



Four Tips to Jumpstart Your Career

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April 2007 issue

Have you lost perspective on where your career is heading? Feeling a little stuck? It's not always easy to see what needs fixing or how to make the right choices to move a career forward. As a music career counselor, I typically meet with clients one-on-one to discuss their goals and plans. What a good career counselor can offer is objective feedback and perspective on your profession; but musicians can and should take steps on their own. Below are four tools for a do-it-yourself career tune-up.

Self-assess

Ask yourself the following questions and write down your answers. What are my specific strengths as a musician? As a performer? As a professional? An educator (if you teach)? Note the differences in these questions. Your *attributes* as a vocalist include your range, the size and type of your voice, your repertoire, intonation, and language and diction skills. Your *qualities* as a performer include your stagecraft, interpretation, acting skills, stage presence, and the amount and level of your performance experience.

The question about you as a professional concerns your reputation: Are you known as someone who is easy to work with, who shows up on time and is well prepared? Are you carrying any "diva" baggage?

If you teach, you may want to assess your teaching abilities as well: what are your specific strengths as a teacher? These might include particular repertoire, or dealing with specific age groups, or in solving particular vocal problems. Write down your answers.

Now, using the same categories of questions, think about your weaknesses. We all have them. What are the specific areas you could improve? Be specific, be honest, and write it all down. If you're serious about moving ahead in your career, you need to be willing to confront what needs changing and then work on it.

Since we're not usually our own best judges, it's important to get objective feedback. Make individual appointments with three to four trusted mentors who know your work well. Ask people whose opinion you value: a coach, a conductor, a former teacher, or an employer. Don't ask loved ones or members of your personal fan club – they'll only tell you you're wonderful. When you make these appointments, be clear in advance that you're asking for unvarnished appraisals of both your strengths and your weaknesses.

Be prepared for honesty. I recommend writing down what you hear from these consultations – both the good and the less than good – so you can sort it out later. Listen calmly, don't get defensive, and don't make excuses. You may get recommendations and advice that are contradictory – take time to think it through carefully. You'll need to sort it all out and make decisions on what to do about any of the feedback based on your best judgment, not your emotional reactions. It takes maturity to ask for and to process this kind of detailed, critical feedback.

Being humble and astute enough to ask for input, and then being able to put it to use to improve your work: these are the hallmarks of a committed professional.

Got Goals?

With the ammunition of more perspective on where you are now in your abilities, it's important to think strategically about where you want to go from here. Typically, a career counselor will ask a client: "What would you like your personal and professional life to be like five years from now?" Write it down in detail. What kinds of performances do you plan to be doing, and where? Will you be teaching? Where do you plan to be living? Are family, pets, and real estate involved? What, specifically, are you working towards?

The point is to clarify your goals. If you're going to commit to your future, you had better know what you're going after. The more work I do advising musicians, the more I've come to realize that the ability to plan is a career essential. To make positive changes, first you need to plan and organize your behavior, and then follow through on your plans to achieve the desired results.

Is your five-year goal achievable? You want to be positive, ambitious, *and* realistic here. The feedback from your consultants should help. Once you've determined your five-year goal and written it down, you need to choose appropriate shorter-term, benchmarking goals to help you gauge your progress towards your five-year target. Ask

yourself what concrete steps you can take—this year, this month, this week—that will best help you towards your long-term goal.

This “backwards planning” is an invaluable tool that successful wedding planners, corporate executives, and savvy musicians use. The idea is to plan backwards from the desired outcome, to make sure you have a workable timeline and a set of specific and realistic action steps with deadlines. If you realize you’ll need to gain more performance experience and credits to reach your long-term goal, it may make sense to start locally and get more modest performance experience, and work your way up to more ambitious projects later. Do you need to build your reputation, your repertoire, and your résumé credits? What are the specific action steps that will enable you to accomplish your goals? What is the best thing to knock off your to-do list this week, this month, this year? Your short-term goals should address these questions.

Having realistic short-term goals will help to keep you focused and motivated. Meeting your shorter-term benchmarking goals is the best way to achieve your five-year goal and the best way to eventually realize your long-term dream.

Research!

Armed with your goals and your feedback, the third area to tackle is finding the necessary resources. Depending on your plan, you’ll need to find relevant information, contacts, opportunities, collaborators, and, possibly, funding. I’m convinced that every successful musician is part detective – finding opportunities is essential in a field where the supply of musicians far exceeds the demand.

Spend time each week researching and reading up on your field. Read pertinent journals and websites (beyond the Boston Singers Resource!) that offer news and resource information to your profession, such as *Classical Singer* (<http://www.classicalsinger.com>), *Opera News* (<http://www.metoperafamily.org/operanews>), and *ArtsJournal.com*, (<http://www.artsjournal.com>). Check out the national service organizations that offer professional development and networking opportunities, grants, commissioning programs, or competitions, such as Opera America (<http://www.operaamerica.org>), Chorus America (<http://www.chorusamerica.org>), Chamber Music America (<http://www.chamber-music.org>), Early Music America (<http://www.earlymusic.org>), American Music Center (<http://www.amc.net>), and more.

Check your state and local arts agencies to see what resources they can offer. Read your regional newspapers and check calendar websites to find out who's performing where in your region, and go hear them (and check out alternative performance spaces and possible collaborators). Read other musicians' bios for ideas and leads about grants, competitions, festivals, and performance opportunities.

Be part of your local scene—get to know more of your potential colleagues. Find out if you can set up informal auditions with key conductors, coaches, or directors. And don't overlook your nearest public or university library: reference librarians are masters at finding organizations, performance sites, and financial resources in your region.

Information leads to opportunities. Make it a habit to read up on what's going on in your profession, locally and nationally. Being curious and then following up with research leads to finding and creating opportunities.

Think like an entrepreneur

If you're relying solely on auditions and advertised job openings, you're limiting your options. In the Boston area, scores of musicians have created their own entrepreneurial projects—old and new music groups, mixed chamber ensembles, and a wide array of professional and semi-professional choruses, as well as vocal ensembles offering educational performances in public schools. For example, Craig Smith and friends founded the acclaimed Emmanuel Music in Boston more than 25 years ago to perform the Bach sacred cantatas as originally intended, as part of a weekly Sunday church service. To date, the group has performed the complete cantata cycle numerous times and has gone on to record, tour, and present large-scale operatic works as well as complete cycles of chamber works by Handel, Schubert, Mozart, and Brahms. None of this would have happened if a musician had not decided to take an idea and make something of it.

Most musicians have some secret project they've always wanted to tackle, whether it's a recital of unusual repertoire, commissioning a certain composer, starting an after-school arts program, or launching a summer festival. People realize these dreams by talking about them with others, and sharing their enthusiasm—which often leads to more ideas, collaborators, and plans. Then they follow through on these plans, they take action. Entrepreneurs are simply people who have a dream and then do something about it.

Successful musicians are typically part detective and part entrepreneur. So start brainstorming with your colleagues. Get started doing something about that secret project you've always wanted to tackle.

If you follow through appropriately with the tips above, I guarantee you will have a better sense of where you fit in the profession, and you will either find or create more opportunities for yourself. With all this, however, you need to remember why it is you fell in love with music in the first place. Remind yourself often so that you can be renewed and inspired to do all the hard work of forging your career path.