

The Entrepreneurial Musician: YOU

Author of the acclaimed “Beyond Talent: Creating a Successful Career in Music,” Angela Myles Beeching was the keynote speaker for the Fall 2013 convocation.

I’m honored to be a part of the celebration welcoming in a new year and a new age: welcome to entrepreneurship! My goal today is to reveal a way you can make the most out of this year: a way you can increase the return on your investment.

To help, I brought three items: a story from my summer vacation, a dilemma, and a challenge (and this is where you’ll need to write something down—we’re going to put everyone to work). So it’s story, dilemma, challenge.

Here’s the story: earlier this summer I was in Breckenridge, Colorado at the National Repertory Orchestra program—was there to give a talk and do some individual and small group consultations with some terrific young musicians. NRO is a great program, two months of intensive concerts and workshops. It’s beautiful—way up in the Rockies—and once I got past the altitude sickness, I had a blast.

I had a conversation there that’s been haunting me. It was with a talented violinist who wanted to talk about a career issue she was struggling with. She explained she’d always been focused on an orchestral career and did fairly well in auditions, and her concern was that in the back of her mind she was also—and this sounded almost like a confession—attracted to the idea of playing backup for country music groups.

My response was, “Sounds cool—what’s the problem?” She looked at me with surprise and relief. She went on to explain that she hadn’t felt comfortable talking about this with anybody at her school. I asked why. She said she didn’t think people would “approve” . . . thought they might look down on her, or think she’d abandoned her goal, that she’d “sold out.”

Now would anyone actually give her a hard time about this at her school? I don’t know—but that she even *had*



this concern says a lot about the cultures of music schools everywhere. So what did we talk about? Here’s some of it:

We talked about the fact that many musicians today play a range of genres and styles: that in fact the whole industry is becoming increasingly “multilingual” when it comes to what used to be considered categories of music. It seems somewhat “old fashioned” to only play music in one narrow category—the genre formerly known as “classical” is morphing and the future looks amazing.

We also talked about the fact that very few orchestras have 52-week seasons, so most orchestral players have multiple income streams and so

it seems entirely reasonable to be able to do recording session work and performances and tours with bands, depending on the scheduling. And we also talked about the fact that it’s her damned life, so who the hell cares what other people think?

The reason that this story has haunted me—and why I’m talking about it months later—is that it illustrates part of the dilemma I will talk about next.

I want to name one of the unspoken problems of music schools and of our education system in general. I find it can help to acknowledge the “elephant in the room” since we each need to learn how to manage around this issue. And actually I think we can do better than manage around the issue: I like to think we can learn to dance with the elephant.

So here’s the problem: our education system in many ways trains us to become passive learners. In classroom settings we study to be able to spit back what’s required for the exam. We typically pay attention enough so that we can win the points to get a decent grade, to please the teacher, pass the class, to get the degree, and supposedly a job. From kindergarten through college, it’s all too often about following directions and doing what’s assigned. But we’re clearly living in a world now where that’s not enough.

“We all have goals, we all have things we’ve been procrastinating starting, or talking ourselves out of. So the question is: what’s your project? What career-related project do you want to take initiative on? What is it you want to explore? Maybe it’s something that you’ve been reluctant to tell others about? If you know what that something is, write it down.”

Let’s extend this rough assessment to how we study music. With music, we have an added component to this passive learning: the master/apprentice model. We study with teachers we want to emulate, learning by imitation and often by rote to perform “correctly” to another person’s standards. Many of us started studying as very young children, playing to please our parents, then our teachers, and later on our coaches, conductors, and employers.

Please don’t get me wrong here. I’m NOT saying that music schools are bad. I believe in music and music education, and I know all too well that schools have to balance competing needs and goals. And the truth is this model works really well for much of what we as musicians need.

But it doesn’t work so well for developing individual creativity, innovation, or leadership: the stuff that’s at the core of entrepreneurship. And for that violinist I talked with, she was afraid to talk about what she wanted to do as a musician because it wasn’t sanctioned—it wasn’t part of the program. That’s the education system letting us down.

Again, this is to acknowledge the elephant in the room: when we try to teach entrepreneurship and encourage innovation, leadership, and creativity, we are doing it in an environment that in some ways is at odds with our education system. That’s the dilemma.

Just think about the quintessential entrepreneurs: Mark Zuckerberg dropped out of Harvard as did Bill Gates, and Steve Jobs quit Stanford. I’m not saying quit school, but I am saying that passive learning is not enough in today’s world.

So for those keeping score, we’ve done the story, the dilemma, and we’ve arrived at part 3: the challenge.

Every musician I’ve ever met, actually every creative person I’ve ever met, has a goal or idea in the back of their minds for a special project, something they’ve always wanted to do, create, or help make happen. Think about our violinist friend.

The deal with these ideas or goals is that to become real, they need to be articulated. You have to have the guts to admit to yourself that in fact you ARE interested in whatever it is. Then you need to have the courage to talk to another person about it.

Unfortunately, musicians often keep these ideas to themselves. Worse, they often talk themselves out of pursuing projects, thinking they’re too ambitious or too time-consuming. This is a shame, because it is these creative project ideas that can lead musicians to rewarding and satisfying career paths.

Let’s go back to our violinist friend interested in playing for country music bands. We talked about how to turn an idea or a goal into a project—something you could explore in a practical way to test out and gain some early experience with. In this case, we talked about networking with studio players in her area, jamming with local country bands, and researching venues, studios, labels, and musicians in her area. We brainstormed about how to get started networking and exploring. From an entrepreneurial viewpoint, this is the “R&D,” the Research and Development phase. And you know what? This is the phase that lots of people never get to, often because they haven’t had a conversation with someone who might help them think it through.

It can really help to talk with someone about your secret goal, an objective person who can brainstorm with you. The good news is you have plenty of excellent faculty and staff right here at the University of Illinois. Have the conversation that can get you started.

We all have goals, we all have things we’ve been procrastinating starting, or talking ourselves out of. So the question is: what’s your project? What career-related project do you want to take initiative on? What is it you want to explore? Maybe it’s something—like our violinist friend—that you’ve been reluctant to tell others about? If you know what that something is, write it down.

In case any of you are struggling because you have too many projects: choose the one that as of right now, seems to be generating the most heat. It should be a project that you can see yourself actively working on for the next few months, because you care about it.

What to do if you can’t come up with a project? Anybody in that boat? Think about what you’re curious about—what you might want to investigate. There’s got to be something. If you’re really stuck, then your project might

be to find the thing that you really are interested in and talk to a faculty or staff member about that.

So now's the time to come clean with yourself. What's the project YOU'd like to take on this semester? What's something you want to explore? What can you do about it this semester? Write it down.

Writing your goals down is really important. Here's why: Years ago they did a study at Harvard of the graduating students to find out how many had written down their career goals. And when they went back 15 years later and checked in with that graduating class, they found that the 3 percent who had written down their goals were now making more money than the rest of the class combined.

Now, I'm not saying that if you write down your project goal now that you'll make a lot of money. I AM saying that writing down your goals is a form of commitment—it has an uncanny effect of keeping us focused on our goal. So keep your card. The next step would be to talk to someone who might give you feedback and ideas

on how to take the next step. And that someone could very likely be out in the lobby when we're done, at the reception, or sitting just a few seats away from you now.

And the last piece I want to leave you with is a reminder about something that many of us get wrong. It's all too easy to fall into the habit of thinking that the education you are getting is about the program, coursework, lessons, and tests you are given—that your education is the curriculum. Wrong. The actual education you get lies in what you make of these—it's what YOU put into it: the thinking, trying out ideas, the new connections you make as a result of what you read, experience, and do here at the University of Illinois. Projects are focused on “doing” as opposed to “being.” Project learning is about action—it's the antidote to passive learning.

Again, I congratulate you all on the new initiative, and my hope is that you'll take the challenge and activate your learning.

Thank you!

SCHOOL OF MUSIC

Wish List

Our Divisions are in need of the following items:

Audio Division needs \$1,600 for two Martin LE 1200 stage monitors to improve live performances on campus; \$2,400 for two Sennheiser MKH 40 microphones to record performances in the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts Great Hall.

Building Management and Electronic Support needs \$7,500 for a digital information board in the lobby to assist guests to the music building; \$2,500 to help fund a smart board and additional classroom technology for classrooms.

Jazz Division needs funds to support its upcoming trip to the Jazz Educator Network conference in Dallas, TX in January 2014; \$2,000 for a Nord keyboard for use by the division; \$1,000 for additional music stands for Smith rehearsal rooms 11 and 25; \$500 for a new bass amplifier for Smith rehearsal room 11; \$400 for new folders for Concert Jazz Band and Jazz Band II.

Musicology Division needs \$2,500 in annual support to for an annual spring semester “Current Trends in Musicology” lecture; \$1,500 to purchase instruments for a Brazilian music ensemble, to be directed by Assistant Professor Michael Silvers.

Orchestra Division needs \$10,000 to fund a training/lab orchestra of up to 60 players for students in the orchestral conducting program.

Organ/Harpsichord Division needs \$15,000 for a new clavichord; \$40,000 for an eighteenth-century copy fortepiano; \$50,000 for an early nineteenth-century copy fortepiano.

Percussion Division needs \$25,000 for a new set of professional grade timpani for Smith Memorial Hall; \$5,000 for two new drum sets for the percussion studio; \$650 for a new set of professional-grade temple blocks for Foellinger Great Hall performances and rehearsals.