

# Being a Professional Musician in NYC

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When Kat first approached me about doing this workshop, we discussed having me tell my story. To me that was a fairly boring proposition, but it made me think about how I've gone about this career of mine, what I've learned from it, and how I feel about what I'm doing at this point in my life.

It is significant that the things that used to make a career in music either no longer exist or are far less reliable. Conventional thought used to be that a professional musician had some sort of steady work, generally freelance work, with aspirations towards a full time orchestral position. But now, orchestras have cut back on their seasons, concerts are not being well attended, freelance work is not what it used to be, while going to shows has become more expensive. So the question becomes, is all of this relevant to how careers are formed these days? And should there really be, or are there, conventional ways to go about making a career any more?

I believe that what matters are your interests, and in what way you might want to develop them. The rest is immaterial. What makes a career in music is how you define it for yourself.

I did not go to a conservatory. I've won very few competitions. I was not a star in high school, college, or even grad school for that matter. When I finished school, I had no contacts, no career path, no one guiding me telling me all the stuff they don't tell you about in school. Yet there seemed to be certain expectations of what one was to do. The expectation was to take auditions, to stay in



school, to continue to take lessons and go to master classes, and to go to festivals. And if you didn't, well then, forget it. I did, at some point, start to take lessons again, but overall this did not seem to be the right path for me. I had to create alternative opportunities for myself so that I could gain experience, gain confidence and get better. In essence I created my own career. Let me make it absolutely clear that I did not just step into a career of teaching and performing chamber music. I took almost no orchestral auditions, and hardly did any freelance work, but I did do things like play in small ensembles for weddings, church services and parties. Playing chamber music was what I wanted to do, and playing these kinds of jobs was a way to get to know people, play literature I did not necessarily know, and get paid for it.

Certainly luck and perseverance play a very important role in making a career, as does being open to an array of opportunities that might not seem like they will bring anything, but do. I looked for different places to play here in NY, and I taught private lessons at home. I fell in love with teaching and found this to be a somewhat stable source of income. I used my assets to further my career; for instance being able to speak a foreign language helped me book concerts in other countries, and being

incredibly organized earned me a lot of respect. Being a flighty artist does not get you anywhere! Being organized, prompt and living up to your word to follow up with letters or demos sends potential presenters the message that you are serious.

I helped set up a non-profit concert presenting organization as a way to create opportunities for myself as well as for people who had gotten me concerts in Europe. I was involved in producing concerts that I performed on. It was a way to gain more experience as a performer, and to help build up my resume. But in addition to that, every single aspect of this experience taught me so much. I learned about budgets, how to raise money, how to organize my time and rehearsals, the various means of both free publicity and publicity that you must pay for, and how to get reviewed.

Playing in Europe was important to do, because it was a lot easier to get reviewed there than here at the time. European reviews also carried more weight—I have been told that this is no longer really true, but it doesn't matter. Press is press, and you need it to help build a portfolio. I had some contacts in Europe, and am fluent in German. Between these two things, I was able to get a start. My contacts led to other contacts, and I made sure I met with even newer contacts during each trip.

At the same time, through a conference that Concert Artists Guild used to offer, I learned that I had to become a salesman and market the product I had to offer. I also learned about how to find potential presenters. In essence, I became my own manager. That meant creating an image and a package I could mail out to potential concert presenters. That package included biographical information, reviews, photos, a demo recording, and sample programs. Finding potential presenters was easy. At the time there were lists you could buy that were broken down into various categories, making it easy to determine who a good contact might be. What wasn't easy, and was actually quite scary, was having to be the salesman. But I started trying

and got better at it as I went along. I am often in the same position today, only the stakes are a bit higher. I found that making a personal connection with music presenters and music directors at radio stations often paid off well. I think these people enjoyed having a connection and developing a relationship with me, the one actually doing the performing. These experiences of the earlier part of my career have helped me a lot. I have much more confidence now, but I am also much more matter of fact about the process, and understand that this just happens to be part of my job.

As I developed relationships with concert presenters throughout this country I learned that many of them were interested in artists who could also present Arts-in-Education programs in the schools. I began to develop these kinds of programs and offer them along with formal concerts as part of a package. Because there was a lot of grant money available for Arts-in-Education programs, being able to offer this helped sponsors/presenters be able to fund what I had to offer.

After having gotten quite a bit of experience touring both in Europe and the States, it became clear that it was time to start being marketable to a higher level of promoters and presenters. That meant it was time to make a recording. This was something that looked a lot better than a demo, could be sold at concerts, and was also distributable to radio stations and vendors such as Amazon or Tower Records. Having air play is of course another means of publicity and a way to get your name out there without necessarily having to relate it a specific event. Making a recording costs money though, so the question became how? Does one spend the time trying to get another producer interested? The truth is that unless you are already well known or have won a major competition, more often than not, you have to come up with the initial recording costs yourself. But we (my husband and I) had a non-profit already in place. Through that and its generous donors we were able to raise the money to make our first recording. It was a lot of hard work and agony,

but it made making the second one a lot easier. That experience has helped me with every other recording project I have been involved with since then. My previous experience as a “salesman” made me more comfortable with having to get in touch with music directors at radio stations, and vendors. And even though those initial recordings were made quite some time ago, they still help me get work now.

Is this the way I would recommend others go about this? I don't know. It's just where I was at the time and the paths I chose to follow. I think that I just always had a quest for improving my musicianship; I still do. So, it was all about finding ways to do that. I will admit, though, that I wasted a lot of time wondering about the “legitimacy” of what I was doing—did all of this seemingly untraditional way of working mean that I was a professional musician?

After I had been touring in the southeast and in Europe for a few years, I would take an occasional lesson from the teacher I had had while in school, Gerardo Levy. He had a very old view of the world—was very traditional in many ways. He was from another time. He had left Berlin as a child in 1939, and ended up in Argentina. He had already been playing professionally for quite some time when he decided to come to the United States. He felt he had gotten as far as he could, and thought that by coming here to study in Boston, his playing would improve and he would also be able to work professionally at a higher level. He had given up a lot to come here. This was a man who always expected you to give 100% no matter what. He set the bar pretty high, and taught me a lot about professionalism and having high standards. I always thought he had traditional views about what makes a musical career. Anyway, I was taking one of those now infrequent lessons, when he and I began to talk about what I was doing. I'm not sure what prompted it, but he told me that a lot of people would give anything to be doing what I was doing. In many peoples' eyes I was a success story. And yet, somehow, the state of my finances, being worried about having/not having

health insurance, not being an orchestral player, and not being world renowned made me question my legitimacy. This was all an important lesson to me. I really had to think and decide for myself what this whole career thing meant and how I would define it.

I think in the end it is important to really be committed to doing the things you go after, and seeing the other stuff as a means to getting you to that point. What matters is your attitude and that you do what you need to do to feel like you are in good shape, that you are growing, and that you feel solid. If you do a gig for experience, then that's good. If you do it for money, or if you have a 9-5 job for money, that's good too. It's just important to keep what you are after in sight and work towards it. You have to decide what matters to you and how to bring those things together. How do you create opportunities for yourself so that you can grow artistically while being a responsible adult? I think you just need to throw out anything that makes you feel like you have to fit into a certain mold. A career in music is defined by you being able to put a combination of things together that satisfy you emotionally, intellectually, and artistically. And you can do that by combining performing with teaching, research, music business, or the recording industry. It's “whatever floats your boat,” as they say.

Finding a balance of these things along with living the rest of your life is always a challenge. As we grow and become more experienced and mature our needs and what we look for changes. So, just like anything in life, you shift gears and find new ways to do what you want to do while covering that ground.

My students often ask me for advice about these things. I can only tell them what I have learned through my own experiences: Don't worry so much about where you think you should be, or what others define as where you should be. Think about who you are, what you might like to do, and start setting some goals that will allow you to achieve those dreams. Whatever it is that you want to do, you need to be the one

creating the opportunities. If you want to perform you need to find ways to get as much experience as possible. How do you do that? The obvious answers are that you play in your church, synagogue, or for your community. Do outreach—whatever puts you in the hot seat. Find places that sponsor people like you, where you can get space for free, even if you might not get paid. Taking auditions, playing for contractors, performing in competitions, doing anything and everything to play for an audience. But always ask, does it get you closer to what you want? How does it help you? Keep that all in perspective.

I think it is important to be honest with yourself about who you are. Allow yourself to work with that while still going after what you want. In other words don't try to turn yourself into the person you think you should be in order to aspire to your goals. Don't set goals for yourself that you think you should have. Really think about what music means to you and what you love about it. Use your assets and an understanding of who you are emotionally. Your assets and your goals are your strengths.

What else do you need to be able to do? Set a good example. Support your friends if you expect them to support you. We always talk about dwindling audiences, and how no one comes to concerts. I hear you all talk about it and make jokes. Humor is great, but you also have a responsibility to help keep this art form alive. That means that part of your responsibility, regardless of what end of the business you end up in, is to create new audiences. Seeking out places that may fall outside the definition of where you can imagine hearing music can help you do that. You need to convey your love and enthusiasm for what you do to everyone. You need to let them know why you think this is important, which is often easy to forget.

Yes music is good for the soul, yes it is good for the brain. Yes, it often makes us feel better, and yes, listening to Mozart is supposed to make your children more intelligent. Yes, music for

young children is great because it helps stimulate their creativity, which in turn makes them better learners and therefore creative in their thinking, which can lead to fostering the great minds of our future. Maybe those minds can lead us to the end of global warming, other ways to be less dependent on oil, maybe even the end of poverty and the beginning of world peace. And yes, exposing under-privileged children to music is the beginning of a way out for them. But in the end, all of that seems like it is only for the chosen few who develop a skill on an instrument.

What about people who just go to listen to music? We are losing them. Everyone should be going to concerts. Music matters because it reminds us of what it means to be human—the worst of it and the best of it and everything in between. It reminds us of the extremes of what we are capable of, and we need that. Without those reminders we are lost.

You have a responsibility to help keep the arts alive, which it cannot do without people to appreciate it. It means you have to find other ways to reach people, and ways to support other musicians and their performances. Creating your own opportunities and performing outside the concert hall in unconventional places, for audiences who don't get to hear a lot of music, may not be the most glamorous of lives, but it sure does go a long way.

There are many ways to have a career in music as long as we recognize that it is a vital part of life and continue to find ways to allow it to thrive. It is a question of finding a way to put something together that combines the aspects of music that matter to you, and not being bound by your own or any one else's perception of what a "traditional" career is supposed to be.