

STUDENT LIFE

BUILDING YOUR LIFE IN MUSIC: ESSENTIAL NETWORKING AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP SKILLS FOR THE 21ST-CENTURY MUSICIAN

by Jessica Meyer

I have been asked many times over the past year: “What advice would you give to those just now starting a career in music?” and “What business skills do musicians need to succeed?” Being a musician myself, I have come to realize that there are so many skills beyond playing an instrument that affect where a performing career goes. Currently, one cannot escape the word “entrepreneurship” when reading about the future of classical music. However, to truly be entrepreneurial, you need to be able to communicate effectively both what you do and what you want to do while growing your network of friends and colleagues. This is no small task, since most of us are more comfortable talking through our music (“I became a composer so I wouldn’t have to talk!” a colleague recently exclaimed). These communication skills should also be practiced to build the life you want in music. But first, we need to take the important steps of recognizing our strengths, recognizing the skills we need to develop, and envisioning our desired career.

The main difficulty is that we are not used to being asked those questions, especially at the age when it is most important. We are often told by most of our professors just what to do—what pieces to learn, what we should program in our recitals, how we should play, what recordings to listen to, who we should model ourselves after, and what auditions to take for a chance to be chosen as “the winner.” There are also many faculty (and students) who are under the incorrect assumption that developing certain skills away from the instrument will detract from our training or are for those who might not be good enough to

“make it.” But when you look closely at those who are consistently performing, teaching, or writing for projects that are a good fit for them, they are somehow using these skills daily—regardless of how “big” or “small” their careers are in the field. I share my story with the desire to highlight some of the necessary communication and career-building skills one needs in this century, and to empower you to create your own path in today’s music world.

When I was at Juilliard in the 1990s, the important concerns at the time were things such as, “How can I play this passage better in tune?” “How can I avoid tension when I play?” “Whose fingerings/edition should I use?” “What summer festival should I go to?” and “When are they going to put up the practice room sign-up sheets!” To some degree, these are still important issues while in school. This is one of the few times in your life when you can devote yourself to just learning and excelling in your art, before bills, family, and other real-life concerns set in. But nothing really prepared me for the moment when I was finally out of school and I had to hustle to pay my first student loan bill. I had just married my college sweetheart (another musician who was completing his master’s degree while racking up even more student loan debt), and time was ticking. I picked up my copy of the *International Musician* and made plans for what auditions to take.

At the time, there seemed to be only a few paths for violists: win a competition and become a soloist with management, win a chamber music competition and be in a group with management (or get hired to be part of a pre-existing group), get an orchestra job, or

freelance. Having spent years playing in orchestras and studying excerpts, I assumed this was to be my path and that the key to success was to just lock myself in a practice room long enough to get the chops to win a gig. I remember how one of my teachers, William Lincer, had us lying on the floor while listening to sports psychology tapes so we could learn how to visualize playing a “perfect” audition. I had a dog-eared copy of Don Greene’s *Audition Success* on my nightstand and regularly practiced jogging up to my fifth floor apartment to get my heart rate up just before running through the excerpt list. I kept taking auditions and got to the finals a few times.

However, during these few years after graduation, I did not have the luxury of just devoting my life to the audition process. I had to make money ... and fast. I freelanced in New York some, but not enough. I could not understand why some people would just come into town and immediately start working everywhere (now I do, but more on that later). Fortunately, I happened to do four things that proved to be essential in building the particular career that I have now:

- 1) I decided on a whim to take a class with Eric Booth on how to be a Teaching Artist (TA). I was very uncomfortable speaking in front of small groups of people—to the point where I would shake and feel sick, and I wanted to get over this fear. As part of a fellowship the following year, I taught in a NYC middle school for twenty visits and got tons of experience (a trial by fire, if there ever was one). As a result, I conquered a fear, discovered something else I could be good at, and was immediately able to start freelancing as a TA so I could make money in a more predictable fashion.
- 2) I discovered that I enjoyed playing new music. The opportunity to explore rhythm and sound in a whole new way excited me, and I happened to befriend some composers while at Aspen. We collaborated on projects together and decided to start our own ensemble—the award-winning collective counter)induction was born.
- 3) I recognized the importance of organizational skills. Ever since I was a child, I always fell into the role of “organizer.” Whether it was for my high

school string quartet or for our prom night activities, it was always assumed that “Jess will take care of it.” After playing for a few weddings and private events, I decided to embrace this strength and started my own event music business.

- 4) The single most important thing I did upon graduation was writing down on a piece of paper what I enjoyed doing in music and what I was good at. I still have this fourteen-year-old piece of paper, and I read it whenever I need a reminder. I also started writing down my professional and personal goals every few years, and I cannot explain what a profound effect this has had on my life.

A few years later, I found myself staring at another audition announcement in the latest copy of the newspaper. It was a local orchestra job that I could have had a shot at winning. But then and there, I abruptly decided to stop auditioning. Not because I gave up, but because I realized at that moment I was already making just as good a living performing and doing other musical activities I loved in a way that best suited my strengths and personality. I knew enough about myself to know that I would not be happy if I won that job. Why do we need to be chosen for a certain job to live a life in music?

Over the next decade, most of my performing involved new music, with a couple of standard-repertoire chamber music concerts here and there. But on paper, I was making a good chunk of my income as a result of skills I had developed away from the instrument. I wanted to be playing more, but I was keeping busy doing many different things and was able to buy an apartment and start a family.

For my event-music business, I had put money into making a website and was lucky to get some great press and editorials, but I kind of let it (and everything else I did) just roll along. When school budgets started to dry up and one of my main sources of Teaching Artist income began to disappear, I decided to become proactive about meeting more people in the wedding industry (regardless of the economy, people are always getting married!). I knew a small group of colleagues that I worked with over the years, but I was not doing a good job at keeping in touch with

them, nor was I building upon chance meetings I had with new ones. So I spent the summer of 2011 having at least three to five coffee dates a week and going to industry events. Whenever there was a meet and greet for business owners, I went to it and forced myself to meet new people. Whenever I met someone new, I followed up with them and offered to introduce them to other people. I was not great at it at first, but I got better as time went on. Since I had a decade of experience teaching classrooms of students, I just had to translate those skills into talking one-on-one with people. As a result, my sales almost doubled that fall.

In the midst of all this, I had a real moment of clarity when I visited a BNI chapter meeting. BNI is an international networking association where you regularly go to a meeting at 6:30 or 7:00 a.m. once a week with people who each own a different kind of business. After a few moments of mingling and coffee, everyone gets sixty seconds to get up, do his or her elevator speech or a little “commercial” reminding us what they do, list ways they have helped other people in the group connect to someone they know, then speak about how others have helped them. As I watched people get up and down to do this, I thought, “What if all musicians had this skill?” And then, there was a defining moment when someone gave a presentation on effective networking skills, and for a moment time stopped and everything made sense. He went on to say ...

Networking is really all about the three I’s:

It’s about the follow-up ... because if you meet someone, have a great conversation, but don’t follow up after that, the opportunity to build some kind of relationship is gone.

It’s about Integrity ... doing what you said you would do, when you said you would do it.

And the one that blew my mind was ... It’s not about you.

Networking should not be about you selling yourself or getting a gig. Instead, it should be about making your knowledge and network available to others and

approaching conversations with a “how can I help you?” attitude. And I then thought, “Wow ... we were not taught this at all in school, and we don’t make a habit of thinking like this.”

I immediately adopted this mindset and made this a part of my own practice while building all of my networks—starting first with my performing career. I wanted to perform more solo repertoire and get back to writing music. I wanted to commission other composers, make a CD, and find more performance opportunities for the ensembles I helped to start. I wanted to play with other ensembles in town. Everything immediately changed for the better, simply because I stated my intentions on paper, consistently put my energy toward making those things happen, talked to people about it, and most importantly—supported other colleagues in their quest to do the same. I was so inspired by these recent events that I decided to create *Chops beyond the Practice Room*, a series of workshops in which other musicians can learn and practice these and other necessary skills.

When I look around at the classical music field today, I notice time and time again that those who are successful are the ones who can consistently create work for themselves and others while connecting those around them to the music they care most about. Regardless of the constant murmurings about “the death of classical music,” people are still inspired by our music on a daily basis because of folks who are doggedly out there meaningfully engaging their audiences and finding ways to create new ones. They are out there teaming up with like-minded colleagues to keep our music alive and well. People like violist/composer Kenji Bunch, Mattie Kaiser of Classical Revolution PDX in Portland, and Lev Zhurbin in NYC—they are not waiting to be chosen—they are creating their path instead. However, you can’t set out to build that life unless you can imagine it first, practice these skills, and have systems in place where you consistently build your networks so people know who you are and what makes you special.

With this in mind, here are the top ten things you can routinely do to start building your best career in music:

1) The non-negotiables: Be on time, Be nice, Be reliable, and Be prepared to do your best ... always.

If you choose not to do these, you are essentially shooting yourself in the foot. All of these traits over time create your reputation and put you in the front (or way in the back) of people's minds when they are deciding if they want to work with you. First impressions are the most lasting, and everything else comes from how consistent you are. I have met many wonderful players over the years that I simply cannot recommend to others because of one or a combination of these issues. Many positions are filled with people who never even had to apply—the job found them. Your reputation is the deciding factor.

2) If the situation you desire does not exist, create it.

The essence of entrepreneurship is finding your own unique way of uniting the ideas you are passionate about with the needs of a community. This concept is usually applied to musicians who start their own ensemble or non-profit, but I encourage you to embrace this idea even as an individual. What if we ran our careers like a small business? What if we saw ourselves as music "vendors" who can provide an assortment of goods or services? Regardless of what part of the country you are in, what steps can you take so that you are consistently creating work for yourself?

3) Always be investing; if not with money, then with time.

I remember sitting in the back seat of a car with a colleague, pounding out yet another grant application for counter-induction while being driven to a gig. Our friend turned around at one point and said, "Why are you guys doing all this?" There were times I wondered the same, especially as my husband and I worked well into the night surrounded by piles of scores, budget spreadsheets, and documents in our bedroom. However, we were investing our time creating something meaningful and different—which resulted in years of performance opportunities for ourselves. The same applies to the individual musician. Of course you want to collapse on the couch at

night instead of going to hear a colleague play. But you never know who you can meet while you are at that concert, and these encounters can certainly affect future events in your career. What investments can you make that go beyond your pictures, press kit, and website?

4) Meet as many people as you can, especially while you are still in school, and build relationships with like-minded colleagues.

A large percentage of the colleagues I now collaborate with, or even work for, are ones I met while in school or at summer music festivals. I cannot help but wonder what opportunities I might have had if I had consciously built up my network of colleagues then. School is certainly a safer place to practice and develop these skills than in the real world, where bills need to be paid. Just as we each have our own teaching style, we each have our own networking style as well. It doesn't just happen, it evolves. Why not start early and give yourself plenty of time to hit your stride? Next time you are out and about, make a point to meet at least three new people. Yes, it will feel uncomfortable at first. No, you won't vibe with everyone you meet—but find a way to keep in touch with the ones you do.

5) Make yourself available to others.

As I write this, it is summer and once again I find myself filling my pockets of free time with coffees and meetings. I was invited to a BNI meeting this morning and was reminded of the wonderful relationships you can build when you network as if "it's not about you." Today's particular quote was, "If you give, you gain." In the room with me were two colleagues who graciously spoke in front of the group about the work I do. In turn, I then spoke about their work, thanked them for the work they have given me, and offered to help a few other people in the room with certain issues that came up during the meeting. Later in the afternoon, my inbox had e-mails from a good handful of people referring new business to me. People who own thriving businesses know that person-to-person referrals go much farther than any website, ad, or social media campaign. The people who

send these referrals your way are ones who have come to know first-hand not only the quality of your work, but your willingness to help solve a problem (without necessarily being hired to do so) or to be a sounding board for someone's ideas. When taking the time to make this a habit, it not only gets results, but it feels good at the same time. But most importantly, it can help build a stronger sense of community among classical musicians while ensuring the future of the art we hold so dear.

6) Develop a system to regularly follow up with people, preferably in person or on the phone.

The most important words here are “regularly” and “in person.” It takes regular contact, in a frequency that is not overwhelming, to build a relationship. A quick follow-up e-mail, a Facebook invite, an addition to your mailing list, or even a combination of all the above just does not do the job. There is a reason why businesspeople still fly everywhere for meetings: nothing can replace face-to-face human interactions (or, at the very least, voice-to-voice). That is not to say that social media or online chat opportunities are not helpful, but they should not be your main way of being in contact. Just as you schedule your practice time, schedule your “keeping in touch” dates or calls, which might eventually lead to “I was wondering if you would like to work with me on ...” opportunities.

7) Routinely write down goals, outline the steps you need to take to achieve them, and identify people you need to meet who will help you do so.

We certainly know how to make a plan and monitor our progress while gearing up for a recital, so how can we do the same when building our careers? When you let life just happen to you, you might not be happy with what it gives you. Our thoughts shape our actions, which establish habits, which then create results. The simple act of deciding what you want to have happen already sets forth a chain of events. However, your goals cannot be achieved without the help of other people. We are certainly not all trained in marketing, fundraising, social media, grant writing,

and obtaining non-profit status, etc.—but there are plenty of folks out there who will help us if we simply ask. So who are they? If you don't know them, can someone you know make an introduction? Are they appearing somewhere soon? Can you send them something that shows what you can do? Those people who swooped into town and were working right away while I wondered why my phone did not ring ... that's what they did.

8) Learn from your mistakes and be persistent.

We all have bad days. We did not prepare well enough, did not play our best, said the wrong thing, or neglected an amazing opportunity staring us right in the face. As Winston Churchill put it, “All men make mistakes, but only wise men learn from their mistakes.” Resilience and a positive attitude are two of the most important qualities you could ever possess. Failure just provides a more urgent opportunity for us to learn.

9) Do not be afraid to change things that are working against your goals or your true nature.

Many folks live lives they think they ought to be living, rather than ones that exemplify their true potential. It is, indeed, safer to stick with what is comfortable or expected of us. For example, I took on a job teaching privately in a school a few years ago when the economy was starting to slide. After a few months, there was a huge opportunity for me to have a larger role (and a much larger paycheck, and free tuition for my son, and ...). But I hated it. It was not me at all. After many months, I had the courage to leave—and it was one of the best things I ever did. So much that led up to what I am doing now would simply not have happened. I know many people who have faced similar choices, and it always works out for the best when you live according to who you really are. Be sure to take some time to find out who that person really is.

10) Practice, practice, practice.

All of the aforementioned is moot if you are not

spending quality time on your instrument, yet we can't neglect the tasks that are away from our instruments as well. It will certainly be a daily struggle to balance the business of "Me, Inc." with your art, and juggling this will need practice in and of itself. But I think Martha Graham put it best:

Practice means to perform, over and over again in the face of all obstacles, some act of vision, of faith, of desire. Practice is a means of inviting the perfection desired.

Which acts of vision will define you?

Resources

Association of Teaching Artists
<http://www.teachingartists.com/>

BNI International (Business Networking and Referrals)
<http://www.bni.com/>

Booth, Eric. 2012 New England Conservatory Commencement Speech
<http://necmusic.edu/eric-booth-2012-commencement-speech>

Chops beyond the Practice Room
<http://www.chopsbeyondthepreacticeroom.com/>

Hoffman, Reid. "The Real Way to Build a Social Network." *Fortune* February 6, 2012.
<http://tech.fortune.cnn.com/2012/01/24/reid-hoffman-linkedin-startup-you/>

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<http://www.musicalamerica.com/mablogs/?p=4463>

Wallace, David. *Reaching Out: A Musician's Guide to Interactive Performance*. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2008.
<http://www.amazon.com/Reaching-Out-Musicians-Interactive-Performance/dp/0073401382>

Violist Jessica Meyer is a versatile performer who has been featured as a soloist, chamber musician, and orchestral player throughout the world. As a committed advocate of new music, she is the co-founder of the critically-acclaimed contemporary music collective counter)induction, which performs regularly in NYC and around the country. Passionate about education, Jessica has conducted over a thousand workshops for public school students and adults throughout the New York area, has scripted many outreach concerts, and mentors the young musicians of the Academy (a program of Carnegie Hall, the Juilliard School, and the Weill Music Institute) on how to engage audiences of any age through a well-written interactive concert. For more info, please visit www.jessicameyermusic.com and <http://www.chopsbeyondthepreacticeroom.com/>.

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