

Some Thoughts about Starting and Growing a Freelance Career in Music

I. Musical Concerns

Auditioning well is the fastest way to get started. Most of my opportunities have resulted from doing well at auditions, either directly or indirectly.

That said, there is no substitute for excellent ensemble skills. Over the long term, excellent ensemble skills will help you build a freelance career even if you have difficulty auditioning as well as you are capable of playing. However, no matter how well you audition, you will not get more calls if you do not:

- Listen and blend well.
- Play with rhythm that is both independently strong and flexible.
- Play with intonation that is both independently strong and flexible.
- Catch on quickly to play with style that is appropriate to the repertoire and ensemble.
- Play with a flexible palette of tone color.
 - Hint: Focus and clear pitch center are always more important than size of sound.

Know your role in the ensemble. If you are hired to play in a section, always defer to the principal, even if you think you are a stronger player. If you have a question for the conductor, ask the principal player; it's their job to ask the conductor, not yours. If there's a clear moment for you to shine, go for it 150%; the rest of the time it is your job to make everybody else sound good and feel comfortable.

If you are hired to play a principal chair, be a clear, respectful leader and pay close attention to the other principals. String principals always defer to the concertmaster; brass principals to the principal trumpet; woodwinds to the principal oboe...or flute, depending on which one you ask. Lead by consistent example rather than words as much as possible, and do not make comments just to assert authority.

My biggest, most important piece of advice is to play chamber music, play chamber music, and then play more chamber music. Form a standing group and go for it, rehearsing a lot, performing as often as possible, going to chamber music competitions, etc. Build up a library for your group such that you can play any kind of gig that comes up. Before I was out of school I had played many weddings, birthday parties, fundraising events – even a mall opening – first with a trombone quartet and trio, later with a brass quintet.

You learn so much about ensemble playing and performing from chamber music, but also about interpersonal relations – how to talk to each other, how to give and take criticism without hurt feelings, etc. These skills are essential to every musician.

Furthermore, the people in your group are your first and most important contacts, and every member's professional success becomes a part of every other member's professional success. When one of the trumpet players in the quintet wins the principal trumpet position of a local orchestra, who do you think she wants at the top of the sub list for second trumpet? For principal trombone, horn, and tuba?

II. Extra-Musical Concerns

Make it a habit now to keep an accurate calendar. Keep everything about your schedule in it, as far into the future as you know. Have it with you 100% of the time. Double-booking yourself IS NOT ACCEPTABLE.

Make it a habit now to respond to phone messages, texts, and emails in a timely manner. 24 hours is the absolute longest anybody should have to wait for you to respond to an email, and that timeframe is shrinking all the time. If you do not know yet whether you can take the gig for whatever reason, respond right away anyway to say so and ask for a day to work it out.

Students, start with your teachers. Always respond to your teachers in a timely fashion. For every reason, including the fact that your teachers can usually refer you for work, and they want to refer people who will be responsible.

Make it a habit now to smile and greet people, even – especially – janitors, waitstaff, and other people who (probably) can't advance your career. Strive to be a genuinely friendly person. If you tend to be shy and this doesn't come naturally to you, then you will have to work a little harder at it, but don't go so far that it feels insincere. Insincerity is always obvious. Think twice before saying anything negative about another person, and then don't say it.

Make it a habit to express gratitude and appreciation to people. Contractors and conductors do appreciate being thanked for the opportunity. Other musicians crave appreciation and consideration just as much as you do.

It has been my experience that generosity comes back around.

III. Once You Have a Gig

Show up early. I target a half hour at a minimum; more if I have to travel more than an hour or during rush hour. Warm up at home if at all possible.

When you're on the gig, don't show off...until the music asks for it, of course. If you have an audition coming up and you want to be practicing excerpts in the breaks, use a practice mute or confine yourself to the soft ones while you're around other people. Ditto solo repertoire.

Show up prepared. This should go without saying, but if you don't have to be sight reading, don't be. Bring any mute you might need. If you don't know, bring them all (well, most of them). Have a pencil and an eraser.

At some point you will have to cancel on a gig you've been called for; you might actually get sick, you might have an actual emergency; it happens. In any case, always be truthful about it, always let the contractor know as soon as you know, and always offer to find a replacement. Unless it's an actual last-minute emergency, do not send a sub without talking to the contractor first! This will lead to hurt feelings; I can tell you from experience.

Always recommend subs who play at or very close to your level. If you can send somebody better than you, go ahead and do it. It does nobody any good to recommend somebody for a gig they are not ready or not suited for, and it certainly doesn't make you look better to recommend subs who don't play at a level comparable to yours.

In some places it is taboo to cancel on one gig in order to take another, but in many others (like Boston) it's fairly common and very few contractors take it personally. Find out what the custom is where you live and want to work, and always, always, always be up front and honest.

And always know that by canceling on one gig to take another, you are telling that contractor their gig is not at the top of your priority list. I have certainly lost gigs this way, but I made my choices, I'm happy with them, and I am still friendly with those contractors. And in many cases friends and former students of mine do that work.

IV. What to Practice to be Ready When the Call Comes?

Nothing is more important to your professional success than your ability to play consistently in time and in tune, and if you practice wisely you can improve tremendously in those aspects. Here are some of my specific recommendations:

My favorite intonation tool when practicing alone is not a tuner or a drone; it's a blindfold. I buy cheap sleep masks in bulk and give one to everybody who ever takes a lesson with me. Put on a blindfold and start playing slow scales. Stop relying on external feedback and simply allow yourself to hear the sounds you are making clearly. It will take a few minutes for you to relax into the process; that's okay. Match the tone color from one note to the next and match the pitch to your internal ear. When in doubt, sing with the best voice you can muster and let your voice guide your inner ear.

If you are not one of the gifted people born with an unshakeable groove (I'm not), work hard to hone your rhythmic skills. Check out my YouTube channel for a [very simple scale exercise](#) that will help you subdivide and coordinate your tone production to your subdivision. This is applicable to any instrument, really. Use a metronome a lot, but don't just let it give you every beat; remove beats so that you are having to fill in the ones in between. This level of concentration is a skill that has to be practiced and requires mental stamina. You need to build up that mental stamina the same way you build up physical stamina.

Fundamentals are your friends. Anytime is a great time for an Arban's project (or whatever the equivalent is for your instrument). Practice for a broad range of articulations and tone colors. Think about imitating other instruments, so that you can match a trumpet articulation, or a tuba articulation, or the way a clarinet player can seemingly diminuendo forever (that one is hard!).

Sight reading is usually not stressed enough at school. Make yourself do it! Sight reading parties with friends are great ways to have fun and improve everybody's skills.

Finally, remember that you chose to be a musician because you love it. The more appreciative you are of the opportunities presented to you, the more positive your attitude in every situation, the more people will want to have you with them on their gigs.