

THE Instrumentalist

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Mary Land

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Dave Black has seen the music industry from many perspectives – percussionist, composer, and editor-in-chief for Alfred Publications. That experience has convinced him that music schools have to adapt their programs to meet changes in technology. He says, “We continue to graduate thousands of performance majors a year with no place to go.” He has written more than 50 compositions and arrangements and several best selling books. In addition to traveling around the world and recording with a variety of entertainers and shows, he has also written for the bands of Louie Bellson, Sammy Nestico, and Bobby Shew. He is active in the Percussive Arts Society and was on its board of directors for six years.

When I was in college 25-30 years ago, there were many more opportunities for performance majors to make a living, but today many of those opportunities no longer exist. I firmly believe colleges should focus less on graduating performance majors who will be unable to find a job and offer courses that deal with music industry studies. It is great to be a skilled performer, but it is practical to learn other skills in areas that have application in the music industry.

Many students believe there is an absolute divide between playing for a living and pursuing another career. It is invaluable to be able to play an instrument well, but the vast number of careers in the music industry call for other skills to hold a job that provides the stability of a steady paycheck. These fields include publishing, journalism, music engraving, teaching, recording, retail sales, and music licensing. There are so many avenues for creative people who want to avoid scrambling to pay rent. Universities should shift their programs toward today’s job market. This change does not mean eliminating music history and the study of music by Bach and Beethoven. A thorough knowledge of the past remains important, but students will most likely not earn a living by writing in the style of classical composers.

Among the skills that are useful to working in the music business are facility with music engraving software as well as the ability to read chord symbols, back up a singer, and some general marketing, sales, and networking skills. These are just as important as proficiency on an instrument. The business of music is rarely covered in college, and the overwhelming majority of students graduate with little knowledge of how to read and negotiate a contract or what is fair pay for their services. As a result, they lack the tools to succeed in a competitive business.

There have long been two types of music school. Some conservatories focus almost exclusively on

music and offer little academic work outside of music. I attended California State University–Northridge and benefitted from taking a broader range of classes than if I had attended a conservatory. In some ways it was especially difficult to be a percussion performance major with multiple instruments to master. A percussionist who practices two hours a day may spend only 30 minutes on timpani or 30 minutes on marimba techniques.

Everyone knows that the world of large symphony orchestras is fading as audiences grow older. Few professional musicians have an opportunity to play in a symphony orchestra

with the small turnover in these positions. Audiences at concerts dwindle as performances on large-screen televisions with great sound have increased. This alternative, available at home, beats fighting traffic and paying high ticket prices for many people.

The film and recording industries have also changed rapidly in recent years although a few composers, such as John Williams and Howard Shore, score big movies and use studio musicians. Many productions on smaller budgets are completed using a single musician or engineer together with recording equipment that is better than what the Carpenters used to make records at A & M 30 years ago. Many modern music composers work from home and e-mail in the file to some-

My Views on Music Education

by Dave Black

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where else. Jobs for studio musicians have declined sharply.

Traveling big bands have also vanished, although some still play on cruise ships or tour as ghost bands. These cruise ships provide young players just out of college with the chance to travel and play every night. However, many performance majors at music schools focus on classical music, but the remaining professional gigs on a cruise ship, for a Broadway show, or elsewhere require the performers to play from a big book with charts or just a lead or lyric sheet. Many of the professional jobs involve interpreting chord symbols to accompany a vocalist.

I would never discourage anyone from pursuing the dream of performing, but a realistic view of the job market is that only the most well-rounded students have a good chance of surviving in the music business. I graduated with a performance degree and was lucky to tour for many years with great artists and shows. I knew

eventually that life on the road would wear thin, and I always was interested in writing band music or books. I viewed publishing companies as a way to remain creative while earning a steady income. I discovered that in addition to earning a salary, a best selling method book could produce royalties for years to come. I began by writing for a number of publishers and learned how to compose in the various styles of music. My current position as editor-in-chief at Alfred involves less creative work and a greater focus on managing finances, people, and the current direction in music publishing.

The key to success in composing is to understand how to apply basic principles of composition to the level of young band or string players, something a music publisher would want to release. It is great for a student to have a vast knowledge of past composers, but if this cannot be applied to what publishers are printing and directors are purchasing, there is no way to prosper financially.

Dave Black's Quick Takes

- Teach students those skills that will help them make a living today. Don't teach them the fundamentals of theory and composition and just graduate them because you dropped the needle in the middle of a Bach composition and told them to name what part of the work it was from.
- The music industry lost the art of those who specialize in doing one thing well. Frank Sinatra and Tony Bennett just sang well. They were not interested in writing their own songs or producing their own albums. They had the Gershwins to write the songs and the Don Costas and Quincy Joneses to arrange the music. Today everybody wants to write and produce their own materials and while some artists do it well, others spread themselves too thin and lose the craftsmanship. As a result, the music sometimes suffers.



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Dave Black (2nd from left) at the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles.

- I was a percussion performance major with a minor in composition. What's ironic is that I ended up making more money writing than I did playing drums.
- It is fine to learn marimba technique but you will most likely never use it as a solo artist. Instead, learn how to sightread because you will use that in orchestras, studio sessions, and bands.

Most people learn the business side of music through trial and error. Certainly such books as *This Business of Music* have covered some of the basics, but there is no substitute for a wide range of college courses on contemporary subjects. Some colleges have music industry programs. Joel Leach at Cal State–Northridge really started this movement and makes an effort every semester to take his students to visit a music publisher, a record company and to observe Alf Clausen scoring the *Simpsons*. He wants the class to understand what the music business is all about. This is also true with mathematics or any other field. Schools teach calculus and algebra but rarely go into how to use this knowledge to balance a checkbook or fill out income tax forms.

It is important for professionals in the music industry to explore and show students the various career options they have and what is necessary to succeed in each of them. Music professors also owe students an honest assessment of their abilities and what their chances are for success in their field of choice. They need to go further and explain that it is highly probable that graduates will fail to find a career as a performer and that it will require other skills to have a viable career.

I have a slightly different philosophy than some people in the music publishing business. Most publishers, including the one I work for, list pub-

lication guidelines on their websites. We encourage aspiring composers to send in a tape and a score of their work. If you call most publishers before submitting a manuscript and ask if they are looking for new writers, the candid answer is often that their production schedule is full and they do not need new performance publications. However, I may tell those who want to send in their composition to do so anyway because it is impossible to know if someone might be the next hit writer.

In fact several composers have emerged this way. Mark Williams submitted an unsolicited manuscript called *Green Willow Portrait*, and it was terrific. That piece launched his career. I encourage unpublished composers to be persistent, but it is wise to research the publishers before making submissions. Too many people blindly mail out compositions, but if they were serious about writing for the company, they would study recordings of what that firm publishes to find what style, ranges, and grade levels the company accepts. Try to tailor the music to fit these criteria before making the submission. If you are fortunate someone at the publisher will offer suggestions about the length or difficulty of the work. However, your chances of success are more remote if the music is not similar to what the publisher is currently publishing. □

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