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Is the Music Conservatory Model *Obsolete?*

In 2004, the New York Times published a sobering article, *The Juilliard Effect: Ten Years Later*, tracing the paths of 44 instrumentalist graduates from the class of 1994, and seeing where their Juilliard training took them. Despite a mandate on Juilliard's prestigious faculty to produce the next generation of soloists, only three of the 44 graduates identified themselves as soloists. 25% of the graduates won orchestral positions, actually an impressive number when you consider the fierce competition and little opportunity. Still, some claim Juilliard failed to prepare them for orchestra playing or teaching, or for the practical aspects of forging a career. But the most jarring statistic is that nearly half of this graduating class disappeared or abandoned music entirely. >

What the 21st Century Musician Needs to Know to Survive

BY ROBERT THIES

The author Daniel Wakin writes:

Sometimes the struggle is just too much, and many drop out, perhaps disillusioned with a once-sacred endeavor that has come to seem a cold, unforgiving trade. All of those now outside music have struggled to come to terms with their new identities. Surrender can be a wrenching adjustment for people who have lived their whole lives in the intimate embrace of an instrument and whose talent brought them glory at a young age. The drive to study music is so blinding, and doing anything else so inconceivable, that young players are oblivious to the risk. Sometimes it is hard to determine whether they are driven by single-mindedness or they live in self-denial.

PAINTING A PICTURE

The reality can be daunting. One moment we are secure in an academic environment, surrounded by like-minded ambitious, talented peers. We are fearless, full of energy, and ready to conquer the world. We envision the path: we will win competitions, managers will sign us onto their rosters, and before long we will be traveling the far corners of the world sharing our passion with audiences everywhere. Orchestras will hire us as soloists, we will sign with Deutsche Grammophon, and the public will adore us.

Instead, we are alone. Our friends have dispersed. We might even win an international competition, but management companies pay no heed. Artistic directors of local orchestras and long-established recital series ignore our communiqués. We learn that even the smaller regional orchestras will only work directly with New York managers.

Winning an international competition doesn't turn heads the way it used to. Today

you have to win four or five competitions for people to take notice. This is partly due to the sheer number of competitions that exist today and the corresponding number of prizewinners—not just pianists, but string and wind players, vocalists, conductors, and composers. It becomes clearer why managers, conductors, and artistic directors pay little heed to these competition laureates.

Year after year we see the same soloists return with our local Philharmonic orchestras. It's a club, and without the aid of powerful financial backers to hire a major PR firm, it's nearly impossible to break through the glass ceiling and get noticed. Most musicians do not sit on a nest egg, and many have embraced YouTube and social media as a free platform to show off their musical gifts, hoping to get noticed.

Music schools release into the world hordes of graduates every year with very few job prospects ahead of them. Many graduates will set up their own teaching studios. Some will remain in school another 3-5 years to get a Doctorate degree so that their application for a college position will be considered among the hundreds of applicants.

Many piano graduates seek out a position as a staff pianist at their local colleges, and play with singers and instrumentalists for their recitals and juries. It is often steady and reliable work, but frequently these colleges will intentionally limit employees' hours to part-time status to avoid paying benefits.

WHAT IT TAKES TO SUCCEED

Often the hardest lesson to learn is that when it comes to making a career, talent is rarely the most important quality. Success requires discipline, focus and boundless energy; beyond passion, one needs grit, a sense of purpose, and perhaps most impor-

One underestimated tool for a successful career in music is versatility.

tantly, connections. With rare exception, behind every successful artist is a team of supporters who took the artist under their wings and helped the artist cultivate a career, often through financial influence.

But without the entourage of supporters, or the personality for shameless self-promotion, a musician might have to seek other creative avenues for employment. One underestimated tool for a successful career in music is versatility. The more diverse a musician's tool palette of skills and experiences is, the more doors that will open.

As I wrote in my previous article in the Fall 2017 issue of *CMT Journal*, "I Am not An Accompanist," for decades there was a stigma around the solo pianist who branched into ensemble playing, as he would forever be branded an accompanist and forever lose the mysterious aura of being a "solo artist." The implication here is that only a soloist can be a true artist. Fortunately, this absurd and archaic attitude is becoming but a distant memory. More and more successful "soloists" are sharing the stage in duo and trio dynamics, and the art of collaboration is very slowly becoming better understood and appreciated.

The reality is that those willing to collaborate with other musicians are those actually making a living. Pianists and violinists are often the slowest to accept this, because if one looks at any orchestra's season schedule, it becomes immediately evident that pianists and violinists >

have the advantage, as their opportunities as a concerto soloist remain far greater than those of other instruments. However, unfortunately this reality doesn't increase the demand for piano and violin soloists. Before long, music conservatories will need to follow the example of the Yale School of Music and combine the piano performance and collaborative piano majors. Only a pianist equally experienced in these two disciplines will begin to achieve a level of musicianship to carry them to greater success. And for most musicians, success has less to do with fame, but more to do with the ability to pay rent and afford health insurance.

Until the music conservatories reevaluate their curricula to be more encompassing, teachers of pre-college students can better prepare their students. While many teachers might not feel comfortable teaching outside the traditional classical music canon, that doesn't preclude them from being open-minded to encourage students to explore all avenues of music-making. After all, teachers are guides and mentors too.

TIME TO STOP SPECIALIZING

As more and more musicians grasp the practical value of versatility, the idea of specializing will lose its relevance. Ideally, all students should master their instruments, while simultaneously studying theory, harmony, composition, and conducting. This is what the Moscow and Paris conservatories demanded of their students at the turn of the 20th century, and explains why these professors produced some of the greatest instrumentalists and composers ever to live.

Until today's conservatories return to that model from the Golden Age, here are some ideas that teachers of pre-college students might adopt into their own teaching, or encourage their students to discover—all of which will develop a student's musicianship, and put them ahead of the game.

Solo repertoire: Many pianists have found great comfort in the collaborative environment, avoiding the stage fright induced by all the attention being directed to them, or the mandate to play music from memory. However, continuing the study of solo

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repertoire gives these collaborative pianists an edge by honing their ability to interpret, analyze, and execute a solo piano work. The skills necessary to rely on only oneself, with no other voice to hide behind, deepens their confidence and experience when they re-enter a collaborative situation. Putting music to memory also pushes us to listen better and dig deeper into the music, truly mastering its detail. If all that we do is share the stage or spend the day teaching, sometimes our enjoyment leans too much on the attitudes of our partners and students. I find that the return to solo repertoire always centers me, and reminds me why I fell in love with music all those years ago.

Chamber music is arguably the best avenue to develop one's musicianship. One takes all the skills in mastering solo repertoire and adds the elements of ensemble, balance, voicing, breathing with others, spontaneity and reaction to others, teamwork, and camaraderie. And the chamber music of Schubert, Dvorak and Brahms—their chamber sonatas, trios, quartets, quintets—is some of the most inspired music they gave us. Not to experience this music would be a travesty.

Large ensemble affiliation: Whether it's a big band, wind orchestra, or community orchestra, this experience teaches countless skills in balance, intonation, working in ensembles and with a conductor, preparing parts, and more encompassing skills such as leadership, camaraderie, professional behavior, and social interaction. It also develops a musical community and encourages future musical projects and endeavors.

Sight-reading skills: Arguably one of the most important skills all musicians need to acquire is sight-reading. My teacher used to

have me sight-read solo repertoire from a compendium of intermediate-level music. But sight-reading music that involves a singer or another instrument will compel a pianist to keep forging ahead, dropping notes when necessary. Developing this skill is the ultimate tool to exposing students to an infinite amount of music in all styles, and having a fun experience making music with others.

Study of theory, harmony, composition, arranging: Even if a student is aiming for a career as a performer, expanding their experience to include these disciplines will give them greater insight and appreciation into a composer's intentions and processes, and inform their playing and musicianship in countless ways. And those students who move away from performance for a career in composing, orchestrating, and arranging will open doors to unforeseen opportunities in concert and commercial music. And though it might sound obvious, it needs to be said that in an industry that leans heavily on technology and sound libraries, a skilled instrumentalist will be significantly better equipped—technically and musically—when writing or arranging for other instruments.

Musical theater and popular styles: Participating in musical theater productions teaches many useful skill sets that classical music study does not. Musical theater teaches students to learn how to play in popular styles with exposure to new rhythms, contemporary harmonies and playing styles; reading chord symbols; counting bars; following a conductor; and elements of improvisation. These skills foster valuable ensemble skills and how to work with jazz and pop singers. Most of all, it gives the student a broader experience, finding beauty and value in many other styles of music outside of the revered classical canon.

Jazz: A curious student of jazz learns quickly that proficiency requires the same discipline of any student of classical music. The tradition is so rich, and the benefits are innumerable. Introducing students to jazz teaches them how to read chord charts, chord symbols, improvise, “comp” (impro-

vide supportive rhythmic gestures over a tune's harmonic structure), transcribe music, and develop one's "ear" and musicianship. Their knowledge of theory and harmony is vastly expanded, and the joy of making music spontaneously and freely with others is unique to this idiom. As many teachers have no training or experience with jazz, some might turn their noses up to it. But if jazz could spark the interest of Geršwin, Rachmaninoff, Ravel, Milhaud, and others, it should be regarded as important a style of music as classical music.

Improvisation: Though some mistakenly associate it only with jazz, improvisation is an enormously important and inspiring skill to nurture. Improvisation is about creativity and experimentation, and pushes us to explore and reconnect with our instruments, reminding us why we love playing them. It takes the focus off learning notes and repertoire, and redirects our attention to listening, communication, and expression.

World music: Hearing music from around the world broadens our perspective and unearths a treasure of possibilities. Becoming familiar with other styles of musical expression can help bring us a little closer culturally and politically, too. In one of his final interviews in 1976, the famed cellist Gregor Piatigorsky said, "Music makes life better. People who have no contact with music are to be pitied. Music is a necessity. It is rich. It is imaginative. It is magnificent. And it is for everyone."

Music technology: With the digital age upon us, having skills and experience with music technology, software, and production offers opportunities in commercial projects like film and television, and creates paths to being a music engineer, programmer, producer, or music editor.

ADDITIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR PIANISTS INCLUDE:

Art song: One cannot truly appreciate Schubert, Schumann, or Strauss without delving headstrong into this underappreciated art form. Art song brings together the worlds of humanity's greatest poets and our

revered composers who were inspired by them. The marriage of music to poetry is as powerful as that of music to film. Playing art song requires the sensitivity of a chamber musician as well as a commitment to understanding the poetry to appreciate how the composer has colored the text or painted an aural landscape. Also, a good singer and pianist will approach this art form as a partnership, both assuming equal responsibility for interpreting the piece. The shorter duration of a song compared to an instrumental sonata offers an additional challenge: within the context of a few minutes, the singer and pianist must become storytellers and paint an entire world of sound, image, and nuance. Sharing the stage with a singer in art song is an intimate experience unlike any other in music.

Opera arias: Knowing the well-known arias of the operatic literature is practical for so many reasons, especially as most classical singers dream of being an opera singer. The music is stunning, and the pianist is exposed to a wealth of other composers he wouldn't have experienced otherwise. The pianist plays a different role by interpreting an orchestral reduction. Orchestral analysis is necessary, requiring the pianist, like a conductor, to prioritize and know what voices to bring out and which voices to temper. Deep immersion into this repertoire is a common path towards becoming a répétiteur and an opera conductor.

Concerto reductions: Playing concerto reductions is a rare and fun opportunity to step away from piano writing and instead reproduce the colors of a full orchestra. The pianist steps into the role of conductor and orchestra, and must study the orchestration and mimic the various colors, textures, and articulations. And like a conductor, the pianist also learns when to play a supportive role to the soloist, and when to lead.

Other keyboards: Obviously having skills on other keyboards opens other doors for possible paid engagements. Knowing the harpsichord opens a world of ensemble opportunities in Baroque and early music. Learning the organ can help land a perma-

nent position in a church, synagogue, and choir settings.

Musicians, like the rest of society, need to be more inclusive. We need to stretch beyond our comfort zones, never stop learning, embrace our differences, build bridges, and avoid labeling ourselves and others.

Piatigorsky ruminates:

From the beginning, I have only wished to be a good servant of music. I don't know how to pinpoint exactly what I am. I think I'm simply a musician—not "chamber musician," not a "soloist." "Musician" is a real category; I am not so sure about the others. My goodness, I'm full of titles. I don't know how many doctorates I have—but thank God nobody calls me "doctor." Ah, those titles. So superficial, so meaningless. ■

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