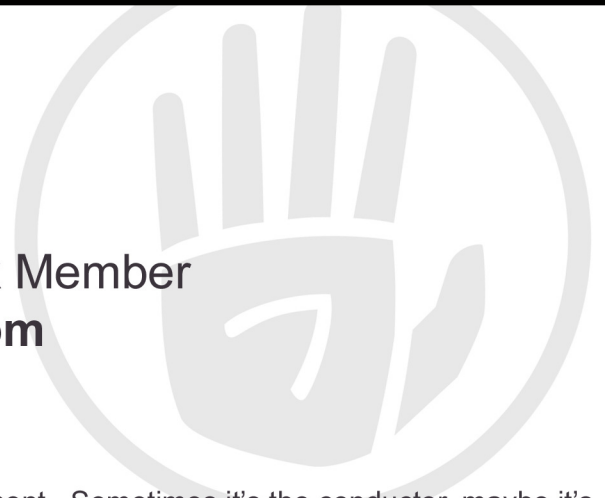




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Practical Tips: Transition from College to Professional *Part 2. More Than Music: The “Other” Skills*

Making the transition from college to the professional world requires more than a successful senior recital, diploma, and as I addressed in part one of this series, the necessary collection of percussion instruments. Every year, another crop of talented percussionists enter the music field. Do only the strongest players find work? In this article, I will outline three skillsets that are just as important as one's ability to perform.

The first step is to agree on what a professional musician is. For the sake of this article, a professional musician is someone who makes a majority of his or her living in the music business. By definition, this would apply to performing, but may also include teaching, composing, arranging, manufacturing, merchandising, producing, or a host of other career paths. In most cases, a music career includes a variety of revenue streams and require more than the ability to win an audition.

Interpersonal Skills:

A former colleague of mine uses the following formula when accepting gigs. In order to say yes, a gig must have at least two of the following three characteristics:

1. Good Music
2. Good Pay
3. A Good “Hang”

Number one and two speak for themselves, but number three is the intangible. We've all worked in environments with less than cordial colleagues and at the end of the gig, it wasn't the music or the paycheck we recall, but the mental baggage left from working in a negative

environment. Sometimes it's the conductor, maybe it's the principal percussionist, and often times it's the lead singer of your band. The hang is incredibly important to personal satisfaction. But remember, it's a two way street!

There's a saying, “wherever you go, there you are.” If it seems every work environment you enter has unmanageable problems, the solution may likely be to look within. Fortunately, there are hundreds of books on managing relationships in the workplace. Consider this as important as practicing the snare part to Rimsky-Korsakov's Scheherazade or your interpretation of a Guaguanco on drum set.

The bottom line is, as a freelance musician / educator / entrepreneur, a large percentage of your work will come from referrals as opposed to a standard audition or interview. Your audition happens on the gig and whether you are hired back is a combination of your musical skills and social skills. Did you know your role, were you flexible, and did you present yourself as someone who fit into the ensemble's many layers of personalities? Being able to accept criticism and provide clear and effective feedback is a skill of immeasurable importance. It's never too early to ask your friends, teachers, and colleagues if they would recommend you for a gig. Request an honest assessment of your interpersonal skills and what areas you should focus on for improvement.

Organizational Skills:

Whenever I meet someone working in a sector of the music industry different than I, the question I'll ask is “what does one need to do to be successful in your field?” A common thread that seems to run through a surprisingly high number of responses is simple; “the ability to show up on time.” While this seems simple

enough, mistakes can happen when juggling a variety of large ensembles, private lessons, miscellaneous rehearsals, as well as your family life, social life, and other personal responsibilities. Having skillsets in time management can make or break your career. Just like practicing percussion, there's no sooner time to develop your organizational skills than in the comfortable confines of college.

Do you have a phone and email account you've set aside for business and check frequently? I can think of many wonderful gigs I've landed simply by being the first to respond to a contractor's phone call or email. Do you stay in touch with associates on a regular basis, thus keeping your name fresh in a potential employer's mind? Are you reliable with lessons starting and ending on time without last minute cancellations? In a matter of seconds, can you look at your schedule and determine your availability for a gig three weeks to six months from now? Learn to cherish the busiest times of your life, as they are often indicators of success. The irony is, musicians with the most work are likely to receive even more gigs, as they have the proven capacity to organize themselves and get the job done. Regardless of what facet of the music industry you enter, maintaining a calendar and keeping clear and efficient channels of communication is your lifeline to professional success.

Secondary Skills:

So you can play. Your tambourine chops sound perfect on Berlioz's Roman Carnival Overture and your soft four-stroke ruffs are beautiful on Prokofiev's Lieutenant Kije. While you are waiting to win the next major audition, you will likely take on a plethora of other types of gigs. Having strengths in multiple areas can increase the revenue streams available to you. My personal philosophy asks, when the phone rings, can you say yes to the gig? Sure, for most of us, a last minute call to play tabla in a touring Hindustani group is unlikely to be a gig you can say yes to, but is also unlikely to happen. However, can you read the drum set book in a local big band? Teach a summer marching percussion camp? Cover the percussion book in a regional musical production? How about your non-percussion skills?

With the growth of successful chamber percussion groups such as So Percussion and the Meehan/Perkins Duo, there are great opportunities for percussionists

available beyond the standard institutions of major symphonies and higher education. The ability to manage, market, fundraise, and account for all of the logistics of such an ensemble takes a host of skills not included in the standard percussion curriculum. Do you have marketing skillsets that can be developed? Web design? Recording and production skills? Tour management experience? Grant writing success? For every skill you don't have and aren't willing to learn, you will likely pay someone else. In addition to your musical skills, having the business know-how can serve as a potential revenue stream and make you an invaluable member of an ensemble. Take a personal inventory of what your non-percussion skills are and develop those that are of particular interest. Again, there's no better place to do so than in college.

Another realm of the percussion industry is in the education sector. Consider even the top players in major orchestras teach and many of the drummers in your favorite bands are sought-after clinicians. Developing a private lesson curriculum and teaching style is ideal while under the guidance of an experienced college teacher. Regardless of whether you have one or one-hundred students, always treat your private studio as a business. Find a niche. Students are clients and you have something unique to offer. Whether you are preparing high school students to enter college as music majors or are teaching adults for enrichment, teaching is a powerful endeavor- developing lifelong music lovers and patrons.

In addition to your percussion goals, take stock of your "other" skills and consider them a work in progress. Enjoy the process and get started while you are in the nurturing and relatively forgiving environment of college. Take pride in all aspects of your career and make every reflection of yourself one of professionalism.

James Doyle is visiting assistant professor of music at Adams State University and performs with the Music in the Mountains Festival Orchestra, the San Juan Symphony, the Doyle/Kane Duo for flute and percussion, and numerous commercial artists throughout the Rockies. He previously served as principal percussionist with the USAF Band of the Golden West, was a member of the Baton Rouge Symphony Orchestra, and performed with orchestras throughout California, Nevada, Louisiana, and Missouri.