

Success in Music

What constitutes success in music these days?

There are so many gifted, motivated, and accomplished musicians who are having a difficult time making a career in music, even after working much of their lives towards mastery of their instruments. Ours is not a time or culture that rewards its artists. And there is such competition for the few opportunities that do exist. Given such a challenging environment, how should success in music be defined?

This essay is directed mainly to practicing musicians, people who meet several criteria: 1) professional training in a good music school or conservatory, 2) access to a stage, at least occasionally, 3) a certain standard of playing/teaching ability validated by peers, 4) a certain level of income from music making and/or teaching.

When I was a kid, my friends and I used to play a board game called Careers. Before starting around the board, each player had to choose some combination of hearts (happiness), stars (fame), and money (money), then “rolled the dice” in pursuit of that “vision”. Some chose 100% of one category; others split their quest into equal thirds. The balance was the player’s to choose. In thinking about what constitutes success in music, I suggest that some balance of categories is necessary: as a professional, you have to make *some* money; your efforts have to be recognized by at least *some* people in your community; most importantly, why do anything if it doesn’t make you happy?

This essay, written by a fundamentally optimistic fellow, will not dwell long on the financial component of a successful career in music. Of course, there are a few superstars who make astronomical amounts of money. But good jobs in music are scarce and hard to win. An orchestra player making “only” 45K might consider herself a financial failure, and in comparison with the earning power of her contemporaries in other fields with parallel education and professional drive, the assessment is not entirely invalid. But this is the musical marketplace, and contemporary American society simply does not reward its artists at the same scale it does other professionals. “It’s the economy, stupid.” Any subjective judgment of one’s financial success in music needs to be tempered by a clear, objective understanding of the tilted playing field.

Happiness is tied to expectation: the greater the gap between one’s wishes and one’s reality, the greater the unhappiness. What a shock it was to this idealistic young music student to learn that several members of the first violin section of the New York Philharmonic considered themselves failures, having never achieved status as soloists. It seems part of the human condition to want to be recognized for one’s achievement. In grappling with this issue of success in music, it might be helpful to ask the question, “How much attention is enough

attention?" If the orchestra player feels under-appreciated, maybe he needs to organize a chamber music or even solo recital. Those selfless servants of our industry, music teachers, also would do well to take their turn on a stage, and show that old GB Shaw's dictum about teachers really doesn't apply to musicians.

I do not mean to imply that many orchestra musicians aren't proud of themselves and their work, aren't aware of how fortunate they are to hold the position they enjoy. But I have observed over the years that many of the most ambitious, most driven "stars" in music schools leave the field, unable to live with less than 100% celebrity status. A happy musician needs to have something of the "plugger" inside!

In this society, musicians need to develop an almost existential ability for self-respect. If you can play a Mozart violin concerto well, you have achieved something 99% of humanity can only dream of. (A caveat: let's not indulge in uncritical delusions about our abilities. There is no other meaningful criterion for achievement in music than the respect of peers and colleagues in the field.)

Perhaps a more important indicator of success in music is the contribution we make to our community. Janos Starker spoke always of contributing to the "cause" of cello playing. Whether a high-powered soloist or humble teacher of beginners, a musician is successful whenever he brings positive energy to his community. Not everyone can be Yo-Yo Ma, but there is something to be said for status as a "local celebrity." Let's make the model for success not the empire's ruler, but the village's shaman.

In my childhood board game of Careers, there were equal opportunities to collect money, stars, and hearts. I fear that today's board would have only one space on which you could collect a million dollars and international media coverage, and that you'd have to roll 50 doubles in a row to land on it. However, there still would be plenty of spaces filled with happiness points. Happiness appears: when an audience member comes up after a concert with gratitude in his eyes; when the "light goes on" with a student; when a concert goes reasonably well; when a practice session is productive; whenever you "connect", whether with a colleague, or a listener, or a student, and most especially, with a deeper place inside yourself. Making music is truly a path with heart. The successful musician never forgets that truth.