

By: Matt Tropman

For most ITEA members, reading the summer *Journal* usually means the start of a new school year is close at hand. For some, it means the start of an entirely new musical and life experience—college. If you’ve gotten so far as to audition, accepted, and now have enrolled in a college or university as a music major with tuba or euphonium as your principal instrument, then you’ve already gotten a lot of advice, and probably followed a good bit of it. You may well be tired of hearing it. When I started college there were a lot of people willing to tell me how much more I needed to practice, how hard it would be, how unlikely it was that I would succeed, and how badly it paid if I did manage to find a job. So I assume you’ve heard all of that before. Instead of another version of “that lecture,” I’d like to offer some broader impressions of life as a college music major. Overall themes I’ve observed, things I think tend to make students successful or unsuccessful, and ways of making yourself the best player possible as well the best musician, and some ways of giving yourself a chance to get paid for how good you’re going to get. Instead of telling you how many hours a day to practice and what speed your double tonguing should reach by second semester, I’m going to speak more to what it feels like to major in music, why it’s hard, and how you will succeed.

Passion+Vocation=?

Perhaps the biggest overall difference between studying music in high school and entering college as a music major is that you are taking your passion and trying to turn it into a vocation. That is, your passion for music and the enjoyment it brought you in high school now has to meet the more practical problem of getting a job someday. Turning your passion into your vocation is *really hard*. It is my experience that two main problems arise. First, if you try too hard to “vocalize” your music making you may snuff out your passion. Or second (and quite related) you follow your passion to such a degree that practicality plays no role, and you become the world’s greatest unemployed musician. Solution? Get to know you. Start by trying to merely identify which description best fits you. Even though passion and vocation can seem to be at odds, the most successful musicians find ways to make them complimentary in their own careers. By seeking out opportunities that enrich both the passion and the vocation, you can too. Here are, I hope, some ways to do just that.

Be Fearless

One of the areas where I think incoming freshman struggle is with really inhabiting the character of the music. As an example, take any etude from Book I of the Bordogni/Rochut. In high school, you were probably corrected on missed notes, rhythms, intonation flaws, and so forth. In college, you might well play the entire etude for your teacher with a few technical mistakes, and your teacher might say something like “so what is that piece about?” (Hint: it isn’t about the E-flat you chipped in measure 13). In high school, you were probably the best player at your school. You were routinely praised by your band director and received high marks at festivals. But now pretty much everyone in the studio can play Rochut Book I. Listen closely to comments in studio class. People aren’t reciting a blow-by-blow of missed notes anymore. They are talking about what they think the music means, and whether or not the performer is expressing it. You cannot express what you do not feel. In your first few lessons, you might feel a little squeamish about “going there” emotionally with your approach to music making. But you’re going to have to if you really want to be a great musician. The great tuba and euphonium players are always trying to *express something* with their playing. So don’t be shy.

Create Structure

A big part of becoming a great professional player is pursuing music artistically rather than technically. The paradox here is that in order to do this, you have to have great technique. And I don’t just mean finger speed, I mean your overall technical mastery of the instrument. As you start out college, you’ll be busier than ever, but finding practice time will be up to you. Developing a schedule for practicing is essential for almost all of us. Within that scheduled practice time, prioritize wisely. The best players know what to work on, and they avoid the trap of practicing only what they like and are already good at. In order to gain the technical mastery that will facilitate great artistry, you really need to address your weak points in addition to continuing to develop your strengths. You probably can’t practice *everything* in one session. So consider developing some different types of practice sessions; you might have some sessions just for lip slurs, long tones, and scales. Another might be for assigned etudes and ensemble music, and still another for solo repertoire. There is no one formula that works for everyone, but by creating some structure

around your practice sessions, you'll be headed in the right direction. Learn as you go. The more honest you are with yourself, and the more aware you are of your strong and weak points, the easier it will be. If you tend to struggle with the vocational aspects of a music career, working on having good practice sessions can be a big help later on.

Collaborate

Try to get used to saying "yes" a lot. If a string quartet asks you to show up to rehearsal someday and improvise with them, say yes. If the band director wants you to play trombone in pep band, say yes. If the Glee Club needs someone to sing a low B-natural in "Salvation is Created," and you can do it, say yes. Saying "yes" to all of this might take away a small amount of practice time on Prokofiev V or *Festive Overture*, but you'll be a much more interesting musician for it. Besides, finding enough time to learn excerpts is up to you now. It may be that a composer overheard your rehearsal with the string quartet and wants to write a composition featuring you. During pep band the camera may focus on you and launch your career hosting a sports talk show. You might go on tour to Asia with the Glee Club merely because you can sing a low B-natural. And after all of that happens, your rendition of Prokofiev V might be much more interesting than mere practice possibly could have made it. As you fashion your career try not to cross anything "off the list." While you enter college with a specific major such as education, performance or therapy, your eventual career may not be in the specific area in which you started. Frequent collaboration keeps your mind open to the possibilities.

Create

Do you compose? Do you do arrangements? Can you improvise? If not, start. It could be as simple as doing a four-part arrangement for tuba-euphonium ensemble. If you ask your teacher, almost certainly he/she will at least read your arrangement during rehearsal, if not put it on a concert. You might even offer to conduct. You'll gain valuable skills doing this sort of thing. For one, it can be difficult to promote your work to others. By having the courage to ask your teacher to program an arrangement, you'll make it easier when you have to ask the Director of Bands to program a tuba concerto your senior year. You'll also gain experience in using notation software, and doing any kind of arranging or composing usually has positive side effects in theory class.

Teach

Whether you are a performance or education major, you need to have some students of your own. If all of the private lesson teaching in your area is spoken for, volunteer at local schools. All musicians are teachers. Passing on what you know is a part of music; it forces you to constantly think about fundamentals and the simplest, most effective way to accomplish musical goals. And, you might get paid a little.

Devour

Attend every concert you possibly can. Keep music playing constantly. Befriend string players, vocalists, and history majors. Sight-read double-bass excerpt books. Attend a reed-making seminar for oboists. Join the Gamelan ensemble. All of this is available to you, and all of it will enrich you. Do not restrict yourself to tuba-euphonium related events. The more diverse your experience base, the more interesting you will be. There can be no such thing as a boring musician. You are what you consume, so devour as much as possible.

Manage

You will find within your first year in college that certain people at your school are the "gig people." These are students that have shown the enterprise to start up their own brass quintet, which now works most weekends. Others are known to be the best web designers in school. Still others have a knowledge of sound recording and have a profitable recital recording service. These people are showing you by example what the vocation side of music is all about. Watch, learn, and participate if you can. Think about how you can apply these principles to managing your own career. What are your most saleable assets?

Comfort Zones are for Losers

So, get outside of yours, and stay out! Humans naturally seek equilibrium, homeostasis, and balance. Balance is overrated, and it doesn't usually create great art. If you have a choice between sitting first chair in the second band or last chair in the top band, take the top band. If your teacher needs extra performers for studio class at the last minute, volunteer. If the Dean puts out an email to studio teachers asking for students interested in having lunch, volunteer. By the end of your career, you will have spent the vast majority of your time as a musician sitting alone in

a practice room. By venturing outside your comfort zone and seeking new opportunities, your musicianship will develop much faster.

Listen

Last, but certainly not least, *listen*. Listen to your teachers, seek their mentorship and trust them. You probably considered many schools before settling on one in particular, and hopefully you have a good musical and working relationship with your studio instructor and many other teachers at your school. They want to help you. They want to write you a great letter of reference when you are applying for a job and to hear from you after you've been hired. But it is largely up to you to develop these relationships. Your teachers are your best resource. Whatever challenges you are facing, your teachers probably faced them too. If you bristle when your teacher suggests something to you, and if you immediately start blasting *Ride of the Valkyries* the instant band rehearsal is dismissed, you are not going to be able to develop the types of relationships that can really help you grow. As a final thought, my favorite quote from the music business comes from Wynton Marsalis: "The humble improve."

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