NEWMUSICBOX

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NOV 14, 2007

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All The Things You Are: Five Suggestions for Composing Your Happiness

Musicians love to talk and write about lots of things related to our work. We talk and write about music. We talk and write about the tools we use to make music. We talk and write about how to make money with all that music we talk and write about.

But few of us talk and write about the bigger picture of how our musical and tactical efforts are guided by three distinctly non-musical concepts that don't get talked and written about often or openly enough: positive vision, abundant thinking, and a sense of self-worth. Thanks to technology, we now live in a world of vast possibilities and our music can reach millions of people, even if we choose never to rise from our chair. The key to making full use of these extraordinary powers lies with tapping in to the extraordinary joys within us.

Welcome to the musicians' philosophy toolbox.

Artists are communicators, and the world of communication has changed immensely in the past decade. Yet the way artists perceive themselves in the world has been slow to adapt to the freedom and power we now possess. We're most likely to have a viable career with our art if we ignore some of the paralyzing rules, paradigms, and myths from the past that are no longer relevant.

Our perceptions play an enormous part in how our life unfolds. Choices we make about everything from note placement to state of mind are determining factors in our careers. If we choose to focus on obstacles and disappointments, it's likely that we'll attract more of exactly those problems, because a bitter outlook tends to repel good people and opportunities. Conversely, when we center our thoughts on positive events, we project a sense of well-being that resonates to others and brings wonderful things much closer to us.

Here are five suggestions that apply not only to our music careers, but to our personal happiness throughout life:

> 1. Reconsider the way you perceive yourself and your worth in society.
> 2. Reject negative assumptions.
> 3. Change your reality by changing your perceptions toward abundant and positive thinking.
> 4. Embrace the notion that art is not a competitive business.
> 5. Remember the spark and the joy that made you decide to be a musician in the first place.

Following these suggestions can lead toward a vital and viable music career. We'll begin by talking about self-worth, because everything we do hinges on our sense of it.

Self-Worth

There has never been a better time to be a composer or musician. Artistically, there's no dominant style to which to adhere; technically, the internet has given us outstanding tools with which to share our work across the globe; and financially, we can publish our own music and recordings and reap one hundred percent of the rewards. Even physically, many of us can choose to live and work anywhere in the world armed merely with a laptop and a wireless connection.

But all of the amazing gifts presented to 21st-century musicians require a sense of self-worth in order for us to fully make use of them. We are the product we are distributing. Our music is one of the most personal things we have to offer, and it stems from our uniqueness as individuals and our desire to communicate to others. The first and most important declaration of our music's worth must come from us, whether we are giving it to people or selling it to them.

As artists, we can't fully exploit this enormous power without deeply believing in our work. If we're seeking to make a living from our music—not every artist chooses this, but many of us do—then we must believe that we deserve to earn money from our output: that it is worthy, and that we are, as well.

As media expands and musicians self-publish, the contemporary music community has gradually released its expectation that artists can only survive if tethered to academic institutions, Carnegie Hall premieres, and glowing *New York Times* reviews. Yet there remains a lingering impression that when it comes to art, money is a four-letter word.

This would almost be quaint were it not so damaging. We have tools enabling artists to take full control of their careers and benefit greatly from their work. But quietly imbedded in the subtext of our culture is a sense that artists don't have to make money because we love what we do and would do it anyway, and that the moment one tries to make money from art, it transforms that art into craft for commerce. These assumptions are not only outdated, they're entirely untrue.

Each of us knows what we deem to have value and merit. We know what we're willing to pay money for in our lives. So naturally, if we don't place a value our own work, then we're not meeting our own standards of what's valuable. Ouch! That hurts to read, doesn't it? If we believe that we're doing good work and living up to our standards, we then have to ask the tough question, "Why do I feel reluctant to ask for proper compensation for my work?" Notice the choice of the wording: not "receive" proper compensation, but "ask." Is it because of the myths outlined above? Is it because of subtle messages sent to us by society or teachers early on? And here's one to make you squirm: is it because as long as we hold on to limiting beliefs, we have a reasonable excuse for not making more money?

Creating a career is like choreographing a dance. Our gesture is our music, and the responding gestures come from everyone around us. Each dance begins with what we envision we want. In many negotiations, we end up receiving a little less than what we initially asked for: all the more reason to begin with a healthy and reasonable evaluation of our worth, since if we start at a higher number, we'll end at a higher number. This is important, because this axiom unfortunately works remarkably well in reverse.

The cycle begins with us, not with the outside world. It has to do with our positive attitude, which in turn has a lot to do with our expectation of how the transaction will proceed. If we clearly envision what it is that we seek, we are in a marvelous position to make it a reality. The more specific the detail of our vision, the better. Each of us possesses far more power to determine an outcome than we realize.

> **Suggestion #1:** If we think what we create is valuable and we are willing to commit to it, then others will feel our commitment and believe that what we create is valuable, too.

Creating Need

Some claim that no one wants what we create. But, think about the advertising business: until we were told that we needed *this* toothpaste and *that* deodorant, we had no idea we needed or wanted them. Through the persistence of positive marketing and media presence, the message of need gradually seeps into our consciousness, and soon we find ourselves wandering down the drugstore aisle casually slipping a new item into our basket, willing to try it.

Sound like an approach that could be paralleled in our new music business? Composers and musicians can do a better job seeping into the consciousness of the society around us. We can begin by ensuring that the tone of our message is an engaging one.

If we state that the general public doesn't like new music, then we're internally absorbing an expectation that our work, no matter how wonderful, won't be enjoyed. We're setting ourselves up for a frustrating experience, and we're transmitting this negative message to the very people we'd like to reach. If we change our thoughts, instead choosing to say that there's always a niche market that can be created somewhere for what we have to offer, no matter how inside or outside the box it is, it's highly likely that such a niche will appear. Not out of the blue; we can't just sit back, eat bonbons, and await inevitable success. But by beginning with a positive assumption, we create the frame within which we can work hard at all the things necessary to build a career.

No matter how ardent our efforts, we will never be fully effective if we give ourselves negative messages about the unlikelihood of success while we're knocking ourselves out reaching for it. But if we take the private positive message we learn to give ourselves, and make it a public one, then just like advertising executives we can find ways to communicate about our musical product in such an enticing way that more people will want to try it.

> **Suggestion #2:** Reject the myth that composers and musicians can't do well. We are all worthy.

Abundance

When we think positively about our lives and are kind and supportive to others, there's a far better chance that positive and kind things will happen to us. Just being aware of the internal statements we silently make during the course of a day, and catching ourselves when we veer to the bitter side, can produce a hugely positive shift in our productivity.

If you work ardently at what you do and believe you are good at it, and if you have peers who are successful, then there is little reason why you can't be successful as well. There is room for everyone, because inherently, every artist offers something unique. Negativity is an effective excuse to avoid taking responsibility for your own happiness. An abundant view of the possibilities in your career will usually result in a happier journey through the process of building it.

We tend to get what we expect to get in life. Not always, but often. There's tremendous power in our ability to envision what we want, because once we can describe it, we can manifest it. Many of us do this in our musical work. We envision what projects we want to focus on, and we draw them to our lives. We then begin the creative process by defining the new undertaking, e.g.: Who is it for? Who are the personnel involved? What are we trying to communicate? What approach are we using? Much of our work naturally has to do with

determining parameters. Imagine defining the parameters of what you would like your life to look like, just as you might define what you want a new piece to sound like.

It's a lot more enjoyable to go through life being kind, open, trusting, and generous than it is to be tense, negative, wary, and hoarding. Our state of mind tends to be reflected back to us. When we're angry, it ultimately hurts us a lot more than it hurts the target of our unhappiness. Everyone else goes on with their lives, meanwhile we walk around with a dark cloud eating us up. Finding ways to release negative emotions is important. We're incredibly lucky to have an outlet in music.

Sometimes it seems like there are thousands of composers and musicians wanting to make their mark in the new music world. And you know why? Because there are! And this is the most wonderful thing for the state of our art and for our place in society. What better way for us to become significant to our communities, than to infiltrate them by sheer numbers! This is not something to find professionally threatening.

> **Suggestion #3:** Turn any negative thinking into abundant and positive thinking, and change reality by changing perception.

No Competition

Jealously and competitiveness feel terrible and they're destructive. When a colleague of ours does well, we should all celebrate, because what's good for one artist often ends up being good for our art. It doesn't matter how many competitions there are, or how few slots exist on a season's worth of concert programming: the only person you should ever be in competition with is yourself. That's right. You're best off when you set a personal goal based solely on your art and your vision of what you wish to create and share with others.

It also doesn't matter what your peers are doing, because if they're the same kind of genuine artist you are, they're marching to their own vision, too. The whole point of composing and performing "art music" is that presumably we each have something original to say. The more we say it and stand behind it, the larger our fan bases will become. Listeners respond to sincerity and truth. Authenticity rules.

Many of us have been on both sides of the competition fence: as the submitter to some, and as the panelist in others. While these contests are often frustratingly subjective, art is subjective, which is what makes it different from, say, calculus. If we've done our best work and know that it has worth, then we submit it and either it will speak to the condition of the judges at that particular moment of that particular day, or it won't. The result often has little to do with whether our music is worthy or not. Most of the time there will only be a few slots available for awards or grants, but there are many times more solid, deserving applicants. So the lesson is to not take these things personally, and instead be glad that a few more people around a table now know about what you do. This is how a career is built: through familiarity.

Sometimes when people think about abundance, they think of success as it might be defined by the outside world. But the only definition that matters is a very personal one. We can't compare our careers with anyone else's, and we can't define success by any one else's terms. We will always have the greatest success when we pursue the things that we're most excited by and driven to, as opposed to pursuing what we think—or often, what we're told by others—we "should" be doing to advance our careers. It's easy to get caught up in the external world's expectations. With a broad view of the many possible paths we might choose, we can find the one that will lead us to a success that is uniquely ours.

Kindness and generosity toward others is one of the greatest traits a person can have. The same abundant approach goes for sharing information that we come across and helping our peers network with wonderful colleagues. If we've banged our heads against the wall trying to learn on our own how to do X, Y, and Z, then there's no reason for anyone we know to have to reinvent the wheel and go through all of that again. If we've figured something out, we should be happy to share that information. What someone else does with it will still be different from what we do with it, because our music and inspirations are all different. The better educated and prepared our colleagues are, the better for all of us.

This is painfully true on a business level. Because colleagues before us have been willing to do the same work for free, or nearly so, it sometimes appears to be a challenge to be appropriately paid. When a precedent is set in which creative efforts don't have to be properly remunerated, the entire community suffers. Be part of the larger community and think about how your decisions impact others.

> **Suggestion #4:** To be a professional artist does not mean you must be competitive.

Joy

We all wear so many hats these days. With professional demands pressing from all directions it can be overwhelming, and it's not hard to lose sight of how we initially came to the conclusion that we were meant to be music-makers. It's helpful to take a moment and reconnect with our personal stories of first inspirations. Recalling that early glee will fuel us through times that are sometimes bizarrely disconnected from it.

We work hard at what we do. Any independent composer who does not have a day job and is not on faculty anywhere, has days that are often 18 hours long, five, six, and occasionally seven days a week. Between the composing work, and all the administrative work that comes with being self-published, there's just never enough time. But despite working a 90-hour week, one can still feel energized and absolutely happy in these manic pursuits. We're completely driven to do what we do; otherwise, we shouldn't be doing it! It's too hard, and the monetary rewards are often out of proportion with the amount of hours and sweat invested. So if creative work feels more often like a chore than a joy, don't do it—at least, not as a profession.

But sometimes we truly love what we do and it still doesn't feel joyous. We often feel overwhelmed, under appreciated, and very tired. This is where the concept of being a whole person, not just a musician-on-legs, comes into play.

Filling our lives with pursuits that are separate from music, and finding joy in other parts of our existence, whether with family, friends, hobbies, or volunteerism, is a way to be refreshed and to make sure we always see the big picture. By being more interesting and more well-rounded people, we become better artists because we have more to communicate and more emotional experience from which to draw. All of this adds to the joy in our lives as musicians and keeps us in touch with basic happiness.

> **Suggestion #5:** Realize that artists can—and deserve to—be happy.

It's All Related

Now that we all feel warm and fuzzy about our music and the world around us, how do we actually put these philosophical concepts into action? How do we use them to earn a decent living pursuing what we love? Everything discussed here prior to now has focused on the inside: what makes us tick as people and how that relates to our musical life. Now it's time to look to the outside, and to how we can build a viable career that connects us with others around the world.

An enormous part of our work is based on the relationships we nurture. Networking with people is vital; the intimacy and immediacy of physically meeting colleagues is something that will never go out of style. With the 21st century, artists have gained a significant additional power: the internet, which completely transcends the way we can promote our music. Although we can't be present with people 24/7 or in several countries at once, our internet presence can.

The World Wide Web is the most effective tool with which to rapidly create an international career. For music artists willing to spend the time necessary to create thorough websites and cultivate professional relationships, this medium is unrivaled and can dramatically alter our artistic and financial profile. Via email correspondence that links to our web presence, we're able to collaborate with artists and connect with audiences no matter where they live, and often, no matter where we live.

When you establish an internet presence, you are advertising for yourself and for your work. You are letting people across the planet know about what you create and what you presumably care a great deal about, and you are simultaneously putting forth a persona. Your sense of self-esteem will be called upon, and almost always bolstered, by publicizing your music. Many people around the world who until now didn't know about you, will be delighted to have discovered your work. And the process leads to self-discovery as well, because in order to tell others about what you do, you have to carefully define it for yourself.

The serendipity of the internet is one of the greatest gifts to our profession. The meritocracy it has created encourages each of us to do our best, knowing that we can determine our own path, make our own choices, and be far more responsible for our outcomes.

Reject the myths, the limiting beliefs, and the old paradigms that created preconceptions about how artists are supposed to build careers and conduct business. In only a few years we've evolved from a longstanding status quo of the rules and behaviors devised by then-necessary gatekeepers, to a new sense of self and self-determination that has made those rules and gatekeepers irrelevant. There is tremendous power and also great joy in being positive, in clearly envisioning and communicating what we wish to achieve, and in having an open and abundant approach to everything we do and toward everyone with whom we come in contact. There has never been a better time to be a musician, and the world is available for everyone's notes.

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Alex Shapiro

Through her website, **her MySpace page** and **her blog**, composer **Alex Shapiro** daily experiences the fulfilling results from the advice she shares, and proselytizes to colleagues in print, at schools, and at the ASCAP "I Create Music" Expo in Hollywood. This article is part of Alex's upcoming guide to building e-careers. Alex lives amidst nature on remote San Juan Island off the coast of Washington State and is currently composing a concert wind band piece commissioned by the United States Army TRADOC Band, whose Commander discovered Alex's music on MySpace and contacted her there. Alex's newest CD is a collection of eight of her chamber music works on the October 2007 innova Recordings release, ***Notes from the Kelp***.

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