

On the specific challenges of working as a classically trained musician



Classical musician Margaret Shin Fischer discusses the ways in which classical musicians must structure their lives in order to make a living, the value of building up a good reputation and understanding the value of your peers, and having a healthy perspective about what you do and why you do it.

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 4577 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Inspiration](#), [Income](#), [Process](#), [Independence](#), [Education](#).

As a classically trained musician, how do you go about getting jobs?

As a classical flute/piccolo player who specializes in the symphonic literature, the ultimate goal is to win a job in a full-time orchestra, but those jobs are highly competitive. It's not uncommon for a top-tier symphony to get 300-500 resumes for one job opening, and even after they cut the applicants to the ones they consider most worthy to hear at a live audition, you might still be competing against 100-175 other people. I heard a rumor that the last time the New York Philharmonic had a principal flute vacancy (in the early 2000s), they received upwards of 2,000 resumes.

So, since winning the full-time symphony job had not happened by the time I finished school, I went the route that a lot of players do and opted to be a freelancer. I've only tried making a living as a freelancer in the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex so what worked for me here may not work in other areas of the country. Some areas are much less welcoming to newcomers, but I found it relatively easy to break into the local "scene" in Dallas, partly helped by the fact that I did my Master's several years before at the University of North Texas (UNT), so there were still people around who I knew, and who could help me with recommendations.

A classmate from school recommended me for a piccolo position in a part-time local orchestra (the Las Colinas Symphony Orchestra) because there was an unexpected vacancy and the chair needed immediate filling. While the appointment was initially temporary, I ended up playing there for nine years after winning an audition for the chair. Through that orchestra, I met a lot of terrific local musicians and that helped to get my name "out there" for small gigs (things like the occasional wedding, church service gig, etc.). However, my freelance career really started taking off after taking some lessons with the principal flutist of the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra (FWSO). I didn't ask for the lessons specifically to get on the FWSO's sublist (I was taking an upcoming full-time audition in another city and I wanted some feedback from a player I respected), but based on the strength of my playing in those lessons, she asked if I would like to be added, and I naturally said yes.

Being called to sub with that orchestra introduced me to a different echelon of players, and added legitimacy to my reputation as a performer. Playing with the FWSO also got me on the radar of arguably the top music contractor in DFW. I've gotten a lot of work just through her recommendation, and it's through her that I've had the

opportunity to play arena shows, touring Broadway shows, anime conventions, corporate conventions... never a dull moment in the freelance world.

As for the Dallas Symphony Orchestra (DSO), I started subbing there based on my performance in one of their local sublist auditions, but I was able to get my foot in the door and get a slot for the audition because they called up a former teacher of mine and asked her to submit several names of players she thought they should hear. It is true that "who you know" can get you an in, but it's also true that it's "what you know" that keeps you there, and I'm always cognizant that there are people who want to have the gigs that I'm called for so it keeps me practicing.

I'm not sure I can really say that school prepared me for the realities of freelancing. Things are better now vs. when I was in school (I finished coursework in 2006), and universities and conservatories are talking more about training graduates to market themselves and to face the challenges of making their own career/work vs. simply winning auditions. In fact, I feel like today, freelancing is seen more as a legitimate career goal instead of simply something you do while you wait for your career to start. But back in the early 2000s, I have no real memory of any advice regarding what to do if the full-time gig didn't pan out before graduation, besides "teach lessons to pay the rent," which I did and still do (about half my income comes from private teaching).

What are the things that you wish you had learned more about in school in terms of how to deal with the real world, and building your professional career?

I wish I had realized fully while I was in school that your classmates really are the future leaders of tomorrow—they are the future professors at conservatories and university schools of music; they are the future members of the major symphony orchestras; they are the future renowned soloists and chamber musicians. Networking begins when you're in school, and your reputation during your student years matters because you never know who has the keys to future opportunities for you. The reverse is true, too, as we all may hold keys to opportunities for others.

Of course, we all need to prioritize practicing and mastering our instrument, but that's not all that's important. The post-gig "hang" can be an important factor in your success as well, as it's an opportunity to get to know your colleagues on a level outside of just work. People want to work with stellar musicians, yes, but they are also hiring the whole package. If people develop a reputation at any point (in or out of school) as flaky, loose with time, unprepared for gigs, sloppy, rude, hard to work with, entitled, etc., sometimes that is enough to deny people the call for a gig, no matter how well they play.

Conversely, if you build a reputation as easy to get along with, fun, hard-working, someone who can diffuse stressful situations, and generally as someone other people want to be around, it can only help your career. These sort of interpersonal relationships cannot be built in solitude in a practice room cubicle. The music world is small, and people have long memories.

I also wish I had known more about how to file taxes when you're self-employed. I only found out about paying estimated quarterly tax payments because a friend had gotten an \$8,000 penalty for failing to do so, and that made me look into it. Similarly, I think I probably missed out on a lot of deductions in the early years just due to ignorance about what I could write off and what I could not. The tax code changes often enough that any college course including this topic would have to constantly be updated, but it's important info for all musicians to know to avoid legal trouble.

Editor's note: For more tax tips, see [A smart artist's guide to income taxes](#)

Things I would tell young players who think they may want to become freelancers:

There are a lot of perks to freelancing. I love it. I'm never bored because every week, my job can be wildly different. I might be playing weddings and church services one weekend, and then playing Rachmaninov and Sibelius symphonies the next. Then I might end up playing with a classic rock band in front of 20,000 screaming fans. It keeps you on your toes. It exposes you to so many different styles of music, and helps you learn how to get the

job done. Freelancers have to be much more flexible and ready to roll with the punches than musicians who stick with one style of music, and it is a massive adrenaline rush to experience a gig come together in a very short amount of time.

Also, you gotta be able to sight-read as if your life depends on it. I've had to sight-read entire concerts before when I've been called to step in for an ill colleague, with no rehearsal. Scary? Of course! But that's what freelancers do—we get the job done.

Networking does not have to mean sucking up and passing out your business card to everyone you meet. People can spot a fake miles away and they can also tell if you're only being nice to someone in order to get something from them. Be genuine, be nice, be interested in people for who they are rather than what they can possibly do for you professionally. People will remember how you make them feel, and if you make them feel uncomfortable or disrespected, there's no positive way to spin that.

If you are a freelancer, to some extent, every gig you play is an audition. Someone is always watching. Take every job seriously. (Thankfully, I didn't have to learn this the hard way but I've seen enough people misstep to never want to do it myself!)

Regarding union membership—I've been a member of the AFM since 2004, before I left school, because I played in a union orchestra while living in Michigan and doing my DMA degree. However, I would not say that being a union member directly led to getting me any gigs. Flutists are a dime a dozen and no one consults the union membership roster to find a player—they rely on word of mouth. However, I am glad that I had the opportunity to join as a student, because it is much cheaper to join then vs. when you're out of school, and these days most of my gigs are union. Texas is a right-to-work state, so I'm not prohibited from taking non-union work, but I do prefer to work union gigs when possible.

What is the current breakdown of your creative life? As a musician, how many different gigs and freelance things do you need to stitch together in order to make a living?

My income is approximately 50% from private teaching and 50% from performing. For the performance gigs, I have the steady gigs and the freelance gigs. Steady gigs are the part-time symphonies and ensembles in which I am a regular contracted member, or I have won an audition for my chair. For these gigs, they usually send me a list of upcoming performances before the start of the season so that I can block off the dates as needed. Freelance gigs are the ones that come up with limited notice (anywhere from a few days to a few months in advance). This includes subbing for ensembles like the DSO, church gigs, weddings, and various other one-time only performances.

As far as steady gigs go:

Dallas Chamber Symphony (around 4 concerts a year)

Dallas Winds (around 8-9 concerts a year)

East Texas Symphony Orchestra (typically 1-2 concerts a year, though the symphonies themselves do more; piccolo is considered an auxiliary instrument so I am not needed on every concert. This season is unusual in that I'll be playing on 4 concerts.)

I find the steady gigs through audition announcements and word of mouth, but these are competitive ensembles so you have to prove yourself in order to get that contracted spot. For the freelance gigs, it's usually enough to rely on someone's recommendation—either a contractor or perhaps a colleague (for example, let's say a church is looking for a flute player and they already have an oboe player hired. They might just ask the oboe player which flute players they would recommend).

What's the hardest part about making a living as a musician?

I'd say the hardest part is two-fold:

1) I really struggled at the start with the idea of saying "no" to anything. When you're just starting out, you need to take every opportunity that comes your way. However, at a certain point, I was working myself into illness (and freelancers have to pay for their own health insurance). I never felt like I could take any sort of vacation-what if I got called last-minute for something?

This lifestyle was rough on my marriage for a while. I'm married to a non-musician, and it was very hard on him at first, because while he has a "normal job" with sick leave and vacation days and bonuses, I have a job that requires me to work nights and weekends (and weekdays, if you count private teaching). Due to the nature of me trying to break into the local freelance scene, as well as trying to complete my doctorate degree, for a long time, work always came first and I wasn't able to prioritize our relationship.

Plus, since I was working at all hours, it was horrible for my physical and mental health. Once I started falling asleep at the wheel of my car, and that was a major reality check that forced me to cut back some on my teaching load, and to be choosier about the gigs I took. There's a financial saying, to "pay yourself first" by setting aside the amount of money you plan to save each month *before* paying the rest of your bills. I started having to pay myself first with my time, just with things like a rest day on occasion, because if I wasn't going to give myself a day off, who would? I started learning to create a boundary so that I had some sort of a life outside of just work, and I'm happier for it.

2) The other bit that I think is difficult to deal with is the idea that you could leave the business tomorrow and it wouldn't matter. There will always be someone else jumping at the opportunity to take your place. It's not a job in which there's any sense of security, and we don't get a lot of outside validation that we are important or valued for what we personally bring to the table. What's been important for my mental health and outlook is choosing to do the work for the work's sake, because it's something I feel is important and that I love doing, rather than doing this for accolades or fame or riches (let's be real, no one gets famous or rich as a freelance musician).

By working every day to meet my own expectations as an artist, I think prioritizing that has unexpectedly led to me getting more respect from others versus if I gave everyone else's opinions about my playing more weight than my own. And on the occasion that I do get a sincere compliment from a colleague or a conductor, it is particularly meaningful since I'm not chasing it. I do my best to give these compliments as well, and it's amazing to see your friends' faces light up because they hadn't thought anyone noticed their hard work. Once I made a friend cry just by telling her how beautifully she spun her melodic lines-I felt so bad for making her burst into tears but also so good for making her feel validated.

It's worth remembering as well that performers have a noble occupation: without us, the work of composers would never be heard. Classical musicians (and actors, and dancers) occupy a strange role in that we are the conduit for someone else's work. If you are a rock musician and you write a song, you generally perform it yourself. You are the primary source, and the listener can hear it directly from you, or through your records. If you are a sculptor or a painter, the public can see your vision directly as it comes from you. However, if you are a choreographer and you are envisioning a ballet, there's no way you can perform the role of all the dancers yourself.

If you are a composer writing a string quartet, or a percussion ensemble piece, or a symphony, you need players who can take what you have in your imagination and bring it to life. Conversely, performers such as myself need composers in order to help us say what we don't have the language to say on our own, and to reveal a part of us in the process, both to ourselves and to the audience. When I frame my attitude toward my work like this, it's a heck of a lot more motivating and inspirational than thinking, "Ugh, Beethoven *again?*"

Outside of the work you do playing with the symphony, what do you think of as your own personal, creative practice?

I'm not a composer, so I don't feel like I have a musical creative practice that doesn't require others. However,

I will occasionally choose to challenge myself by taking on musical projects outside of symphony work. I've done solo recitals, and I recently formed a woodwind quintet with other freelancers I know. More recently, I collaborated with a friend who's a visual artist and I performed a specially chosen solo flute work alongside her most recent art exhibition in Oxford, England, based on the themes of genocide, memory, and the concept of home in a shattered world. It's easy to get stuck in a rut of only working on symphonic literature, so I try to branch out from time to time to keep myself fresh.

Outside of music, I practice taekwondo for its physical challenge and its mental benefits, and [I have a blog](#) where I write craft coffee reviews and advice columns, as well as occasional off-topic posts.

Do you think using social media—Instagram, Twitter—helps with sustainability in the classical music world?

I'm not sure that asking a classical musician this question will be super helpful. I follow orchestras and musicians on social media, but if classical music wants to be sustainable, it needs to attract audiences outside of other musicians. I'd be more interested in hearing the answer to this question from a non-musician. I feel like in theory, social media can be a useful tool to make classical musicians, ensembles, and the art itself more accessible to interested audiences. There is a perception that symphony concerts are stuffy, elitist affairs: there's a dress code, there are rules about when you can and cannot clap, no phones allowed, no talking...

In a way, I feel like YouTube channels like [TwoSet Violin](#) are doing more to help the perception of classical musicians than any orchestra. My massage therapist is not a musician but he loves TwoSet's comedic videos about classical music, and he even bought tickets to see them when they toured Dallas. Will that translate into ticket sales for the DSO or other ensembles? Only time will tell. I do meet people on a regular basis in my life (cab drivers, row-mates on planes, hairstylists, etc.) who express curiosity to me about symphony concerts, ballets, and opera, but often they are hesitant to take the leap and attend. If social media can help break down some of these perceived barriers, I think it would be fantastic. We don't need so many gatekeepers in this industry.

What are some of the challenges that might be specific to people working in the world of classical music?

Classical musicians don't typically have a normal childhood. Success in this field often means that a person has started taking private lessons from a young (sometimes very young) age, and their families have invested a lot of money into their instruction, instruments, and things like driving to and from competitions, youth orchestra rehearsals, recitals... countless hours in support of success. The cost of a four-year degree in music performance can be staggering, and these days more and more people pursue graduate degrees, so it's not unfeasible for someone to graduate with hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt, with no certain prospects on how to pay it off. I was lucky enough to receive multiple scholarships and graduate fellowships, so by the end of three degrees, my total student debt was only \$18,000, and I paid those loans plus interest off within seven years or so. I know lots of other people who freely admit that they will *never* be free of their student loan debt. They expect to carry it with them until they die, and with these figures I can see why. If I were to price out the current cost of my three music performance degrees, including tuition and out-of-state room and board, this is what it would cost:

2019–2020 costs:

University of Southern California: \$77,459 per year, over four years, plus \$450 New Student fee in first semester:

Total: \$310,286 ([source](#))

University of North Texas: \$30,164 for two years:

Total: \$60,328 ([source](#))

Michigan State University: \$44,764, for three years (my DMA took longer, but let's use 3 years as a point of comparison):

Total: \$134,292 (<https://finaid.msu.edu/sampbud.asp>)

Total for all three degrees: \$504,906

And let's not even begin to talk about the costs of quality musical instruments, insurance, and repair...

I haven't checked the figures lately, but I believe the Los Angeles Philharmonic leads the nation in terms of top annual average salary for orchestral musicians, at a figure around \$154,000 per year. That probably sounds like a lot of money to the layperson for simply playing music, but not only does that figure not take into account the many, many hours of practice and rehearsal and the rigor of performing multiple concerts a week to a world-class standard, it also generally reflects the fact that by the time you are at a level to earn membership in an orchestra of this caliber, you have been training on your instrument for anywhere from 10-30+ years. I can't think of another field where it's routine to toil for so many years for such little financial payoff.

Only the very top tier of musicians make anything approaching six figures, and there's also increasingly less job security in full-time orchestral work (see: the recently resolved Baltimore Symphony lockout, the past Minnesota Orchestra and Atlanta Symphony lockouts, strikes by the Chicago and Fort Worth Symphony Orchestras, shutdowns of the New Mexico Symphony Orchestra and Honolulu Symphony, just to name a few).

The business model of classical music is in trouble, and it's something that we collectively as artists need to find a solution for: adapt or die. I don't have the answer for this, there are no easy answers, but I do think it'll be incumbent on my generation and the next generation to find a way if we want this art form to survive.

Margaret Shin Fischer Recommends:

There was a quote I heard while watching the admittedly campy movie "Center Stage" (it's hardly Oscar-bait but it's one of my guilty-pleasure sort of movies), made by the director in the feature film commentary on the DVD, and it inspires me time and again when I'm feeling beaten down by things. He was speaking of dancers but it's equally applicable toward classical musicians:

"What I find very moving is the eagerness and enthusiasm with which very young people are prepared to sacrifice much of their youth, in order to achieve a form of perfection for which there is no particular monetary recognition. They don't get famous in the way lots of kids want to be famous. They do it because they have recognized what is beautiful, and they do it for the sake of beauty—for the sake of an art form which is old and which is steeped in tradition, and which, I suspect, even if some of the youngest kids can't articulate it, they realize it is worth doing for its own sake." (Nicholas Hytner)

Some suggestions regarding social media...

One area where freelancers have to be careful is social media—in conversations with other musicians and contractors I respect, it's an etiquette minefield and it's easy for people to offend colleagues, future employers, etc, without even realizing it!

People use social media differently, and there may not be one "right" way for everyone to use it, but speaking just from my experience and observations, the top players don't humblebrag, they don't tag themselves and everyone else they're working with at every single gig they play; their social media use about work is minimal. It could be considered a chicken-and-the-egg situation; maybe the top players don't post because they don't have to post—everyone already knows them—but it's also true that people do notice and get fatigued seeing a constant stream of "look at this cool gig I get to play and you don't."

Facebook and such is inherently self-centered; it's about posting about your own life and it affords you a peek into the lives of others. It's not that posting about a cool opportunity is completely forbidden by any means—your friends will want to share in your joy/success, and it can also be a sweet way to thank people that made the opportunity happen for you, but here are some examples of things I've commonly seen that have hurt people's careers, whether they realized it or not at the time.

a) Player backs out of a pre-planned small-paying gig (Gig A) in order to take a higher-paying gig (Gig B). Posts pictures and tags himself at Gig B. Contractor for Gig A sees this and gets upset, vows to never hire this player for anything in the future or recommend him for work to others.

b) Player backs out of a pre-planned small-paying gig (Gig A) in order to take a higher-paying gig (Gig B). Does

not post on social media but someone else at the gig tags him and posts pictures without his permission. Contractor sees this and gets upset, etc.

c) Player posts rehearsal pics and video clips that might upset others (maybe someone else made a mistake in that exact moment and they don't want it getting out there for public consumption), or even violate orchestra policy.

d) Player brags about upcoming gigs before they happen, which attracts attention but mostly makes people who didn't get the call feel small.

e) Player vents about colleagues at gigs. Even if they don't include names, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out who they are talking about if an oboe player posts on a Saturday night, "Violists!! Stop wearing cologne, some of us need to be able to breathe, ya know!!" and the post is tagged from a particular concert hall.

And generally speaking, if someone is on social media ALL the time, it makes you wonder, when are they practicing? ;-)

Except in the case of...

f) When someone tags themselves daily @The Practice Room. It's like seeing people's Runkeeper stats or Orange Theory check-ins—I don't really care. Mute!

So, basically, I'd tell any young player to think before they post. It's generally okay to post about a cool gig after it's done, it's nice to tag friends at gigs and share good memories, but if the chief motivation is "I need to get my name out there," I'd counter with, it's not typical for freelancers to get hired solely from FB posts. Your name gets out there thanks to how you conduct yourself. The best asset you can build for yourself as a freelancer is to be known for the quality of your work, not the frequency of your social media posts. But, you can certainly add to the chatter about you in a negative way if your social media posts paint an unflattering portrait of what you'd be like as a colleague.

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