

Lee Vinson: Auditioning for BSO

By Omar Carmenates

Dustin Pedroia is going to have to move over because there's a new rookie right-hander from Alabama in Boston with all-star credentials and the stats to boot. He has been called up from the minors—not to Fenway Park but just down the road to Symphony Hall. It's the Boston Symphony Orchestra's newest percussionist, Lee Vinson, who shows all the promise of being a clutch player. In May of 2007, Omar Carmenates had the opportunity to chat with Lee about his new job. At the time of the interview, it had been two months since the audition finals and four months before Vinson started his first season with the BSO.

Omar: *Tell me a little about your background.*

Lee: I am from Auburn, Alabama, and I started playing percussion when I was in sixth grade. My parents are both musicians and college teachers; my father is a percussionist turned college band director/arranger, and my mother is a flutist, so I guess it runs in my blood. I started taking lessons in middle school and was involved with my school's band program, doing everything from concert band to marching band to jazz band. During high school I spent two summers at the Interlochen Arts Camp and another summer at Boston University's Tanglewood Institute where I met Tim Genis.

In the fall of 1997 I started at the Eastman School of Music, studying with John Beck. During my junior year at Eastman I won a position with the United States Navy Band in Washington, D.C. So I left school after my junior year and spent the next four years working full time in the Navy. After that, I went back to Eastman in 2004 to finish my degree, and then spent the next year teaching private students, high school drum lines, and playing odd gigs back in D.C. In the fall of 2006, at the age of 27, I decided to go back to school at Boston University to study with Tim Genis.

Omar: *How did your professional experience in the Navy Band benefit you as a percussionist?*

Lee: The Navy Band was good for me for a lot of reasons; it gave me a lot of time to mature as a person and as a player. I learned a lot about being a working musician and how to be and how not to be professional. I got a ton of first-hand experience playing all of the instruments with the band, which was great. That was a really good thing for me.

The practicalities of the job were also nice; the pay was fine and the benefits were good. The schedule tended to be unpredictable.

Omar: *How do you compare working with the Navy Band to working with the BSO?*

Lee: The nature of the work is completely different. In the Navy Band, much of our work was with the ceremonial band. We did a lot of retirement ceremonies, arrival ceremonies, change of command ceremonies, and funerals at Arlington National Cemetery—lots and lots of funerals. We also had the concert band, which operated more or less like an orchestra; you would have a couple of morning rehearsals early in the week and one or two concerts later in the week. Basically I alternated weeks between the concert and ceremonial bands during the four years I was there. Also, the Navy Band didn't have a regular performance space like the BSO and most other orchestras. We performed most of our concerts in high school auditoriums or outdoors in the summer.

Omar: *Let's move on to your audition for the BSO. Can you walk us through your preparation for the audition?*

Lee: When the ad came out in the AFM paper, I sent in my materials—but I wasn't invited to the preliminary auditions. They did, however, invite me to make a video tape to qualify for the preliminary audition. I think they received 247 resumes and only invited about 18 to the audition based on resumes alone. They received about 50 tapes and invited another 15 or so people to audition, of which I was one. The excerpt list required for the tape was taken from the full audition list, so I already had some of the material in really good shape, and a lot of the material was from pieces I already knew.

Omar: *My understanding of the tape auditions is that you had to play the entire list with no stops.*

Lee: Right. Several orchestras are doing this now. The idea

is that it discourages you from going into a studio, recording yourself, and editing the final product. We were required to submit a digital video, and the list had to be recorded from top to bottom with no cuts in the tape. So, I borrowed a digital camera and set up the instruments in a practice room. I recorded five or six takes over three nights and then chose the best one. This was about a month after I had started working specifically on the tape list. I made my tape, sent it in, and got invited. From the time I found out I was invited, I had about five weeks to prepare the full list for the preliminary audition on February 26.

Omar: *What was your preparation process during that five-week period?*

Lee: Ideally you have at least six to eight weeks to work with, so I was in a little bit of a time crunch. Since I had been in school practicing a lot already, getting my hands in shape wasn't much of an issue this time around. I started by organizing my music into a binder specifically for this audition and then



photography by Olivia Adams

tracked down a few recordings of the pieces I didn't already know.

After that, the first two or three weeks are about getting inside of the music, especially the rep that you don't know. Your first priority has to be the material that you aren't familiar with. During the course of practicing, I would go through the entire list every week or so and give myself a grade on every piece—all 59 pieces. I grade according to how I feel about the excerpt and how well I think I can play it at that point. Based on this I will prioritize my practice time. Obviously, the repertoire with the worst grades will receive the most practice time and I will touch on those excerpts every day until the next run-through. This is a good time to start recording yourself and listening critically to your own playing. The excerpts I feel good about, which tend to be the more standard literature, I may not touch every day just because I know I can get "Scheherazade" or "Porgy" together in a couple of days. If your hands are in good shape and your head is in the right place, the basic rep shouldn't be a problem.

So after that phase of learning the repertoire and refreshing yourself on recordings and tempos, you have to start playing for people. I try to do this at least three weeks before the audition if not earlier, and every day of the week. I play for people I know, people I don't know, people who are percussionists and who are not, people who I respect and people who I don't really care for. The idea is not so much to get their feedback as it is to get comfortable playing in front of people. While you do want to take their feedback into consideration, a lot of times you have to take it with a grain of salt. But if you start hearing the same comments from everybody you play for, then that is an issue to work on. However, if every person you play for picks on different little things, then you are probably in good shape.

The last week or so I actually scaled back everything I was doing. I cut down my practice hours and I stopped playing for people. I didn't want any more feedback at that point. All of my ideas were in place. It was just a matter of confidence—of being able to play it the way I wanted to the first time, every time. At this stage, I do a lot of mental preparation. I will visualize myself playing each piece, I will go through and sing the excerpts to myself, and I will do some slow practice on the instruments to reinforce the ideas that I am focusing on. It is all about getting centered, getting focused, being positive, and being relaxed. Those are the things I dwell on. My typical practice day is cut in half to about five or six hours now, as opposed to ten or twelve hours a day during the bulk of the preparatory work.

Omar: *How about the day of the audition? Do you have a process for that, too?*

Lee: Yes. I actually write out my schedule a day ahead of time, down to the minute, to the point where I know exactly what time I am going to brush my teeth in the morning! As particular as you can be with your schedule, you have to be flexible once you get to the audition. The audition could be running ahead or behind, or you don't know how much warm-up time or down time you are going to have. I was fortunate because I was already living in Boston at the time. I knew where Symphony Hall was, I knew how to get there and where to park, and I got to sleep in my own bed the night before. I went to Boston University and warmed up on all of the instruments there. Because of this, I could show up a little closer to my audition time slot than I normally would have. I was mainly just concerned with staying focused and keeping my hands warm once I got there.

Omar: *Sounds like a home-field advantage!*

Lee: It really was! I was also somewhat familiar with the hall already since I had heard the BSO play there several times. I had performed there once with the BU orchestra as well.

Omar: *Was there anything unique about the audition that surprised you?*

Lee: Not really. I felt like the audition was pretty well run. There are always logistical issues in trying to carry all your equipment

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from the warm-up rooms to the stage door. That's something you have to be ready for.

Omar: *Do you have a process for that?*

Lee: Sure. I am very particular about the way I do most things. Some guys have a suitcase. I've seen guys make three or four trips back and forth. I use a little luggage cart that I can strap most of my gear to. I also took two snare drums to the audition, so I had to carry them separately. We weren't allowed to use our own cymbals, as they were requiring us to use the orchestra's cymbals. This meant I didn't have to carry a cymbal bag, so that lightened my load a little bit.

I felt like it was a very straight-ahead audition. They asked mainly for the big excerpts from the standard repertoire. The closest thing to a curve ball in the first round was hearing the vibraphone part from "West Side Story." They also heard the Bach marimba solo, but everything else was pretty straightforward. I think they heard maybe 12 or 14 pieces in the preliminary round.

Omar: *Was there only one preliminary round before the finals or was there a second hearing?*

Lee: There was a preliminary round and a



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semifinal round before the finals. In the prelims, there were about 30 or 35 guys, and we each got our 20 minutes or so on stage to play for the committee. They heard all of the candidates play before voting. Then they made phone calls that evening to inform us if we had advanced. That was a little different.

Omar: *When was the semifinal round?*

Lee: The semifinals and finals were a week later on the following Monday, so that was an interesting week knowing I was going to be in the semifinals while trying to put myself through one more week of audition preparation. And then, to make it all worse, my finger split open from over-practicing and I came down with a cold! I was hurting for a few days trying to put in my practice time and still go to class. I felt miserable!

Omar: *And then they narrowed it down again, I take it?*

Lee: Right. There were eight guys total in the semifinal round. We got to play a lot of music this time. They heard more of the snare drum solos and the Yoshioka marimba solo. I think they heard almost 20 pieces in that round plus sight-reading on snare drum and marimba. It ended up being 30 minutes of playing on stage for each of us. At the end, they took a vote somewhere around 4:30 in the afternoon and decided they'd like to hear two of us again. They gave us numbers and I drew number one! I had to go straight to the tuning room, which is just off stage, with no real warm-up time.

Omar: *Was there anything you felt you played especially well or that set you apart from everyone else and ultimately won the job?*

Lee: I know they liked my "Kije" a lot. It was pretty soft! Otherwise, I felt I played pretty solidly across the board. I don't think of myself as an extraordinary player, but I think I'm pretty consistent from instrument to instrument. I don't think of myself as a great snare drummer who can't play mallets or a great mallet player who can't play cymbals or tambourine. I think I have a decent feel for all of the instruments, which comes from experience and practice time. There are always one or two tiny things you want to take back, but I thought the overall impression I made throughout the audition was a good one. It sounds strange, but I don't think the committee was obsessed with perfection from an execution standpoint. Obviously you have to play the right notes and rhythms in good time, at the right tempos, but I think this committee was listening beyond that and they wanted somebody who felt like a good fit for the orchestra and the percussion section.

Omar: *Now that you have the job, what are the specifics? Do you have a primary responsibility in that section? Are you dedicated to an instrument?*

Lee: The BSO does it differently than some other orchestras. For example, many orchestras designate a principal percussionist who usually takes the premier part for any given work. The BSO, on the other hand, sort of has specialists on each of the instruments. Tim Genis is obviously the timpanist at this point. Will Hudgins is more of the mallet expert, and Frank Epstein is the cymbal specialist. I was basically hired to be the snare drum specialist.

Omar: *The season length is 52 weeks?*

Lee: Right. I think the classical season is about 32 weeks starting in September. Then we have some pops work around the holidays and in the spring after the classical season wraps up. There is also an eight-week summer season at Tanglewood. There are a few weeks of vacation built in there as well, but it will be a full-time job for sure!

Omar: *You are obviously stepping into a major orchestra with a lot of tradition. Do you feel that tradition of excellence, stepping into the chair of section percussionist?*

Lee: That is something to think about—stepping into the shoes of people like Tim Genis and Tom Gauger, or even Arthur Press and Charlie Smith. That being said, I don't get the feeling I'll be told to do things a certain way. I think I am going to have some space to do things my way, which will be nice. I will also certainly be thinking a lot about what works best with the orchestra, which is where I'll take into account the way my predecessors played. It's going to be a tough task, but I look forward to the challenge.

Omar: *One thing unique about your position is that you are relatively young. Do you think of yourself as opening a door for young orchestral percussionists—something in the vein of what Cynthia Yeh achieved in Chicago? Is that something you think about?*

Lee: No, not really. In the fall I remember thinking that maybe I was too young for this, or that I wasn't ready, and then I opened my eyes and looked at the guys who were getting jobs. I especially looked at who was winning the big jobs, like Cynthia in Chicago, Marc Damoulakis in Cleveland, and Dan Bauch in Detroit. I realized that we are all pretty close to the same age, yet I was making excuses not to take any of the big auditions even though I was having success in the smaller ones. Now I feel like you are really in your auditioning prime from around your mid-20s to your mid-30s because you have reached a certain level of maturity and ability. In my situation, I was also free from

being busy with a family or a job. I had the advantage of being pretty much "no strings attached" so that I could make the audition the number-one priority in my life for that stretch of six or eight weeks.

Omar: *Being that you are fresh out of school, do you have any advice for young college-age percussionists aspiring to be orchestral percussionists? Especially with the job market as competitive as it can be?*

Lee: I would tell students not to specialize in orchestral playing too early. I worry when I see 18-year-old students playing nothing but excerpts. You have to learn how to play all the instruments and be a good musician first. I didn't really commit to making orchestral music my career until my third year at Eastman. I played a lot of solo marimba literature and timpani up until that point. I also played some drumset, albeit pretty poorly! I had my hands in a lot of different things at Eastman. It was during the summer of 1999 at Brevard studying with Tim Adams that I really started focusing on orchestral repertoire, and taking auditions. The Navy job worked out about six months after that.

I would also tell students to have a backup plan. Before I came to Boston University last year, I was basically supporting myself by teaching high school students and coaching high school drum lines while I practiced and took auditions. Marching band is pretty big in Northern Virginia, and it tends to pay pretty well, so I got involved with three or four different schools at the same time. For me, the marching percussion was more for fun at first, but it turned out to be a great way to recruit private students. So I think having a backup plan is crucial. There just aren't as many full-time playing gigs out there as there are people who want them. You have to have other marketable skills besides orchestral percussion to make a living as a percussionist, even if it's just teaching.

Omar Carmenates is Professor of Percussion at Furman University and is pursuing a DM in Percussion Performance from Florida State University. He received a BM in Music Education from the University of Central Florida, an MM in Percussion Performance from the University of North Texas, and his teachers include John W. Parks IV, Mark Ford, Christopher Deane, Ed Soph, Ed Smith, and Jeff Moore. He is also the Percussion Caption Head for the Boston Crusaders Drum and Bugle Corps. **PN**



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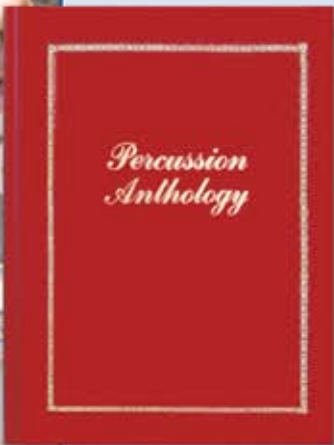
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