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WRITTEN BY
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ARTICLES

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Roundtable: Let's Make a List

[Ed. Note: In the spirit of conversation and story sharing, we reached out to music makers and asked them to let us know what was on their minds when it came to cash and creativity and what lessons from their own careers they might share. Some answered questions we posed directly, others were inspired to take the topic somewhere else. Each provided something illuminating, and we hope you'll jump in and share your own experiences in the comments. –MS]

Alex Shapiro

Okay, fellow note aligners: let's talk about the nitty and the gritty when it comes to creating income from the music we compose.

I'll begin with this important, tone-setting manifesto:

Our worth as composers is meaningful, whether or not our music generates income.

Too often when reading frank discussions about money, some composers who either by choice or circumstance do not garner much revenue from their music are left feeling as though their pieces don't really...count. Bah, humbug (or maybe in this case, Bach, Hamburg). Money has nothing to do with the quality of anyone's music.

That said, for those who choose to put together a living from composing, there are myriad avenues for monetizing one's output—which can offer both exciting opportunities and an overwhelming career equation to solve. Thus, I'm asking fellow music creators to build an ever-growing master list of income sources derived solely from their work. We'll start with my list, simply because it's the example with which I'm most familiar, and because what it lacks, others will chime in to add. By doing so, we all can benefit from contemplating the broad landscape of possibility that is seeded by our copyrights.

Ancillary work

Before we launch The Big List, let's have a look at other income sources in our field. There are many terrific ways to earn a living in the music world through ancillary careers. Performing and teaching are probably the most obvious ones, in addition to working:

as an arranger and orchestrator
as a conductor
in music administration
as a music librarian
as a music preparation professional
in publishing
as a manager or agent
as a composer's assistant
as a music video producer
as a recording engineer
as a consultant to peers
as a judge on panels
as a studio assistant
for honorariums from service organizations
giving private lessons online and in person
giving workshops and seminars...

...and these are only a few.

There is also a gray area that includes writing articles and book chapters, or allowing one's music to be used for free in videos, for which one is not often paid, but which offers a level of professional exposure that has the potential to become financially rewarding, one step removed. A few years back, I penned an article for NewMusicBox exploring this, titled "**The Economy of Exposure: Publicity as Payment?**".

But in this instance, let's enumerate the many ways by which the original music that pours out of our hearts and brains can be turned directly into the food that feeds us, the roof that houses us, and the prompt internet bill payment that keeps us connected so that we can deliver our work and watch the next episode of *House of Cards*. In other words, let's limit the scope of this list to ways that our music can earn us money. Not our instrument-playing gigs or our conducting, but solely our copyrights.

Round One

Here's an initial pass at some of the ways in which composers like me earn income. These aren't listed in any particular order, and some consistently generate larger amounts than others. I invite you to add to this incomplete list in the comments section below.

Commissions

This includes your composing fee, plus an additional fee for the music preparation, if relevant. If you are also doing the score and parts copying for your own work, then that counts as a source of income directly related to your original music.

Score sales, directly from you

If you are the publisher of the music, you receive 100 percent of these proceeds.

Score sales, through a distributor

If you are the publisher of the music, you receive a designated percentage of these proceeds, after the dealer discount.

Score sales, through a publisher

If you have assigned a copyright to a publisher, then you will receive a designated percentage of their proceeds.

Performance royalties

Money that comes from your performing rights organization for small rights, and from your own negotiations for grand rights.

Publishing royalties

Money that comes from your performing rights organization and possibly your co-publishers.

Digital streaming royalties

Money that comes from collection services like Sound Exchange, if you own copyrights in sound recordings.

Mechanical royalties

Money that comes from record labels and their distributors. You may need to invest in a high-powered microscope to see the amount you are paid.

Residencies

Fees that conferences, symposiums, festivals, and schools pay us to come and lecture about our music, coach rehearsals of our pieces, and drink boxed wine with a side of fried mozzarella sticks at Applebee's after concerts of our works.

Sync licenses

Money paid to you, if you own the copyright, for the use of your music with visual media.

Arrangement licenses

Money paid to you for the right for someone else to create an arrangement of an existing work in your catalog.

Ad revenue

Money paid to you through programs like Google AdSense, Amazon Associates, YouTube Partner Program, etc. when your online content includes ads that generate click-throughs.

Online coaching

A fee paid to you to attend and coach a rehearsal of your work via Skype or a Google Hangout.

Skypehearsals, as I've dubbed them, are a newly created market, and especially useful for composers working with large ensembles. I was among the early adopters who incorporated these sessions as an ongoing income source, and they're a significant part of my creative and business approach in the wind band world. For a moderate fee, I'm brought right into the interpretive process, resulting in a meaningful connection with the musicians, plus some oblique, tangible advantages. By forming a virtual, yet personal relationship between me and the ensemble, the director is more likely to purchase my other scores (sales income), perform those pieces (royalty income) and commission me in the future (as long as I remember to comb my hair and avoid drooling). In other words, a relatively small Skypehearsal fee often turns not only into a long-lasting collegial friendship, but into three additional sources of income as well.

Be in the flow

Income for an independent composer is all about the flow. Sure, it's wonderful when larger checks show up in your mailbox or direct deposit. But more often than not, getting a viable career up to speed means creating an ongoing succession of projects and uses of your material that together generate a constant stream of cash that usually arrives in modest amounts.

For instance, a commission fee from an individual or small ensemble might be spread over

four payments, as opposed to the traditional two. Perhaps you have three such contracts in a given year, in addition to others that pay you larger amounts in one or two segments. The result of this "3 clients x 4 payments each" is that you have a check coming in virtually every month from one piece or another (and sometimes from several at once, depending on your composing schedule). Those, along with your income stream throughout the year from the categories listed above, complete the recipe for being able to pay your bills.

Account for yourself

Cash Week - sm

Read more new music and money coverage all this week on NewMusicBox.

Like most working composers, I receive income each month in varying amounts from a wide variety of sources, rather than from just one or two places. It can actually be a bit dizzying to keep track of it all. I'm frighteningly organized (yup, one of those obnoxious "neat desk" people), and yet when it comes to accounting and staying on top of things in my business, I'm embarrassingly-but-charmingly simple in my record-keeping. Okay, probably more on the embarrassing side, but hey, it works for me.

To wit: I create a simple spreadsheet each year, featuring columns for the "who/what/when due/when paid" information, with a psyche-soothing color code for each fee category. I list and enter every payment chronologically so I can see the rundown clearly, gathering and summing the categories at tax time. Many of you reading this are highly sophisticated and use great software that does far more (other colorful spreadsheet strategies of possible interest are outlined here). But admittedly, for as über-high tech as I am in my project studio, I'm very old school when it comes to accounting. I'm sharing my process here so that composers daunted by the prospect of managing all their information can see how utterly straightforward it can be.

In addition to the spreadsheet, I keep a tally in an even simpler text file, listing what my anticipated income is for each month of the year, as well as my monthly expenses. Assuming your clients pay in a timely manner, you will know that the second of three payments for *Such A Brilliant Piece* is due in February, and that the first of two payments for *Another Brilliant Piece* is due in May, as is the final, fourth payment for *This Utterly Brilliant Piece*. You'll know that if you served on a panel in late March, your honorarium will arrive sometime in April, and those residency fees from symposiums and universities will make your mailbox smile in, say, July, October, and December. Your PRO payments come at pre-determined times, while your score sales and Skype fees probably go up and down each month. As I noted above, it's dizzying, and you can see why it's wise to write all of this down. Each of these items combines to create a cascade of cash flow, borne from the riverhead of your biggest asset: your copyright.

Live modestly

To achieve the elegant simplicity of the road map above, there is one very significant rule of thumb which cannot be stressed enough: live within your means, and avoid using credit whenever possible. (The tragedy of student loans is an evil that for some is unavoidable, and is a separate discussion.) Pay as you go. Money is artistic freedom: the less stress you're under to meet monthly financial responsibilities, the less you will need to rely on other non-composing sources of income and the more choice you will have as a composer as to what projects to accept.

Think creatively

If you happen to be a non-performing composer as I am, that means that you can choose to live anywhere you wish. You may decide to trade in the expense of a big city for the affordability of a small town. Or even a small rock, like where I live on Washington's San Juan Island. Or... a boat! I had a live-aboard permit years ago for my sailboat in Santa Barbara. I still consider the future possibility of forgoing a house, buying a decent sized older vessel, and setting up my studio in it. Thanks to cell and internet connectivity, music creators have many economic options that would never before have been realistic.

Find a balance

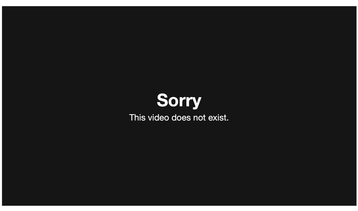
For composers who choose to earn money from their art, the pride of being paid cold hard cash in exchange for the sonic chaos inside our heads cannot be overrated. But even for those with established careers, it's common to toggle between different kinds of projects: some naturally destined to be more obscure, and others predicted to garner many sales and performances. A contrabassoon sonata probably won't move nearly as many copies off the shelf as a wind band or choral piece. In both cases, they can equally represent the excellent art of the same composer, but do so through different compositional voices for different audiences. One helps to subsidize the other, resulting in a very fulfilling artistic life. No one would criticize a friend for cooking an Italian meal on Tuesday, doing Szechuan take-out on Wednesday, enjoying a North Indian buffet lunch on Friday, and making French onion soup on Sunday. Writing varied types of music is no different, and it is a wise approach to staying in the flow both musically and financially.

Be kind

I'm a firm believer that there's a beautiful correlation between being a decent, positive person and attracting opportunity. Kindness, graciousness, an interest in what's meaningful to other people, and a sense of humor about oneself are traits that not only enhance your life, but also your career. Because you're not just in the music-making business, you're in the relationship-making business.

Additional resources

Chamber Music America has a long-running series about the music business called the First Tuesday Sessions, for which I was a guest speaker a few years ago. Recently the organization began posting videos of these valuable conversations. The newest one is a must-see for any composer wishing to be paid for their work: composer Martin Bresnick gave a terrific, very specific, one-hour tutorial on the details involved in negotiating fees for one's work:



Be sure to **click here**, as well, for more excellent advice.

Another wonderful resource is composer Garrett Hope's podcast "Composer on Fire." You can hear me address some of what's in this essay in my two-part March 2016 podcast, and the site is filled with inspiring conversations that will make you even more excited than you may already be about having a viable career doing what you love.

Never forget

After all of this discussion of the many ways to earn money from your art, it's important that I wrap up with the very same credo with which I began:

Our worth as composers is meaningful, whether or not our music generates income.

Everyone knows that developing the ability to support oneself in the arts is a challenging mission. Not every artist is naturally suited to the requisite demands placed upon our left cerebral hemisphere, as well as upon our people skills. No one is "better than" or "less than" anyone else, whether or not they possess these traits. We each compose because we are unstoppably drawn to do so. Our work, whether commissioned or not, is simultaneously exhausting and exhilarating. For those who find a way to make their passion their vocation as well, exhilaration should ideally become the overriding adjective for a very busy life that's filled with magic.

...

Composer Alex Shapiro aligns note after note with the hope that at least a few of them might actually sound good next to each other. Her persistence at this activity, as well as at non-fiction writing, public speaking, arts advocacy, wildlife photography, and the shameless instigation of insufferable puns on Facebook, has led to a happy life. Created from a broad musical palette that defies genre, Shapiro's acoustic and electroacoustic works are performed and broadcast daily across the U.S. and internationally. Her pieces are published by Activist Music, and can be found on over twenty commercially released recordings from around the world. She is the Symphonic and Concert writer representative on the ASCAP Board of Directors.

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