

Interlude: Five Fundamental Questions

Clearing the Runway: Removing Obstacles to Your Success

Before venturing further with the practicalities of your music career, there are some larger conceptual issues that need attention. The five questions below speak to the essentials that determine your satisfaction in your career and life. These core issues often go unexamined by musicians. Unfortunately, when not dealt with, these issues can be stumbling blocks on your career path. Thinking over these questions can help you clear the path to your future.

1. Why Are You in Music? ♦

It's easy to get bogged down in everyday life and lose sight of why you first got into music and what you value most in your musical activities. There are many ways to be involved in music, so knowing what you want out of your involvement is essential to making good choices. Understanding your motivation will help you decide which projects to pursue and how to spend your time and energy toward creating a satisfying life in music.

Musicians rarely grapple with this crucial question of their motivation. If you take the time to reflect, you will most likely identify a range of reasons for your involvement in music. What's more, goals and ambitions often change over the years. So periodically reexamining your fundamental drive will help you assess whether or not the journey is worthwhile. Bear in mind that we are all “works in progress.”

The Motivation Quiz

There are no right or wrong answers here. There is only the value of examining your motives. Check off all the reasons why you are in music. Add more as needed.

- Love of music itself, both as a listener and as a performer
- Love of performing, being in front of an audience, the adrenaline rush, the excitement, the applause
- Connecting with the audience, sharing a sense of community and communication
- Desire for acceptance, encouragement, approval (from parents, teachers, peers, and audience)
- Attraction to the “musician lifestyle,” the idealism, ambition, and the daily rhythms of practice, preparation, and performance
- Sense of accomplishment
- Sense of identity, mission in life
- Sense of belonging to a community of the arts, something larger and more essential than a mere job or profession

- ❑ Challenge to surpass one's limitations, to constantly improve
 - ❑ Communication: music as a means of expression that is more fulfilling than either words or any other arts discipline
 - ❑ Other reasons? Add yours here:
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2. How Do You Define Success? ♦

Musicians can be so focused on improving their abilities as performers that they avoid defining the version of success they actually seek. How do you picture success? What does creating a satisfying life in music mean to you?

When advising musicians, I generally run into two extreme camps. On the one hand are the complete idealists, interested only in *artistic* success, not financial success. They don't care what they have to do to make a living as long as they have time and freedom. These people proudly wear the "starving artist" badge, and dealing with any aspect of the business of music is viewed as "selling out." Unfortunately, this extreme position is difficult to maintain without a trust fund or second income.

On the other hand are those musicians who define success as having a major international career, worldwide acclaim, and the imagined appropriate financial reward for such stature. For these people, success means fame and the rarefied atmosphere of superstardom.

But outside the arts, other highly skilled, accomplished professionals are considered successful even if they are *not* famous. The idea is illustrated in this riddle:

What do you call a person who graduates from an Ivy League medical school at the bottom of his class?

A doctor.

How does this apply to musicians? There are highly skilled and accomplished musicians who do not consider themselves successful because they have not attained national or international recognition. They may perform locally and regionally, and have created wonderful lives for themselves and their families. They may combine performing and teaching with recording, freelancing, and other work. Viewed from the outside, their lives seem interesting, varied, and satisfying. But they may not consider themselves successful because they have not achieved "superstar" status. It's not unusual to hear gifted and experienced older musicians lament the fact that they never got that lucky break or the major label contract of their dreams. And they may express some version of "I could have made it big if only ..."

To me, the problem in all this is how narrowly musicians define success and how they discount their own value and achievements. How you define success for yourself determines how you will measure your life's work. Your estimation of your accomplishments can either contribute to your happiness or make you bitter and resentful.

So when you take the measure of your life, what kind of yardstick will you use? As you advance in your career, you need to notice and appreciate the everyday triumphs, the series of small successes along the way. It's important to be both practical and patient; long-term career development is about process. It requires separating the fantasy of media-hyped stardom from

your own values and goals.

Goals and priorities can change over the years. Your goals at age 20 are different from what they will be at age 30, 40, or 50. Look at how the priorities of Astrid Schween, the cellist of the Lark Quartet, have shifted more than once over the years. Early in the quartet's history, the Larks had a grueling tour schedule, playing 100 concerts per season. Later on, as several members were starting families, they focused more on New York City–based community engagement and education work and asked their manager to limit their touring schedule. These days, Astrid is excited to be adding concerto and recital work to her schedule, something she had no room for earlier on.

Besides your own goals changing, available opportunities will change as well. Technology has fundamentally changed the way music is heard and taught, distributed and purchased. As audience demographics change, so does the arts economy. Orchestras, opera companies, jazz clubs, and festivals are all undergoing rapid change. As you develop your career, you will need to be open to exploring new opportunities and expanding your skill set.

Many musicians find that as they develop their careers, they want to make a larger impact, to help improve their own local communities and beyond. This is one of the reasons we find that the leaders of major arts institutions are typically either practicing artists or former artists. Whether it is the head of the National Endowment for the Arts, the managers of performing arts centers, symphony orchestras, or conservatories, these leaders typically started out as artists and then found they also had the interest and the ambition to improve organizations and communities.

It's also important to acknowledge that career success and happiness do not necessarily go hand in hand. Life is just more complex than that. Talk to people you consider successful, people in any profession. Ask them about their definition of happiness. Most often, people speak of seeking a balance in life, of having meaningful and challenging work balanced with a rich personal life. In this balance is where many find satisfaction, contentment, and joy.

3. Is Your Thinking Getting in Your Way? ♦

The phrase “he's his own worst enemy” encapsulates the idea that individuals can sabotage their own chances of success. The problem lies typically in how these people view their circumstances—it's about their thinking. The way we think about ourselves and the world determines how we experience it.

For musicians, there's a particularly common syndrome, a type of problematic thinking. It's a black-and-white “music versus business” dichotomy, and this results in an unfortunate “us versus them” attitude. The two columns below illustrate some of the contrasting thought associations—the way musicians think (and talk) about the artistic and the business sides of the profession. These are slightly exaggerated, but all based on my experience of advising musicians.

Thought Associations

How do you think about music itself and about the business side of the music profession?

<i>Music as Art</i>	<i>versus</i>	<i>The Business of Music</i>
Good (clean, pure)		Bad (dirty, commercial)
Us (musicians, people who “get it”)		Them (everyone else)
True calling		“Selling out”
Realm of imagination, creative		Tedious, dull
Focus on practicing, performing		Focus on money, paperwork, and “administrivia”
Feeling “at home”		Feelings of discomfort, distrust
Being idealistic (perhaps unrealistic)		Being pragmatic (perhaps limited in imagination)
Art for its own sake		Music as a profession (way to earn money)
Self-satisfaction		Music for others (an audience)
Expect/wait for that “lucky break”		Do-it-yourself, artist in charge: an entrepreneurial attitude

As you read down the columns, consider your own associations with art and business. And consider this: nothing in life is ever really 100 percent good or bad. There are positive and negative aspects on both sides. The real problem here is that for musicians, this good versus bad thinking prevents them from dealing effectively with both sides of their careers. And both sides are necessary for success. This polarized thinking can prevent musicians from taking charge and from moving forward in their careers. It can keep them isolated and disconnected from others, even from potential supporters and collaborators. Careers don't happen in a vacuum. The best alternative to the “us versus them” dichotomy is to think in terms of partnerships.

4. What Kind of Partnerships Are You Creating Through Your Music? ♦

Consider the live performance experience itself. Arranging a concert involves plenty of work: securing a venue, handling the publicity, writing and printing program notes and invitations, organizing a reception, and more. To be successful, performances usually need a team of people, all working together for one goal: a successful musical experience for both the performer and the audience. Who is on your “team”? How are you treating them?

The “us versus them” thinking separates musicians from the people who are actually their partners in this artistic process. To get beyond the us/them trap, remember that performers work in partnership with others to create the live concert experience. The diagram below shows the process and the collaborators. With this illustration, notice that the performer is not in the center, and is not a lone figure, but is, in fact, part of a team. The performer—with or without a manager—works with the presenter to arrange the performance date and negotiate details. Then, in order to attract an audience to help create the live musical experience, a performer needs to connect with media outlets. Everyone in the circle is a partner in the

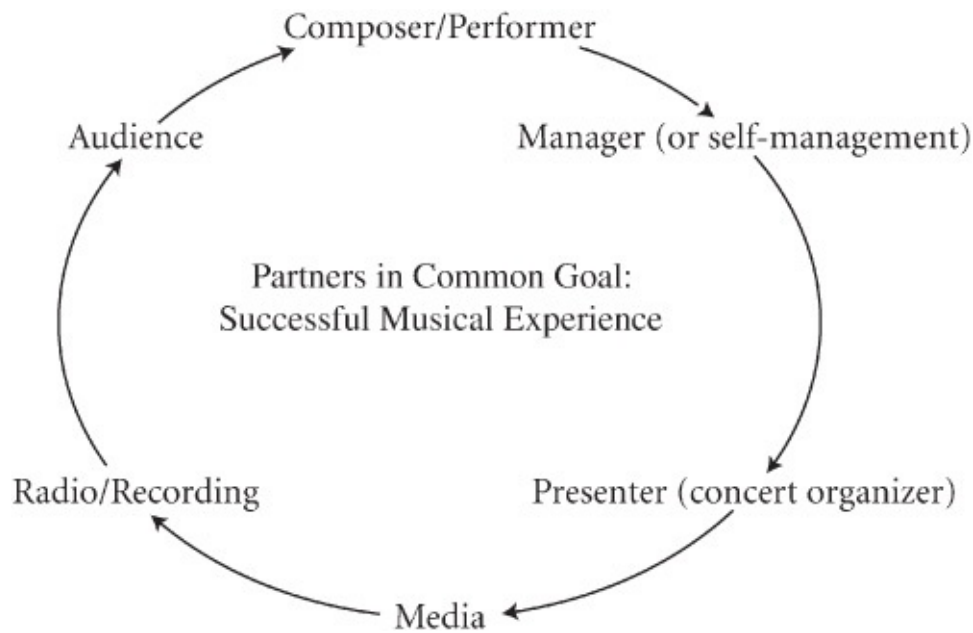
process. They are all contributing to the desired outcome, which is a successful live musical experience.

It may seem strange to see the audience in the circle of collaborators. What is the audience's role? What does an audience contribute? For musicians, a successful performance may mean a high level of technical accuracy and a close approximation to their ideal interpretation. For the concert presenter, the successful performance may mean a full house, a good postconcert reception with the artists and donors, lots of media attention, and names and addresses of potential new season subscribers. But what does the audience want?

Several years ago I heard the Borromeo String Quartet perform the Schoenberg String Quartet Op. 7, a dense, difficult, forty-five-minute work that I had never heard before. The performance was spectacular. But what I found most memorable was my experience during the performance. For once, I was not analyzing the work or the performance (the curse of a trained musician as audience member). Instead, I noticed my own experience, my pleasure in watching expressive, passionate performers, and in the collective audience response. The audience's intent listening made a kind of palpable electricity in the hall. At times my thoughts were racing, trying to keep abreast of my own sensory overload, thought connections, and trying to take in the total experience of the performance. Because the piece is one long movement, a sustained experience, I was even more conscious of my continuous thought process. At some point after the quartet finished, during the applause and cheers, it dawned on me that each person in the audience had experienced something individual, perhaps nothing at all like what I had felt. But as a communal experience, it was clear we had all shared in something powerful.

I used to think of performances as fairly one-way transactions. The musician gives the performance, and an anonymous audience receives it. At the end, the audience signals its pleasure or displeasure. But now I think of the performance not as the sounds the musician produces but as the *experience* created by the audience and the performer in partnership. What I mean is that the real performance occurs in each listener's mind, the nonverbal dance of ideas, emotions, reminiscences, and associations. The performance experience is creative, associative, individual, and communal. In the best situations, a performance creates a sense of community between musicians and audience.

What do you imagine your audience getting from your live performance? What do you imagine runs through their minds as they listen? It can be difficult for trained musicians to imagine what nonmusicians experience, because they may not listen critically. The audience may be there for entertainment or as an escape, a break from their hectic lives. People come to concerts to mark special social occasions for family and friends, or because they seek a source of inspiration, solace or comfort, an emotional and intellectual challenge, or a spiritual release.



Process and collaborators in live performance

As for the question of partnerships, it's worth considering: who *are* your partners? If you feel a sense of being part of a larger effort, and that others are pulling with you, it can improve your experience as a performer, and can improve the quality of your interactions with others.

“I believe that musical talent is a gift given and that it is inextricably bound to social responsibility ... I believe that musicians are agents for positive change in the world.”

—Pianist Kwang-Wu Kim, former administrative director of El Paso Pro-Musica, an innovative community music program in El Paso, Texas, at his inaugural address as president of the Longy School of Music in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

5. How Meaningful Is Your Work? ♦

In a culture obsessed with materialism, celebrity, and status, it can be easy for musicians to feel marginalized. Musicians often feel disconnected from their community and people working outside the arts. But stepping back from everyday concerns allows musicians to take in the bigger picture of how music functions in our culture. It is important to at least occasionally consider the larger purpose of music.

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the sheer number of memorial concerts showed how important music is in helping people express and process powerful emotions. For the first anniversary of the attacks, the “Rolling Requiem” project presented worldwide, continuous performances of the Mozart Requiem. Each performance began at 8:47 a.m. (the time of the first plane crash), so that the performances in each time zone circled the globe in sequence. I attended a Boston-area performance of the Requiem, held at one of the churches in my neighborhood. The building was packed beyond capacity, with people listening outside on the front lawn. It was so crowded that speakers were used to broadcast the performance into the basement, where organizers had set up chairs for another 100 people to sit and listen.

They'd had only a few rehearsals, and because the orchestra and chorus were made up of community volunteers, it was not a very polished performance. I sat there in that crowded basement, listening to a spotty, heartfelt reading of a master-work, surrounded by neighbors and strangers, all members of a community grieving together. I have rarely been so moved by any performance. For me, this was a powerful reminder of how music serves humanity: by creating ritual and meaning. In these ways, music *creates* community.

Each of us has moments when the importance of music is illuminated and the value of our work is made apparent. Which moments in your life have crystallized, for you, the value of music? If it's not about becoming rich and famous, then for you, what *is* it about? For anyone planning to devote his or her life to music, it's important to clarify its value and purpose in society.

Self-Assessment Inventory

The internal process for career growth involves coming to terms with your motivation, getting an accurate reading on your current abilities, and gaining the perspective needed to make appropriate positive change. To help your process, ask yourself the following questions:

- When do you feel most whole?
 - Who is the person you want to become?
 - What has been working well for you so far? *Why?*
 - What has not been working so well? *Why?*
 - How can you connect your music with your community?
 - How can you help build audiences for your music?
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These essential questions are worthy of revisiting throughout your career. Your perspective on these core issues resonates throughout your work and your life. Responding to these questions should help clarify your values and help you make career and life decisions based on these values.

Below is a terrific article with still more questions to consider concerning the creative process, performance, and practice. This article is by trombonist Abbie Conant and her husband, composer William Osborne, reprinted by permission. This piece is one of several interesting articles found on their website: <http://www.osborne-conant.org>.

Abbie Conant was formerly solo trombonist of the Munich Philharmonic. The *International Trombone Association Journal* has featured Ms. Conant in a cover article and described her as “in the first rank of world class trombonists.” She performs as a soloist and performance artist internationally and is a professor of trombone at the Staatliche Hochschule für Musik in Trossingen.

Composer William Osborne has received two ASCAP awards, a doctoral fellowship to Columbia University, alternate to the American Rome Prize, and a major prize from the Theater Commission of the City of Munich for his Beckett productions. He founded the Wasteland Company in 1984, along with his wife Abbie as the main performer, to explore women's roles in music theater. In recent years they have performed his compositions in over 115 cities in America and Europe to great critical acclaim.

21 Questions for Young Performers ♦

By Abbie Conant and William Osborne

Many of these questions for musicians stem from our work in music theater, and suggest how interdisciplinary endeavors might enhance one's understanding as a performer.

1. Are you practicing and performing with a sense of authenticity and commitment, or working as if you had a musical factory job?
2. Some stage directors are interested in the “performer’s personality and process.” Are you working with such people, or simply preparing to be a cultural institution’s “personnel”?
3. Do you try to discover the musicality of a piece for yourself?
4. A performance is a sort of response to the public. The ability to respond begins with silence, stillness and neutrality. Receptivity. Can you respond when performing, or are you too buried in routine or fear?
5. Are you trying to discover your own identity as an artist? Find it, feed it, fatten it. Think of the stage personality of Maurice Andre, Jean-Pierre Rampal, Maria Callas, or Louis Armstrong. Every person has the potential to express his or her own identity. Who are you? How will you find your artistic identity?
6. A stage director uses responsiveness, receptivity, and intuition. Do you direct the music when you play?
7. Have you thought of working together with a composer or performer to develop a music that fully expresses your identity? Is there a music that is really yours? If not, why not? What would such a music be?
8. To explore yourself without performing (just practicing) leads to excessive introspection and inaudible music. With a little practice and encouragement you can evolve as a performer who projects his or her ideas. Are you learning by doing? How often do you perform?
9. Do you practice to be aware of and remove habits and clichés? Do you practice mechanically?
10. There are three steps to “recreating” a composition. The first is the existential, which is considering what the piece means to you. The second step is the psychological, which is considering the composer’s motives for writing it. The third is the semiological, which is determining how you will perform the work so that others can perceive its meaning. Have you considered these steps? How will your performance make vivid the composer’s motives, and your inner relation to the composition?
11. We communicate when we perform. Have you considered that everything has a meaning, including your presence on the stage?
12. Do you realize that humans think with their whole bodies, and not just the brain? Do you realize that performing is essentially an act of the body? Do you consider it presumptuous

to consider performance as poetry in space made possible by intense physical preparation?

13. Art is the creation of symbolic forms. How do you highlight and detail your performance to create an iconic vividness?
14. The antics do not make the clown, it is when he or she reveals some truth about him or herself. Authenticity. Is it the technique or acrobatic perfection that makes the musician? Do you reveal the truth about your inner identity when you perform? How can you learn to?
15. Have you noticed how instantly and unthinkingly you catch yourself when you slip on the ice? It's not instinct. When you were born you couldn't even walk. When you play do you make active the knowledge that resides in the body? When you practice are you adding the right knowledge to it?
16. Music and theater were given birth by the same muse. Do you realize that every concept, idea, or method in theater has its corollary in music, and vice-versa? Do you realize how this understanding can enrich your music?
17. Have you considered your internal repertoire of physical, imaginative, and emotional skills? Are you trying to increase them? What are you calling upon when you perform? What do you have to offer as a human being?
18. When you practice and perform do you confront yourself in a state of perpetual discovery?
19. Do you practice with the goal of making things so natural and spontaneous that you no longer feel your body? You must divest your body, it must in effect cease to exist. Ironically, only then does it really begin to exist. Do you "subdue the flesh" by removing its blockages?
20. What are you doing to learn to come before a public and not be afraid?
21. Perhaps music isn't sound. Perhaps it doesn't exist outside of our heads, because nothing in the world is a perfect realization or performance of our abstract ideals. Are you learning to operate with your mistakes? Every performer must. It is part of the human condition to constantly proceed from failure. Is there not a certain frailty and miraculousness to creation?