

Spring 2013

Living the Dream: Making it as a Classical Musician

Steven Franklin
College of DuPage

Follow this and additional works at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai>

Recommended Citation

Franklin, Steven (2013) "Living the Dream: Making it as a Classical Musician," *ESSAI*: Vol. 11, Article 14.
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol11/iss1/14>

This Selection is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at DigitalCommons@COD. It has been accepted for inclusion in ESSAI by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@COD. For more information, please contact koteles@cod.edu.

Living the Dream: Making it as a Classical Musician

by Steven Franklin

(English 1102)

I was sitting in the back row of a one hundred and twenty piece orchestra in Chicago's famous Orchestra Hall with a trumpet in my hands. My fellow musicians and I were performing Claude Debussy's *La Mer*, perhaps the greatest French orchestral tone poem ever written. And from the back row of the Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestra I saw everything that was going on and I listened to all the excellent music making that was going on around me as I performed on the same stage as the world-renowned Chicago Symphony Orchestra. After 40 minutes of intense concentration, we had finally arrived at the final brass chorale at the end of the piece. When that last fortissimo came, the rich chords and wild excitement of the ending sent a thrill running down my spine. It was moments like these that made the all the long hours of practice worth it and made me sure that I wanted to become a professional musician. Anyone who wishes to find a career as a classical instrumentalist or composer can relate.

However, it's not quite that simple when it comes to making this dream a reality. Not everyone will be fortunate enough to secure a consistent, lucrative job playing in an orchestra or composing new music. Even if they are, it often takes months or years of waiting before these types of jobs are available. However, the good news is that these are not the only ways for a classical musician to be successful. There are many options available to young musicians that may easily be overlooked. Young musicians must become savvy in the business if they are going to make it. While maintaining the quality and originality of their art is very important, they must also look past the art in order to find a way to make a practical living from music making. A complete musician finds a way to balance aesthetic and artistic values with practical business savvy.

Most musicians enter music school with inspiration, a great work ethic, and absolutely no idea how to make a living after they graduate. While the market is extremely competitive, the smart musician can still find ample opportunities to make a decent living doing what they love by playing music. *The Savvy Musician* by David Cutler provides wisdom for the college graduate that wants to begin a career in music. Cutler speaks from his own experience and his successful career as a jazz and classical composer, pianist and conductor. He insists that to be a musician you need to love what you do first and foremost. Classical music is a competitive and stressful field, with little job security and comparatively low pay; however, it is a very fulfilling job and nothing can be more satisfying than pursuing one's passion for a living. He also states the great importance for musicians to be savvy to the current needs and demands of the music industry. He states, "In order to sustain a career, as opposed to hobby, you must find ways to earn income from your talents. This is where so many musicians draw a blank. They have the passion, cross their fingers and pray that life hands them the magical potion. If things don't work out neatly – and they rarely do—they have little idea where to turn" (4).

This is why marketing oneself well is so crucial. Musicians also need excellent people skills and communication abilities to be able to do this effectively. The majority of gigs that I have played came from a friend or a friend of a friend. A savvy musician, even if not the most talented musician, will be able to thrive in any market. This is important for all of today's musicians, whether classical or not. And there are many ways to put this savvy to use.

A number of potential career options are available for the young musician. One common way for a classical instrumentalist to begin a career is by freelancing and gigging locally; while it can be

difficult for a musician to make this start, it is paramount that musicians build as many contacts as possible in order to begin to secure consistent and lucrative gigging opportunities. In the article “How To Make Money and Find Gigs” by Cesar Aviles, some ideas are presented on how to build contacts and expand one’s freelance career. Aviles suggests creating a website and always having business cards ready to hand out to potential customers, a typical strategy for any business whether it is musical or not. Aviles stresses the fact that the music industry isn’t any different from any other business; he insists that networking is the only way to establish a stable and successful freelance career. He also mentions that being professional in the way one deals with clients is one of the best ways to open up opportunities for future gigs. Communication, punctuality and professionalism generate a positive reputation that will support one’s career.

In the end, however, the most important quality is flexibility. One can hardly expect to get the exact gig one wanted in the first few tries. Some methods of promoting oneself may not work; every situation is unique. Aviles states, “Different businesses, different strategies. You must find your own. This takes a long time but it will determine your success as a promoter.... [Y]ou cannot be a musician only. If Facebook brings lots of gigs then you do that. A blog? Website? Fliers? Word of mouth? Emails? Try everything and always keep looking for more” (2). In order to be a successful freelance musician, these are the things that one must consider. Making contacts from local gigs also lays the groundwork for advancing toward a permanent ensemble position.

The job of an orchestral instrumentalist is one of the most competitive and most coveted jobs in the music business. In addition to being lucrative, it is among the steadiest occupations that a classical musician can find today. Many musicians, who have grown up playing and listening to masterpieces by Beethoven and Mahler, dream of obtaining a job with a professional orchestra and playing some of the greatest music in existence for a living. Although this job can be stressful, it is perhaps the most fulfilling and enjoyable for classical instrumentalists. Because of this, it is an exceedingly competitive market and there are already only a handful of positions available each year.

Professional orchestral clarinetist George Seltzer noted this in his article “It’s Supply and Demand Stupid!” He makes it abundantly clear how thousands of music students are graduating from conservatories all across the nation each year with the hope of playing professionally in an orchestra, while the reality is that only about 250 vacancies in professional orchestras are available and not all of those pay adequately enough to make a living. In addition to the small number of jobs, today’s students are getting extremely good. The quality of student musicians now has reached a nearly unheard of level and hundreds of near-perfect musicians are all auditioning for the same jobs. Music schools need money to keep their programs going so they make promises to students about job placement after graduation, while the reality is actually quite different.

And, on the other side of the equation, audiences are becoming increasingly disinterested in classical music. An entire generation is growing up now that has had little to no music education whatsoever and has no desire to listen to live classical music. Although the orchestral market is very tough, Seltzer doesn’t lose hope for classical musicians. He states, “We need fewer performers and more audiences.... There are possible solutions. Courses targeted for the non-music major are important. Not only the usual music appreciation courses, but also classes in music theory and music history as part of various eras of Western culture could be developed for and taken by any and all interested students” (28). He also advises classical musicians to, while pursuing their music degree, also take courses in outside fields such as business, math, or science. This will give music majors a more standard college education and provide extra-music opportunities should one have difficulty in securing an orchestral job, as could well be the case.

However, an orchestral job is hardly the only option for classical instrumentalists. A plethora of opportunities are available in other musical mediums. Concert band is one example of this. As a trumpet player myself, there are far more available positions playing in concert or military bands

than there are in the orchestral track. In addition to this, there are simply more bands in existence, particularly in the United States, than orchestras.

An *International Trumpet Guild Journal* article “Why Band?” by Marc Reed and Andrew Trachsel addresses this point. Reed and Trachsel discuss many of advantages of playing professionally in a wind ensemble or concert band. Though band is often considered a “lesser” ensemble when compared to the orchestra, this is only due to the fact that for years concert band lacked quality repertoire to perform. However, today new quality band music is being created at breakneck pace. Many of the most prominent names in classical music also wrote selections for wind ensembles, such as Mozart, Beethoven, Wagner, and Stravinsky. Wind band now has a large repertoire of quality music and every day more pieces are being introduced. There are also a large number of positions available for all types of musicians in concert band. Reed and Trachsel note,

The dream of many aspiring trumpet players is to perform in a professional orchestra, as a classical soloist, or in a professional jazz ensemble. However, these select positions represent a small fraction of the world’s trumpets.... [C]ommunity and military bands involve a much larger number of trumpet players. This is in part due to the size of the modern wind band trumpet section, which may range from four to twenty-four players. There are over seventy active-duty professional concert bands in the five branches of the United States Armed Forces, with many more opportunities for part-time playing in the Army Reserves, Army National Guard, and Air National Guard. Band is also part of many public school curricula, providing music for athletic, academic, and public events. (76)

This is true of all instrumentalists, not only trumpet players. Opportunities for playing professionally in wind bands abound. This is yet another viable career for a classical instrumentalist looking for playing opportunities.

Another occupation that is available to musicians is that of a composer or arranger. This is a very broad field. It includes arranging popular music for a local band to producing commissioned large-scale works for orchestra or wind ensemble and everything in between. Composing can be done either as a full-time profession or as a side job to enhance your earnings. Many classical instrumentalists are part-time composers, experimenting in their spare time with ideas to create some new music that might appeal to an audience. This music can either be published by a music company or simply produced on your own.

The ambition of most young composers is to become published by a major music company and therefore begin their career of writing music for a living; however, self-publishing one’s own works is an option that few composers consider and it may be far more lucrative than the tiny percentage of royalties that composers collect from big music publishers. Composer John Mackey illustrates the stark differences in royalty collection between self-publishing and being published by an already established music company. Mackey describes the business aspect of this in detail. When a performance is licensed by the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) as most “classical” performances are, the composer can collect royalties for that performance. However, only 50 percent of the proceeds go to the composer and the other 50 percent goes to the publisher. Moreover, 90 percent of all sheet music sales go to the publisher and the music store, while the hapless composer is left with only 10 percent of the gross profit. In addition to this, the publisher holds the copyright to any piece of music published through that company.

On the other hand, self-publishing allows the composer to keep the copyright to the work and to collect all of the money generated from the performance of the piece. This is the option that Mackey chose. In his words, “I didn’t want 50% of the performance earnings to go into the ether since I wasn’t published, so I registered a publishing company with ASCAP –Osti Music....

Eventually I got an ACAP check for the performance of [one of my pieces] – my writer royalty check. Then, a few weeks later, I got another (equally tiny) check, for the same amount - my publisher check” (Mackey 1). As great as this may seem, the only downside is that the composer must process and print all his or her own music, which can be costly and time-consuming. If a composer is working other jobs such as teaching it can be difficult to find the time and resources to manage that aspect of self-publishing. Mackey states,

All of this takes a lot of time, and a lot of composers, understandably, would rather just compose and not worry about the business aspect of it. They just want to write the music, give it to a publisher, and not think about it anymore, and whatever income they collect, no matter the amount, is just a nice bonus. Most of those composers probably have other jobs — like teaching — or wealthy families to make that possible. I like to think of it like I also have a ‘day job’, and my day job is publishing my own music. (2)

For young composers looking to make a living writing music, self-publishing is a favorable option to consider.

This useful option for composers has actually been present for centuries. Steven Zohn, in his article “Telemann in the Marketplace: The Composer as Self-publisher,” discusses the state of music publishing in Hamburg in the early 1700’s. Famous baroque composer, Johann Philippe Telemann, after many frustrations with the music publishing industry began to self-publish and process all his own music. This proved to be very successful for him and for other contemporary composers who followed his example. Zohn writes that “[w]ith composers receiving little or no remuneration from booksellers, it is understandable that some chose to act as their own publishers. Self-publication seems to have been least common during periods when the music-publishing industry was flourishing” (4). This is true even today, as published composers are receiving record-low royalties from music publishing companies. The self-publishing route is a viable option for composers today, just as it was in the 18th century for Telemann.

The need for new music to be written is decreasing and many musical mediums, particularly the symphony orchestra, are very difficult for living composers to successfully write for. This is mainly due to the wealth of quality music already available for performance that has been written over the last four or five centuries by composers who are no longer alive. The Cleveland Orchestra, for example, does not need to perform new music written by a living composer, whom it would have to pay royalties to. Not to mention that an unknown, living composer would be far less likely to sell tickets than Beethoven or Brahms.

However, many professional ensembles are creating programs dedicated to the performance of new music. The Chicago Symphony Orchestra has a concert series entitled “MusicNow” in which the orchestra performs five or six concerts each year that are entirely made up of new music by current composers. It is programs like these that provide the best opportunities for young composers to make their name known and get their music promoted by prestigious ensembles. Composers are also turning to relatively new kinds of ensembles, such as the wind symphony or the brass quintet, for support and to commission new works for young composers to write. The repertoire that such ensembles have to draw from is far less extensive than the symphony orchestra and new music for these ensembles is important to both the composer and the instrumentalists. Although the job market for young composers of new music is not large, young composers who are willing to engage in the business side of music can survive and find consistent work in the field. Composers must always be looking for new ways to create unique music and make it appealing to a variety of audiences, whether this includes self-publishing or being published by an already established music company.

For any of these career options, the most important thing is to apply the skills that you possess to the current job market. While it is important to possess talent and cultivate your musical abilities to the highest degree attainable, if your skills aren't marketable, they aren't useful; skills must be applied to the job market in a way that is relevant to current needs and trends. Freelance keyboardist James Gibson has worked as a full-time musician in Atlanta, Georgia, for more than twelve years. His book, *Playing For Pay*, is a practical guide for musicians looking to make a start in a freelance career or expand their influence. He created a system for developing your own marketing strategy and expounds on this in his book. This system involves a three-step process in which the musician takes inventory of his or her skills and practical abilities, then looks to see what jobs match these personal and practical skills, and finally builds the contacts necessary to develop opportunities in those particular areas. Gibson emphasizes the importance of creating one's own opportunities, rather than waiting for the opportunities to come to you. He asserts that "[n]o matter how good a musician you are, you still have to create your own career, step by step, job by job. No one will be standing by to tell you what to do next.... You create your career as you go, and you're always searching for people who'll pay to hear you perform" (1). Because opportunities for paid performance usually don't abound for classical musicians, they must learn to create their own.

Another very helpful guide for those looking to make a career out of music was written by Shelly Field. Field is a career expert and author of over 45 books on various subjects relating to practical careers. Her book, *Career Opportunities in the Music Industry*, was the first authoritative exposition of all of the potential careers that exist for one seeking to work in the music industry. Since the initial publication of this book in 1985, it has been revised twice to stay relevant with the current job market. This book not only covers the job opportunities for classical instrumentalists and composers but all jobs that are applicable to individuals who desire to work in the music business, regardless of whether they are musicians or not. This is the most thorough and comprehensive guide to the music industry available. Field lists every current job in the business along with their respective salaries, prerequisites, duties, and employment prospects. Field continues to stress the importance of making and capitalizing on contacts throughout her book. She advises, "Use every contact you have. Don't get hung up on the idea that you want to get a job by yourself. If you are lucky enough to know someone who can help you obtain a job you want, take him or her up on it.... Ask for help. Find a mentor" (14). Field is realistic but optimistic in her view on the subject. There are jobs available for everyone who has a desire to have a career in music.

One of the best ways to build contacts is by joining a professional organization. As a composer, one of the most helpful organizations is the *National Association of Composers/USA* or NACUSA. This organization publishes a journal with useful and current information for today's composers. They also hold annual conferences and sponsor many composition competitions. Membership is only \$30 dollars and with membership comes access to a vast network of composers and musicians that could help one get his or her name out and secure performances of pieces. By joining an association it becomes far easier to build the contacts that are necessary for any successful career in music.

Despite the fact that classical music has declined in popularity, the resourceful, flexible and hard-working musician will be able to maintain a successful career. Julie Lee goes into detail on this point in her article "A Requiem for Classical Music." Despite the lugubrious title, Lee still holds hope for classical music. Though the market is tough and many musicians are struggling, there is not only bad news to be found here. Though classical concertgoers aren't bountiful, the numbers have been gradually increasing. Over the last 15 years, the number of people that attend orchestra concerts has increased by 3 percent. This is in part due to the fact that orchestras and other music organizations, realizing the decline in popularity of classical music, have greatly improved the way that they market and promote their music. Lee states,

Both artists and business people need to think hard about who their future audience is going to be and how to make classical music exiting and relevant to that audience. Whether by delivering neglected repertory, or offering fresh interpretations of old favorites to a small but dedicated audience, or by shedding antiquated conventions and trying to expand into new territory, in the end, successful strategies will need to make people care about the music. These experiments may mean the death of the classical music business as we know it, but also may provide an opportunity for rebirth and renewal (8).

Lee is honest in her article about what she sees as the downfall of classical music, but is equally optimistic about the future possibilities of the profession. Willingness to accept unconventionality and new ideas is crucial to the success of classical music in the future. Musicians that can adapt to the changing times will be able to carry on a career without suffering unnecessarily from lack of public interest.

A career in classical music can exist as both a wonderfully fulfilling pursuit and a practical profession. For those that have a passion for music, playing or writing music professionally is a dream come true. And this dream is attainable with passion, hard work and a little practical knowledge of the business. One cannot simply be an artist; one must be an artist as well as an entrepreneur. Although the classical music industry isn't considered one of the most lucrative professions, it is still very possible to make a successful career in music. For many like me who have a passion and a desire to make music, pursuing music as a profession is a promising and satisfying way to make a living doing what one enjoys.

Works Cited

- Aviles, Cesar. "How To Make Money and Find Gigs." *Tipsforclassicalmusicians.com*. Cesar Aviles, 22 Jun. 2012. Web. 7 Mar. 2012.
- Cutler, David. *The Savvy Musician: Building a Career, Earning a Living, and Making a Difference*. Pittsburgh: Helius Press, 2010. Print.
- Cso.org*. Chicago Symphony Orchestra Association, 2013. Web. 16 April 2013.
- Field, Shelly. *Career Opportunities in the Music Industry*. New York: Facts On File, 1995. Print.
- Gibson, James. *Playing For Pay: How To Be a Working Musician*. Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1990. Print.
- Lee, Julie. "A Requiem for Classical Music." *Regional Review*. 13.2 (2003): 14. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 16 April 2013.
- Mackey, John. "Music Publishing." *Ostimusic.com*. Osti Music, 26 July 2009. Web. 7 Mar. 2013.
- Music-usa.org*. National Association for Composers/USA, n.d. Web. 16 April 2013.
- Reed, Marc and Andrew Trachsel. "Why Band?" *International Trumpet Guild Journal* 36.1 (2011): 76-77. Print.
- Seltzer, George. "It's Supply and Demand Stupid!" *Music Teachers National Association* 51.3 (2001): 28. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 16 April 2013.
- Zohn, Steven. "Telemann in the Marketplace: The Composer as Self-publisher." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 58.2 (Summer 2005): p275. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 7 Mar. 2013.