

The Straight Dope

What follows are some thoughts for my students or any other young person thinking about becoming a professional musician which they will probably ignore - but they shouldn't.

It's a hard life and a difficult way to make a living. This was something I heard people say, but it didn't really sink in. "Fine", I thought, "it's hard. So what? I'm a hard worker and I'm talented. It'll be different for me." This began a long period of bargaining with myself, I suppose, up until this day. A series of justifications and denials, without which, it just wouldn't have been possible to move forward. I think if you know what actually lies ahead of you as an artist, that you would simply not be able to go on.

Let's cut to the chase and say that, at least in some measurable ways, I have succeeded. I have been working professionally for 25 years and have been making my living exclusively as a musician for the last 12 years. I have worked with conductors such as Zubin Mehta, Ricardo Muti, Charles Dutoit and Gustavo Dudamel. I've played with orchestras including, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the San Francisco Symphony, the Seattle Symphony, the San Francisco Ballet and Opera, and New York City Opera National Company. I can be heard on recordings with the LA Philharmonic, as well as several movie and TV soundtracks including Godzilla, Pacific Rim, The Simpsons, and Family Guy. I can play.

The goal, however, was to win my teacher's job when he retired with the LA Phil. I had a shot. And I failed. I have actually failed so much that it is easier to count the things that I have won than to count the number of things I've attempted and failed. When I was a student, I won positions in the Debut Orchestra and the American Youth Symphony, two concerto competitions at Long Beach State, and the Pacific Symphony Institute concerto competition. I won a one year position with an Italian opera orchestra when I was 23, a spot with the John Tesh tour at 26, a job as the trombone teacher at CSU Fresno when I was 33, and I won the audition for bass trombone with the Oakland Symphony when I was 40. That's it. Those are the "wins".

In between those wins I took and lost over 40 professional bass trombone auditions. I effectively lost that one year Italian orchestra position when the principal decided to plug in his student instead. I became the bass trombonist with the New York City Opera National Company after working very hard for 4 years to get the job only to have the whole thing fold two weeks after I got my welcome letter when the management decided it wasn't worth their time or money - a loss. I became the in-house bass trombone/tuba player for the Sacramento Broadway scene and lost it when I subbed out one too many performances.

Are you starting to get the picture? You lose more than you win in this business. You have to become very resilient and thick skinned. And you have to begin to look at the whole thing a little different. Any paradigm that has you winning should be thrown out immediately. You don't ever win at this thing in terms of being done improving. Even if you achieve your goal, you're not done, unless you have so much natural talent that you can coast. There are those people out there - bastards.

For most of us mortals, however, it is more useful and beneficial to have a different paradigm. Winning is a byproduct of a good work ethic and a healthy understanding that what you're a part of is a discipline. A daily set of routines that build exponentially upon one another to create a well practiced and well prepared musician. It's the every day part of it that is the key. You are allowed to take an occasional break in order to not burn out, but you have to commit to a discipline of working towards your goals and getting better every day.

Every musician I know who is successful, even the very talented ones, spent some extended period of their life "in the shed". A time when there was no tv, no sports, no vacations, no video games, no time for anything else that wasn't their

instrument. Think of it as a bonding period with your instrument. Most of us brass players did it in college. Most string players and pianists did it before their 10th birthday. Woodwinds did it sometime in between the two. Generally speaking, of course.

The hard part is after this initial growth spurt, or, God-forbid, after you actually win a job or achieve another big early success. If you decide to coast, you will invariably begin to decline as a player and either lose your work or begin to alienate your colleagues who have to pick up your slack. Many people who find themselves in this position have forgotten what won them the job in the first place. It's easy to high-five yourself and get into a mindset where you believe that you are just better at what you do than the other poor slobs who didn't make it as far as you. Certainly, talent plays into this equation, but the biggest reason people succeed is that they just worked harder than the other people who showed up that day.

I believe a more productive paradigm is to just try to do better than you did the day before. Simply practice to improve. I think it sets you up psychologically to be in a stronger position. You "win" your competitions and auditions because you were the one that worked the hardest. Most importantly, if you end up not achieving your goals, you are better equipped to deal with the grieving period that follows each loss.

This is a very real thing and should not be underestimated. I've grieved for years over some losses because I didn't recognize the feeling for what it was. I tried to run away from the hard parts of the grieving process. It's just like the hard parts of real life - no matter how you try to distract yourself, one way or another you will be forced to deal with them if you are to move on and grow from the experience. Some people get stuck here.

You will lose. It's how you deal with the loss that will ultimately determine your success.

Now let's stop speaking of winning and losing and discuss some other parts of the business. Everyone you meet, and I mean everyone you meet in the music business, beginning with your first music teacher is part of your lifelong network. You can and will get work from people that you met when you were still figuring out how to play 16th notes or how many key signatures there were. Personally, I have received much more work over the years from my own personal network than I ever did from any audition. For some professionals I know it is a different situation, but the importance of developing and maintaining your network cannot be overstated.

In my experience, you want to shy away from the Dale Carnegie "How to Win Friends and Influence People" approach where you risk alienating people who think you're trying to manipulate them. Professional musicians, for the most part, are street smart and can recognize it when someone is just trying to get to know them in order to get something from them. When I say develop and maintain your network, what I mostly mean is to just be cool. Be yourself and try to not piss anyone off. If you do contact people who you want something from, the best thing is to be honest. If you're looking for work or you're trying to get into the school where they teach, tell them so in as diplomatic a way as you can come up with. They've all been there, and there's no harm in asking.

One reality that you need to be aware of is that there is simply not enough work out there for the number of qualified people being graduated from the nation's music schools. However, Gene Porkorny, tubist of the Chicago Symphony once told me that there will always be work for good players. I have found this to be mostly true for folks who stick around an area for long enough, but you do have to be lucky as well.

Another piece of wisdom I received from my first major teacher and former bass trombonist of the LA Philharmonic, Jeff Reynolds, is that if you want to be a player you have to begin to compare yourself with the best there is on your instrument. If that statement throws you for a loop, then you may want to "get a new gig" (another Jeff-ism) and look to something else to make your money. The thing is that if you can not see yourself playing as well as the best players on

your instrument, then you should not enter the competitive world of being a professional musician. It's too brutal and there is no such thing as being good enough. You have to accept the challenge of becoming one of the best or you need to do something else.

The good news is that music is one of the few things in this world where your success is largely self-determined. What I mean by this is that the harder you work at it, the more you get out of it. You want to be first chair in the top band? Then find out how hard the person currently in that chair works and work harder than them. Some people will have a head start on you, but natural attrition, either by them graduating out or changing their own life focus, will often create future opportunities for you. In my experience, if you work hard and wait for your opportunity, you will be rewarded. This model also holds true for the professional music world as well, however, the stakes are much higher.

Perhaps a more honest and realistic way to say this is if you work hard and wait for your opportunity, you CAN be rewarded. Sometimes, no matter how hard you try the opportunities don't come, or other folks get them instead of you. This is a hard one. I've known some amazing musicians over the years that just weren't given the same shots as their more successful colleagues and simply do not work. Jeff used to also say, "Right time, right place, with the right stuff." If one of those parameters are off, the calls may not come. It's unfair - no other way to explain it.

There's more good news here, though. You see, the whole time you've been pursuing this dream you have also been doing things like getting degrees, juggling the complex reality of making a living while having the discipline of practicing, and essentially just learning to survive. I can honestly say that I don't know anyone who I went through music school with who is not succeeding at what they do today. It might not be making a living with their instruments, but they're doing well. It's not wasted time or energy. Plus they have the added bonus of having gone after their life passion - something that many more people than you probably think have never done. Nor will they ever do until they retire or make enough money to feel comfortable - two life goals that can be elusive.

Go for it, I say! But have open eyes. It's hard - really hard. No, I mean really hard. But if you're willing to accept the challenge of becoming one of the best there are at what you do, there are some wonderful experiences waiting for you.

Words cannot adequately describe what it is like to sit on the stage in that wash of sound while something so sublimely beautiful as Debussy's Nuages from his work Nocturnes goes on all around you. Or the viscerally satisfying feeling you get as a bass trombonist of playing the last page of Shostakovich's 7th Symphony. Or being the only member of the brass to answer the orchestral fanfare in the middle of the second movement of Tchaik 5. As I mentioned above, I didn't get my dream gig with the LA Phil, but I have had the honor of playing both of those last two pieces as a very grateful sub in my teachers old chair. And somewhere along the way in between all of these struggles of winning and losing, a valued friend from my lifelong personal network gave me the opportunity to teach at my alma mater, CSU Long Beach. A job I've had the great privilege of doing for the past 10 years.

I know it's a cliché to say this, but if I can do it, you can too. I started at Long Beach State as an ok sophomore transfer student - 3rd best bass trombone (I'm not sure there was a 4th). I found my people and went for it, because sometimes a place chooses you. I believe Long Beach chose me. Maybe, if you're lucky, some place will choose you too. I hope so! Maybe it'll be Long Beach?

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