probably five notes. But my impression was that at that point my audition was over."

In the end, he doesn't advance past the first round. His number isn't called.

Tetreault is haunted by the idea that he's never really gotten to do the thing he's spent so much of his life working for. He gets glimpses of it, moments playing in Colorado when the music clicks and feels solid. And that pushes him forward. But he admits that he may be borderline delusional to keep trying. The quest for success sometimes seems to have overtaken him. It feels that way when he's talking with someone but isn't really listening because he's fixated on the future; when his fingers are always tapping out rhythms on the table, always practicing; when he stops talking mid-sentence to *sing* what he means, his voice articulating little drumming passages to explain things when words fail. Mostly, though, he's consumed by a single thought these days: *Give me success or take this desire away from me. One of the two.*