

FIDDLER ON THE RUN

Crafting a Career in Music

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This is how fast your life can change. I'm talking to you today because the great violinist Itzhak Perlman pulled me off the basketball court. Technically it was my mother who kept me out of a playoff game in high school, but it was to go hear Perlman play.

You can imagine that he didn't come to Macon, Georgia very often. The night he happened to show up was the same night my team was in the playoffs for the first time. But my mother wouldn't take no for an answer, and I went to the concert. After hearing just a few notes, I knew right then and there that I would be a musician for the rest of my life.

I didn't know how hard it would be, or how different my career would be from that of almost any violinist who came before. Several of us in my generation aren't just violinists. We're businesspeople. We're salespeople. We're entrepreneurs. And you're going to have to be, too. You'll need to be a self-promoter, a producer, a project manager and — most important of all — an effective communicator.

In the old days, the paths were steep but clearly marked. You practiced hard and studied with good people, and maybe you won a competition. If you did, it was big news. It made the newspapers and music magazines, and there were a lot more of those.

Then you played or sang in recitals in small cities. Then medium-sized cities. Then big cities, where record producers came to hear you and offer you deals. You got on the radio, maybe even on TV once in a while. And if you had a different blessing from the career gods, you could still have a great time and make a good living in an orchestra or a chamber group. If you got one of those jobs, you had it for life — or until you couldn't stand the rest of your quartet anymore.

But all that has changed. The big record labels, the music magazines, many of the classical radio stations — gone. Music critics — almost all gone. Where are you going to get that great review so your mother can brag about you? If you had told me early in my career a day would come when the Philadelphia Orchestra would declare bankruptcy, or the Colorado Symphony would have to suspend operations for a large chunk of their season, I would have thought you were crazy.

What we are dealing with is a time of unprecedented change in the music we love. Now, the career paths aren't just unmarked — they're on shifting sand. Good luck on that solo career or that orchestra job. You're going to need luck AND a business-oriented education that prepares the entrepreneurial musician for the real world, because there are lots of people fighting for the same opportunities.

And it will be a great deal easier for you if you do three simple things. Embrace the moment. Prepare for the next. And, most important, take comfort in the fact that your career is YOUR career — one that you make yourself.

First, the moment. Some people my age and older are nostalgic for the days of the record store. In any medium to large city, and even some small ones, you could find a good-sized selection of classical records and maybe even a smartypants clerk to tell you that you were buying the wrong one. Then came Borders. Then went Borders.

But as all of you students know, you have access to an inconceivable amount of music on the Internet — and some of you even pay for it. My point about embracing the moment is: Survey the landscape, use the tools at your disposal.

Don't just think: Oh, I'm going to play this concerto more beautifully than anyone ever has, and I'm done. This moment isn't just about repertoire, it's about projects and relationships. I play my fair share of standard rep, but I'm in the middle of a three-year project playing a Philip Glass concerto that I commissioned. It's the work I'm performing here in Denver this weekend.

This piece brought me together with the Venice Baroque Orchestra. We are touring around the world and now presenters want us to do something else. So in this case, a successful project is leading to another.

It took me many years to get to a place where I have three simultaneous jobs: Playing the violin, running a chamber music festival in Rome, Italy, and working with the McDuffie Center for Strings at Mercer University in my hometown. Along the way, I may not have gotten all the bookings I wanted, and some opportunities went to other people. But that happens to everyone. Things don't always go your way. But they have a better chance if they involve situations you create for yourself.

To do that you need tools and relationships. That's why we at Mercer University believe in training your generation of musicians not just in music, but in all the skills you'll need to navigate through the music business. Our program is small — a maximum enrollment of just 26 string players who can form a chamber orchestra. They are taught by resident faculty and visiting instructors who include some of the world's leading musicians — violist Lawrence Dutton of the Emerson Quartet, cellist Hans Jorgen Jensen, not to mention Colorado's own star cellist, Julie Albers. This past spring our students performed with Atlanta Symphony and Aspen Music Festival director Robert Spano and Mike Mills from the legendary rock band R.E.M.

In addition to their intensely focused musical studies, we're training our students in economics — micro and macro. Technology. Business law. Entrepreneurship. Digital rights. Fundraising. Non-profits. Public speaking. Social media. Psychology.

We are constantly thinking of ways to expand a student's field of vision and skill set. The excellent St. Lawrence String Quartet gave a master class for both our students and the Mercer Bears men's basketball team. Then we watched the team practice, break down film from their last game and play their next one. The goal was to expose all these undergraduates to different modes of preparation and performance, different types of teamwork.

We have plans for interdisciplinary programs of unprecedented scope. And the ideas come from everywhere in the Mercer University orbit. With the School of Theology we are planning a course and performance based on Haydn's Seven Last Words of Christ.

A federal judge in Macon wants to develop a project around the film *Death and the Maiden*. It's based on Ariel Dorfman's play and Schubert's string quartet and song of the same name. Students from all parts of Mercer would be invited to study issues around political prisoners, ethics, modern history — and hear our musicians play the Schubert that started it all.

We have also gone outside the university to form partnerships with the Aspen Music Festival, the Rome Chamber Music Festival, the Colburn School Conservatory of Music in Los Angeles, and the New World Symphony in Miami. Our students can participate in master classes with and receive coaching from the New World Symphony via Internet2.

So the world we are living in is an extremely exciting blend of old and new. We are playing and talking about music more than three centuries old through high-def cameras and fiber optic cables. But classical music has always been at the intersection of tradition and cutting-edge thought. Great composers from Bach to Mozart to Steve Reich and Philip Glass have found inspiration in ancient sacred words. Young musicians are sampling all sorts of old and new music to create sounds our grandparents could never have imagined.

And this new world is now yours. Look at where you are. Listen to what you love and find music that's completely different. Think about where you want to be, even if it's a place that hasn't been built yet.

When I was a high school athlete and moderately motivated violinist, there was no New World Symphony and no Kronos Quartet. The Metropolitan Opera and Los Angeles Philharmonic weren't appearing on movie screens across the country. I couldn't play you thousands of pieces of music from my phone. And I certainly couldn't put video of myself online for anyone, anywhere in the world, to watch me play the violin or even shoot free throws.

This new world is yours — not Yo-Yo Ma's, not Itzhak Perlman's nor even mine. And you have tools we never had. Use them. Make music. Make more music. And make music mean more — to more and more people. Thank you. I'll be listening.