

# Being a Musician

Musicians  
Benevolent  
Fund

This speech was given by David Sulkin, CEO of the Musicians Benevolent Fund at Music Learning Live, Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester, 26<sup>th</sup> February 2010 and at the Federation of Music Services annual conference in Belfast on 18<sup>th</sup> June 2010.

What is this speech aiming to achieve? Music education conferences are usually about training, development, careers, the music profession and how to enter it. They are never about the lives of musicians and the long-term effects of being a musician. The speech therefore is intended to open up thinking about the joys and inspiration of the lives of musicians alongside the risks. There is an economic theme too. That is, the average – yet good - musician is unlikely make a substantial living and the economic status of the musician across a life can sometimes be stretched with little room for investment.

The speech touches on the role of the Musicians Benevolent Fund and is intended to indicate our unique role.



Pablo Casals. 29 December 1876 – 22 October 1973

In 1971, the Catalan 'cellist, Pablo Casals, was 95. He was sitting, while a bust of his head was made. The American sculptor asked the great old man about his life. Casals had first toured in the United States in 1901 and had made twenty-one other concert tours since then.

During the sitting Casals was asked about playing. And he said: *"I try to be as simple as possible".* And he added *"...to do this I practice every day, every day, every day. The same thing that I did when I was 18. Scales and arpeggios and then I always finish with a Bach 'Cello Suite. Every day. Every day."*

Casals was a god to those who heard him play. He was equally admired by those he taught. He didn't sustain a career of eighty years without hard work and conviction. He was a man of strong views, of vivid imagination and energy. He was a Spanish patriot, who hated the repressive regime of Generalissimo Franco. He refused to live in Spain while Franco was in power. He aligned his musical imagination with nature and a sense of his own mortality. Saying of himself *"I live. I live."* As such his teaching lives on now.

We see with music how vital the legacy of teachers is. Like Casals their legacies will live on. As teachers they have responsibilities too.

Recently, I visited a care home in Swiss Cottage, London. The Musicians Benevolent Fund supports Live Music Now in giving performances for frail, elderly people by talented young musicians.

In this particular home, which was originally a mansion built by the *Land of Hope and Glory* contralto, Dame Clara Butt, lives one of our beneficiaries, Richard McLaughlin - composer, pianist and organist, who is now over 80. More than other non-musician residents, Richard immediately identified with the young performers. He was clearly energised by the music-making and relished asking questions about the performers' professional lives and comparing their experiences to his own when the performance was over. It was a spontaneous, creative and professional meeting of minds – one in which the difference in ages was irrelevant. Richard pressed the performers with pertinent questions about their training and professional lives. He told stories about his own experiences working not only in music but also in theatre.

Now you may be wondering why, at a conference about music education, I am talking to you about older people and those who are at the ends of their careers.

It's about how musicians see themselves. How they feel. Their self-worth, their skills, and the reason for doing what they do. As many of you know, being a performing artist is scary. Even if you're part of an ensemble you are exposed. You're alone with your skill and your talent. It's a special kind of musician – blessed even – who manages life lightly, gloriously and with the brilliance that only talent can bring.

Look around at the musicians who love and glory in their lives. Look around too for those who are tortured by their talent.

In 2004 Alice Sommer Herz, was interviewed by Christopher Nupen at the age of 98. She told him that music had helped her survive the vastly over-crowded Nazi holding camp at Terezín – the last stop before Auschwitz. The obligation of having agreed to play, to work with other fellow musicians who'd brought their instruments with them gave her a reason to live. The Germans allowed concerts in Terezín including the children's opera *Brundibár* by Hans Krasa. When the International Red Cross called at the ghetto, the prisoners had to clean up, to put displays in the defunct shop windows and put on concerts

and cultural events – all deeply cynical on the part of the Nazis – but Alice Sommer Herz kept going because, she said, of music.

You may have heard the quip from the American wit, Jimmy Durante. He said: *“I hate music, especially when it’s played”*.

We talk so much about music, its role in society, the benefits for people – especially the young - about how all cultures in the world make their own music, about how it helps us to interpret nature [like Casals] and to get to grips with messages from the soul. But we also forget what it really is to be a musician – the player of the music, the creator, the interpreter.

I don’t mean that we overlook the musicians who play for us. But what we do often forget is how hard it is to be a good musician, how long it takes, the Olympian lengths that musicians have to go to, to achieve high standards and then - like Casals - practice every day, every day to maintain those standards.

It’s not really like the Olympics. Yes, we’re all entranced by our sporting heroes trying so hard to be the very best they can against the competition. Beth Tweddle in gymnastics. Rebecca Adlington in the pool. Chris Hoy on his bike. We’re delirious when they win and gloomy when they come a good second or third. “Try harder, Chris, on the acceleration”. “No wobbles on that beam, Beth.” “Just 100<sup>th</sup> of a second off your time, Rebecca.”

For a musician, it’s different. Brit award-winning trumpeter, Alison Balsom, can’t fluff the notes. Lesley Garrett can’t afford not to hit her top Cs. Lady Ga Ga can’t be under par when live at the O2. Being a musician doesn’t allow for “giving it your best shot”. If you can’t do it, you don’t work. Even if the career has been good and something goes wrong in life, there’s little sentimentality. If a musician cannot maintain his or her standards, they’re crossed off the list. They’re not asked back.

When a young musician shows amazing promise – no matter the genre – we in music education have high ambitions for those we are able to help. As teachers, mentors and guides we hope that careers are going to take off. It’s a wonder and a marvel if they do. Of course, we are bound to encourage, advise and support. To be proud. As with other vocational art forms, we probably stress the point that it’s a hard life, that success is elusive, that there’s probably not much money in it. Even so there will be those who cannot see any other road ahead and are driven to study, practice, network, get canny about marketing and promotion, build up reserves of self-confidence and forge that tricky career. We all wish them bucket-loads of success and fulfilment.

We wave off the young at the gateways of their futures. We may see them at a gig, or mentioned in the press and swell with pride and satisfaction. We may even stay in touch and get the odd comp. During this process of growing, young musicians cement their identity. They not only become professionals but live their musicianship. Like Casals, they say: *‘I live’*. As teachers – who are often themselves players – you are conscious of the challenge ahead.

To throw in some statistics and hard facts: research we have carried out at the Musicians Benevolent Fund shows that increases in income were slow in coming to musicians.

For freelancers there is generally no cost-of-living increase or bonus. Despite years of training and education, average earnings for respondents to our survey were £16,300 – which, at the time, was 72%

of overall national average earnings<sup>1</sup>. At the same time 23% of our respondents who classed themselves as professional earned less than £5,000 as musicians in the previous tax year and 37% less than £10,000 a year. We would like to see what the position is in 2011 after the economic turndown and at the start of real austerity.

Our research suggested that around one-third of respondents earn less than the National Minimum Wage which was then £9,737. Although, universally, respondents to our survey were on low incomes, classical musicians tend to work more days than non-classical and classical musicians are among the highest earners.

As we know, the reality of being a musician today is being multi-skilled and adaptable - what we call having a portfolio career. At bottom though, portfolio career musicians identify themselves as playing musicians first and foremost. The early years of practice, the hours of work, the exclusion of other things, focus on motor skills around one instrument— this all adds up to the solidifying of identity. But vocational identity is often not linked to financial security.

When I was writing this speech, I wanted to deal with the matter of CPD at this point – continuing professional development. So I talked to Professor Peter Renshaw who 25 years ago founded the Performance Skills Course at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. In true Peter style he torpedoed my nod towards CPD. ‘Portfolio career’, he said ‘What’s that all about?’ It’s not only the individual we’re dealing with; it’s the whole cultural landscape. It’s globalisation. Musicians don’t live in a cultural bubble. Conservatoires don’t seem to understand. We’re creating schizophrenic students. Those who learn the conservatoire way and yet have a whole cultural framework beyond the music institution. We need to break the single track disposition and help young people become more culturally flexible – like Barenboim, like Yo-yo Ma, like Menuhin was.

‘And another thing...’ Have you ever met Peter Renshaw? If you have you’ll understand how much of a cultural revolutionary he is and how passionate he is about life-long learning. ‘And another thing’ said Peter ‘the transitional stages of being a musician aren’t appreciated – valued. You only need to look around to see musicians in their 30s and 40s who are dealing with crisis of identity. Women are especially prone to this. If they want children – how do they maintain their professional view of themselves? Business tries to deal with this. Culture, often does not. It’s natural for us all – as time goes by for our identity to change. We move from being one type of person to being another. Musicians aren’t immune but the profession doesn’t seem to allow for this progression. Peter says that the term CPD isn’t strong enough. There has to be something in this thinking that’s more enveloping – like musical, artistic and personal development through one’s life-time. Peter would like the acronym ‘MAD’. Peter is certain that what we’re dealing with is ‘discontinuity’. He thinks that discontinuity is the new continuity – that we have created in the world a brand new complexity which we are struggling with - and when Peter described this view to me, I began to think about our national relationships with Europe, the US and the Afghanistan. How confused we are about our national role. Then Peter said how vital it is to define and commit to our own cultural identity. Peter’s not content to leave this matter in the hands of the CPD-ists. While life-long learning as an educational concept has somewhat slipped off the government’s agenda, the role of older people’s identity, how they can support advise, teach and themselves feel thoroughly fulfilled has not and cannot.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Office of National Statistics’ annual survey of hours and earnings [ASHE] for 2005 the average national wage was, for that year, £22,422.

It seems to me that this is at the heart of the music education debate. Personal development in the context of discontinuity.

Peter suggests that musicians especially have it very hard when it comes to 'normal things' like partners, friends, housing, marriage and children – blessed additions to our lives, which a musician may aspire to but with trepidation. Casals, touring the US coast to coast twenty one times! How lonely could that be? And talking of 'cellists, do you remember that scene in the film *Hilary and Jackie* about Jacqueline du Pré when she had to put her 'cello on an icy balcony as she could no longer bear to have it in her hotel bedroom because the instrument seemed to oppress her and when, not knowing what to do about dirty washing, parcelled it up and sent it home to London? Professional musicians often have it tough. Those on the international circuit especially so.

A long time ago, before my Youth Music days, I was in contact with Eric Midwinter – one of the first Life-Long Learning gurus who had a lovely image for life-long learning. He said that, when he was a lad in the 1930s, you went to school, then university and filled up with knowledge which you hoped would last all your life. Knowledge rather like petrol - fuelling you on the road of life. An image of George Orwell's *Coming Up for Air* comes to mind – pootling along bendy A roads without a petrol station in sight. In those days you hoped that, during your lifetime, your tank would not run dry. Nowadays, he said, we have motorways where speed and change is the order of the day and so we need service stations where, every few years we pull in for re-fuelling – to fill up with new, relevant knowledge and skill to fit us for new circumstances in life.

This may suggest re-fuelling stations at the music conservatoires, at universities where the mix of experience and development for people mid-career and older may be especially useful.

When I worked at English National Opera, I asked a very famous singer what she'd be doing at Christmas. She said – having travelled that year singing in the great opera houses of the world - "*I'll go home to my parents and we'll sit at the table and I'll say: 'Another bloody year gone by.'*" She felt isolated, unsupported and alone. Her identity was a public one seen through the triumph of the roles she plays. No one sees the living out of a suitcase, arriving and leaving airports – always moving. Invisible as the person. Visible only as the star. No wonder that matter of identity can become a muddle in the head of a musician.

I think what I'm saying here is, when we've helped launch young people on their careers, do we think enough about the consequences?

We know that buying property, having children, being at home by 6, investing in pension schemes and being in full-time employment is the exception rather than the rule for a musician. Of course, it helps to have a partner in a sensible career but what if they too are a musician?

Then something unexpected happens. A motor-cycle accident, an unaccountable virus infection, a curable disease or worse cancer or MS. The stress of instability, of financial insecurity and responsibility can just make everything 100 times worse.

Let's not forget the day-to-day either. Just being a musician can produce health warnings. Performance anxiety – the result of always having to be at the top of your game. Substance or alcohol abuse because of long hours with social gaps or as a means to relax. Injuries created by a mixture of psychological and physical wear and tear.

We at the Fund support BAPAM – the British Association of Performing Arts Medicine. BAPAM reports that, when a musician presents with a very sore shoulder affecting their ability to play, 50% of the treatment is physical while the remaining 50% is psychological. The mind and the body both need treatment. That's also true with drink and drugs.

You'll have guessed it by now... my talk is about the unique role of the Musicians Benevolent Fund. The holistic service the -hammock - that we try to provide for people in need and with few financial resources.

All of you in music education encourage excellence and ambition in the young. In our new and refreshed guise at the Fund, we are considering how we can help, advise and guide people as they progress throughout their careers. It's interesting to note that, at the start, it's all about artistry and opportunity and, as time goes on, providing help in times of need and changing circumstances.

Of course, we strive to help people stay in the profession and for them to continue to feel fulfilled. Take the courageous and extreme case of Chris Griffiths who is a member of Northern Sinfonia. He's an accomplished horn player, who has a hereditary disease which has dramatically changed his life but, with our help, he continues to maintain his identity as a musician.

Then, going back to Casals and Richard McLaughlin and to many others who we support through long-term care and help, we are fast becoming a nation of oldies and we, at the Fund, are looking at that challenge from the specialised point of view. If musicians maintain their musical identity when they want to retire and when they need to be looked after, what is it the Fund can do to help with this process?

Recent research from IPPR called *Getting On* makes some pertinent recommendations to us music people. And the recommendation that most struck me was the need for social networks for older people. For those whose identity is entwined with music, a social network should include other musicians – not necessarily other oldies.

Older people can maintain their independence by being provided with good advice and guidance and with knowledge of how to access services. Freelance musicians especially may need tax and benefits advice. Independence can often be about access to accurate and relevant information.

Significantly *Getting On* recommends that older people can and should give back through continuing to work or volunteering or befriending. This supports esteem and personal value. Examples in the report include family support given to younger family members and this could easily be translated into musical support.

Other recommendations cover how to stay well, how to feel like a full citizen and – as we are ageing – putting older people's issues at the centre.

So my question is: How could the music education sector help with this?

We, at the Fund, believe that we should be the guardians of musicians' identity and their well-being. When funding is needed in the career of a musician, we shall see if we can provide it. We also intend to be there to alleviate the stresses and strains that musicians are exposed to. To understand and share what a musical life does to people. Yes, joy, fulfilment and satisfaction. But we all know that life's not always a bowl of cherries.

I should add that many of you may think of us as supporting only classical musicians. Often people tell me “The Fund is only interested in classical musicians.” That’s not the case. Even in the 1930s lots of theatre and dance band musicians were helped. Now around 50% of people we help come from other genres and related professions like many of you in teaching, lecturing, management and leadership. We are now building relationships with all branches of the music industry and developing knowledge about what we do.

I mentioned our *Musicians have your say* survey a few moments ago. In it, we asked musicians all about their experience of professional life. We also asked ‘How can we help?’ Bearing in mind we’ve been around since 1921 how we can help is surprisingly little known. 71% of respondents said that we should better publicise our services. They asked us to listen more to musicians. 50% said that we should expand our advice services. 46% asked us to support training and career development which we do and want to find ways of expanding such a service.

The research, of course, looked into all corners of our operation. Health issues, advice about debt, preparing for retirement: all emerged as concerns for working musicians. While we are developing into a pro-active 21<sup>st</sup> century organisation, concerning ourselves with creating conditions for musicians to have successful and sustainable careers, we continue to commit ourselves to people in retirement and beyond. I’m talking about those older musicians – part of the ageing population – who want to grow older in their own, specially adapted homes or who need specialist professional care. The unique thing about the Fund is the ‘ark’ of support we provide, for young, career and older musicians.

So, before I wrap up, let me remind you of the key points I’ve tried to get across today.

- Musicians, bitten by the bugs that are mastery and performance, need to develop a clear, personal sense of their own identity, if they are to survive in a competitive – and sometimes cruel – public arena
- We, their teachers, supporters and audiences, need to continue to see the real person behind the performer; they need support throughout their playing life-times – not just help to climb onto the springboard to their careers
- Musicians need to be introduced to the idea of phases of their professional lives, life-long learning and be encouraged to explore the cultural landscape – not just the bubble of their instrument or band.
- And, finally, as an organisation the Musicians Benevolent Fund is looking to build on our research and day-to-day feedback and recast the organisation as a more flexible, more creative, more wide-ranging and more open organisation for the musical community. Wish us well in our quest!

Don’t worry, I am not about to finish with an appeal for funds...but we are independent and we do depend on income from our investments, from donations and from very generous Gifts in Wills.

I’d like to finish, not with social or psychological reasoning about the music profession but with Friedrich Nietzsche. “*In music, the passions enjoy themselves*”.

If we can see through the musician to the human being, if we can sustain the support we offer and be creative in how and where we deliver it, we will set the performer free – set them free to build confidently on that personal identity that is so vital to them.

And when we help them achieve that freedom, imagine just how much more their passions will enjoy themselves!

Thank you for listening.

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