

Chapter 1: A Story

I would like to share a story with you, one that really happened. It speaks to the power of metaphor in music, I believe, in a most direct and concrete way. I had an outstanding young student come to me after his first semester of music school for a lesson. He was home on Winter break from one of the most reputable music schools in the country. Before classes were to resume in January, everybody in the school had to do a “pool” audition for ensemble placement. He made it clear to me that he really aspired to make the second orchestra. Why not the top orchestra, I asked? Well, he explained, he didn’t feel like he could compete with the upperclassmen, Masters candidates, and Doctoral candidates at the school. Are the audition materials the same for each (?), I asked. No, two different lists of required excerpts. Another obstacle, he explained, was the fact that he had only passing familiarity with 1 of the 5 excerpts on the top orchestra’s list. With only 3 weeks to prepare, it seemed unlikely that he could master them to his satisfaction. So.....he signed up only for the 2nd orchestra audition. Call them, I said, and sign up for the top orchestra audition, too, please. Here’s why.....

Number One, you can’t win if you don’t play the audition. Remember that. Half of life is just showing up, right? So, show up. Number Two: three weeks is an immense amount of time, considering the technical skill you have on that trombone. Don’t be one of those students that struggle to re-invent the wheel day after day after day. Employ your technique. Use it to your fullest advantage. It is a means, not an end. Get beyond it, even with its self-perceived (more often self-imposed!) limitations. Look at those black dots for a moment. Are you willing to tell me that you can’t play high enough, fast enough, cleanly enough to render them in a comprehensible way? Of course you can! Your obstacles are this: the music doesn’t relate to you yet; it doesn’t resonate enough in your imagination to light your fire, and you are already comparing yourself to others when they have yet to play a note! The first problem is easy. Let’s get familiar with these notes, and what they do in context of the music. Let’s crawl down into their world. The second issue, that of comparing yourself to others, well.....that’s a tougher nut. It’s the plague of the modern musician, isn’t it? Such perspectives are economically driven, very often, and fertilized in that ultra-competitive environment in which you find yourself. We must compete, after all, if we’re going to win a job/gig, right? You’re going to have to be the best. I agree with that assessment, but I often disagree with the definition of “best”. So, please tell me how you define “best” when it comes to playing an audition?

He thought for a moment before speaking (did I mention he was an outstanding student?). And then basically what came out was this: great rhythm, spot-on pitch, no “chips”. All good stuff to be sure, and I am quite certain that the pronounced winner of this audition will display copious amounts of each. More power to him, and he will undoubtedly meet with success as he continues to do so. I know this because I see such players in professional settings on nearly a daily basis. Do the gig, right? Hit the notes, center the pitch, and do it all in good time. The one who does this best is the best musician, right? Obviously not. They are, at that moment, arguably the best technician. To be sure, some members of the audition committee will stop right there and grant him the position. But, let’s not stop right there. Let’s go bigger. Bigger picture. Winning a job might result from being so technically-oriented, but ultimately winning a quality of life and bringing your best music to the world will demand more. Maybe you’ve set your bar

too low? Trust me, you don't want a "job". For the longest time, I thought I did. Then, I got one.

At an audition, and in every performance, you want to make music in a manner that draws people into your story and affects the imagination. Once this is your habit, the business of finding employment will take care of itself. If you focus like a laser on the metaphor within the music, and you set about being fully invested in sincere interpretations of the composers' intentions....you may very well awake one day to find that your professional goals have been surpassed. You've got to focus and commit, leaving other distractions by the wayside. We must train our brain.

I see a lot of players get hung up on money issues very early in the game, long before they're making good stories with their instrument. In the early stages of your career, at least, you should be willing to go anywhere and play anything. Bring a smile and a good attitude to every gig. Stay in the moment. Appreciate the music. Respect the music. Elevate those around you, if the situation calls for it. The opportunities for networking, exposure to a wide variety of styles, learning to work harmoniously with conductors and musicians of every variety and skill level....developing these skills is invaluable. Opportunity begets opportunity. By doing a terrific job every time with a good attitude and a professional demeanor, being very appreciative of every dollar paid, you begin to develop a reputation.

I don't care what it is that you love to do: the minute you endeavor to make money doing it, the nature of the game changes. Sometimes, it changes profoundly, and apparently it can change irreversibly. So be careful, and stay vigilant. The most fulfilled professionals that I know, in any field, have found a way to keep their love alive. There is nothing sadder than seeing a professional musician who has failed to do so. Let's avoid that, shall we? It's well worth taking a moment to write down your Love. What drew you to music? Why is it meaningful to you? Why do you feel compelled to make it a central aspect of your life, given that you have so many options for other things? What would make you feel like a failure in this chosen career? Conversely, what would define success for you? Even if you are well along in your professional music career, I encourage you to write these thoughts down.

I feel very strongly about this: write it down. I did so when I was 22 years old and in Graduate School. I spelled out very clearly, and concisely (keep it simple!), exactly what I needed to be "happy" in my musical career. And yes, money was on that list. Let's be real. I don't consider it much of a career if there's no money being made. In that case, it's a hobby, and we might all be better suited for that. In any case, maintaining a strong dose of "amateurism" in your music making is very well advised, even when you're making six figures. The root word of "amateur" translates to Love. In my mind, there ain't nothing wrong with Love, and that's what we're seeking to keep alive here! I say this most sincerely, and you might wish to give it some thought: some of the best musicians I know have, either willingly or forcibly, left the professional ranks. Some are still pros, of course, but I have always held a deep respect for those friends of mine who have known themselves well enough to seek other sources of income....so that their music didn't suffer! That is keeping it real, in my opinion. It's the difference between making music seriously, versus making it sincerely....which is all the difference in the universe.

(This also happens to nicely frame my argument in support of Music Performance degrees. Will such a degree win you a job? Nope. If done properly, though, it will elevate your self-knowledge and artistic perceptions to such a degree that real quality of life awaits you in most any pursuit). I believe that profoundly because I have witnessed it. Do what you love. Keep that love alive. Embrace change in your career. Heck, seek change in your career! If music has spoken to you, it has done so metaphorically. Although music is the best language for metaphor, it certainly isn't the only one. Many avenues of success exist for a mind that can think metaphorically. Indeed, it's difficult to imagine such a mind not achieving its dreams. Metaphoric thinking is the basis of creativity, and I cannot think of a single industry that does not benefit from creativity, can you? Why not use your music to develop a very strong habit of thinking metaphorically?

But how about happiness? What's the secret to obtaining it and keeping it? Can you conceive of this: all of life's ups, downs, sideways, backwards, ecstatic, dramatic, crushing occurrences boiled down to a simple fraction. A formula for Happiness? This is from another book I enjoyed thoroughly (and this time completely), called "The Way of The Peaceful Warrior", loaned to me by another exceptional student:

$$\text{HAPPINESS} = \frac{\text{Satisfactions}}{\text{Desires}}$$

"happiness equals satisfactions divided by desires"

"count your blessings"

"consider what you've got.....NOW, in this moment"

"empathize with the less fortunate"

"stop whining when you've got it so good"

In so many guises, you've probably seen the concept. Intuition may have even led you there. That equation, though, is a really easy way to remind our selves of what truly matters, and take daily stock of our lives. I highly recommend applying it to your life. It seems to work. There is much that I desire, like everybody else, but there is so much more that I am thankful for. I can step back and see those desires for what they truly are....deceptions. I can adjust my perspective. I do not need to be obsessed, distracted, or debilitated by them. As long as my numerator stays big and my denominator small, it's all good. Focus on life's satisfactions and allow desires to drift out of your mind and "pop" like bubbles. Both satisfactions and desires, by the way, are purely matters of perception.

Speaking of perception, here's a list of truisms that I often reiterate to myself:

- Life is short and it is a gift. You have no way of knowing when your time is up. Make the most of every moment.
- Love begets love. You will get in accordance to what you give.
- Music has the power to enlighten, heal, and share the loftiest visions. It makes life better and should always be given our utmost respect. It, too, is a gift.
- Do what you love, the money will follow. (thanks, Mom).

- You are unique, and comparing yourself to others, or worse, equating your happiness to others' perceptions, is a sure fire road to misery.
- Selah.

(This word, 'selah', will probably arise from time to time throughout the book. It is an ancient Hebrew term with a few different translations. It is seen in the oldest Hebrew settings of the biblical Psalms. The best definition, in my opinion, was given by my good friend, and renowned organist, Larry Embury. He introduced me to the term. According to Larry, it means: 'take time and really think about that'. I love it. The Psalms, by the way, were songs. They were sung, and danced, shared, and lived in a musical way. They are rich with metaphor.)

Because I took the time to write down my anticipated satisfactions when I was a graduate student, I can now easily apply the equation and I can see very clearly that I have no reason, no desires, to be unhappy. I just need to be honest with myself. There it is, in black and white: "I'll be satisfied with a life in music when I can: make music every day, supporting myself and a family; share my music with others, perhaps improving the state of the planet for a moment; enable myself to qualify for the experience of working with musical masters; share my experiences through teaching; and never take the gift of Music for granted." So far, so good. We all know that good days and bad days lie ahead, just as we can all think back to difficult moments and awkward experiences. The bigger picture, and much more salient point, however, is this: days ahead and days past are not NOW.

Speaking of now, it would be a good time to get back to my story. So, this particular student, in preparing for his orchestra audition, was willing to participate in an experiment with me. Very often, a student approaches with certain expectations. In the case of preparing orchestral excerpts, those expectations might rightly include work with a tuner and a metronome. After all, we're trying to perfect the aspects of pitch and rhythm on these musical excerpts, right? These particular implements of technology are tools designed to help us do just that, right? Well, yes and no. I have heard many people perform with nearly perfect pitch and rhythm. I have heard others, though, performing with *life in their sound* and an engaging *quality of motion* in their phrases. One might assume these performances to be synonymous. One would be wrong. An audience will always prefer the latter. Even laypeople with very little musical training can discern between the two. Very often, listeners don't know WHY they love a certain performer, or rendition, or recording....they simply know that it fares better in comparison because it speaks to them in some way. We have all experienced this phenomena, I'd be willing to bet. I would argue, though, that it's not, or shouldn't be, so phenomenal. What you are hearing in that performance is Metaphor. At some point, that performer went beyond her technique and dwelled sincerely upon the notion of "what will I try to SAY with these notes?". Then, she set about the business of crafting her story. More importantly, perhaps, is the composer's intent. Ascertaining the intent of the composer, though, can be tricky.

Have you ever written a piece of music? If not, you should try it. Here's a simple exercise. Formulate a phrase or two in your mind. Never mind all the wonderful details of orchestration, harmonization, etc. Keep it simple for now. Try composing a simple melody that would convey to the listener how you felt at your most despairing moment.

Or most joyous. Or numb. Or greedy. Or hungry. Or bored. As long as the music strives to convey a matter of real significance to you, this will work.

Now, using all you know about our system of musical notation, write it down. Every detail of the music as it exists in your mind must be translated and written. Let's assume that our purpose in writing it down is so that it can be re-Created, at some other time and place, OK? Do your utmost and assume nothing of the performer. Get it ALL down there on the staff paper.

Very quickly, you'll see how limited our system of musical notation can be! Subtle nuances are extremely difficult to notate, aren't they? Explaining, in symbolic terms, precisely what the music means to you is a challenge. Do you, have you, will you consider this fact when you are preparing your rendition Mr. Stojowski's fantasy, or Maestro Rossini's storm, or Herr Mahler's personal hell, Strauss' mountain, Stravinsky's primal urges, Rochut's melodious studies.....every drop of music you touch. Only so much can be written. Most of the music cannot be notated. I love my friend who always says, "well, these dots I consider a point of departure."

When it comes to orchestral excerpts, or solos, I can assure you that their intent was deeply significant to the composer. I can further assure you that the intent went beyond every 'A' sounding as a divisor of 440Hz and every eighth note as representing 50.00% of the beat. So often, those are not even stylistically accurate interpretations. Yet, these seem to be the musical features we too often dwell upon: mathematical precision of pitch and rhythm. Where does art enter the picture? What's the story? Where is the Metaphor? In your technique-oriented preparations of this material, how far beyond the notation have you gone? It takes more than even eighth notes and steady tone to properly recreate the Overture from William Tell. Take your ideas of pitch and rhythm and toss them away. Replace them with images of tonal colors and deeply seeded groove. Ask yourself, what was he trying to notate here and how might the notation have fallen short? What aspects of his Creativity didn't/couldn't/wouldn't convey to the page? How do I render his imagination most affectively? What is the Metaphor?

And, that's what we did to prepare for the pool audition. We looked at each excerpt as a stand-alone story. We thought of some dramatic elements to add to each, all well within our technical ability, and our goal in the experiment was simply this: tell a cool story with each excerpt. Make it interesting, engaging, even controversial....and let's just see what happens. Stay in the moment every step of the way, go "all-in" and take some chances. Be absolutely committed to the story in your sound. Absolutely committed. I don't really need to tell you what happened, do I?

He became the first freshman that anyone could recall making into the top orchestra on trombone. Bam! Metaphor your music. When people go to hear music, or committees sit behind screens, they go to enter a different world. They want an escape from their perceived reality....or at least they'd like to be offered a different perspective. Are you setting the table for them? Let's talk concretely about how to start doing that in the next Chapter. There are a couple of "methods" I like to use. I will share them with you, with some explanation.