The Freelance Musician

By Glenn Steele

Who performs most of the live music heard throughout the U.S. and other places in the world? Freelance musicians. A professional freelance musician is one who usually performs in a variety of locations for a limited time and for a fee. Performing examples include symphony orchestras, opera, ballet, Broadway shows, jazz/big band or combo, rock band, avant-guard ensemble, chamber orchestra, recording studio, drum corps, military bands, and many more. Freelance musicians are the “heart and soul” and “troops in the trenches” of most places where live music is performed. They are the musicians we hear on TV commercials and movie soundtracks, in restaurants, bars, and weddings, in addition to orchestras hired for local oratorios, operas, and Broadway shows. Freelance gigs differ from full-time/yearly contracted positions such as those found in major symphony orchestras, Broadway musicals, or military bands. Successful freelance percussionists have extensive experience on a wide variety of percussion instruments including snare drum, timpani, drumset, accessories, and keyboard percussion, as well as Latin percussion and other world percussion instruments. They represent what the Ludwig Company called a “total percussionist.” The freelance experience is often the first professional playing experience that music school graduates will have.

Many professional musicians find that the freelance environment is the most exciting and challenging experience a performer can have. The reasons for this include having to be prepared to perform a wide variety of music in unfamiliar settings, with different arrays of instruments, different conductors and musicians—all within a narrow timeframe. Sight-reading is an important and required skill for success in this career. Some players have left symphony orchestras and returned to freelancing because they found the orchestra experience to be limiting in musical challenges. Freelancers get to perform with some of the most notable musicians, composers, artists, and celebrities on the scene. As a freelance musician, I’ve had the chance to perform with such artists as Luciano Pavorati, Tony Bennett, the Swingle Singers, Joan Sutherland, Leonard Nimoy, Barbara Walters, and Zubin Mehta, to name a few.

Freelancing is often a seasonal business. In Philadelphia, the “busy” seasons are October to January 1, and March to July 4. You sometimes have to take as much work as you can handle while you can get it! Being able to make a living as a freelance musician is a complex but doable task. It takes money, time, and patience. Many freelancers maintain active teaching studios and have additional part-time jobs in order to supplement their income.

A freelance musician needs to own a large number of instruments, mallets, sticks, stands, holders, and specialty equipment. These should be gradually purchased as you progress through your education career. Elsewhere in this article I’ve provided a “minimum requirement” list for instruments, mallets, and stands, and a job checklist for reference. Freelancers often have to buy “uniforms” for different services, such as a tuxedo and/or tails and a white dinner jacket with the appropriate formal shirts, ties, cummerbunds, and shoes. Special uniforms such as colored shirts and slacks, or a striped Dixieland vest may be required for a particular group identity.

Freelancing requires many career skills in addition to musical/performance skills. These include a responsible/disciplined work ethic, time-management skills, networking, good communication and interpersonal relations, and a basic business sense. Some of the business aspects of freelancing include: marketing (selling yourself!), keeping records of expenses, filling out an IRS (U.S.) tax form that includes “Schedule C,” finding housing (location central to the performing venue), buying/renting a vehicle (or other transportation), paying for medical and life insurance, food costs (Bring your own! Eat out? Be careful what you eat when traveling; it can be expensive), buying/cleaning uniforms (tuxedo, tails, etc.), buying/maintaining instruments, mallets, sticks, music, etc. A datebook, address/phone book, and business cards are a must. Many of these communication sources can now be done with a good cell phone or PDA.

It is good to do a cost/benefit analysis to determine if you can afford to do a particular job. It may not be worth renting a truck, hauling a load of percussion instruments, and driving three hours to play a four-hour job for $150.00!

I’m a strong advocate of belonging to the Musician’s Union—the American Federation of Musicians. I’ve moved 23 times in my life and have belonged to five musicians’ locals (a “local” is the term for the geographical area over which a particular union contact has jurisdiction). The union provides guidelines for job descriptions, job security, wages, cartage fees, per diem (daily living expenses), performance time, working conditions, and legal recourse. Contract specifics vary from local to local. There are also different rates for traveling groups such as touring shows.

General guidelines for different types of jobs are as follows:
(Taken from the Philadelphia American Federation of Musicians, Local 77, Wage Scale book, circa. 2004).

Club-date: 3–4 hrs.
Symphony Concert: 2–3 hrs.

### The Freelancer’s Basic Inventory

#### Drums
- Drumset w/drums, stands, cymbals, cases.
- 6” concert snare drum (cable snares/multi-snares) w/stand
- Field drum w/stand
- Concert bass drum (14 x 28) w/folding stand
- 1 conga drum w/stand
- 1 pr. timbales w/stand

#### Cymbals/Gongs
- Suspended cymbals from drumset
- 1 pr. crash cymbals (18”)
- 1 Gong (tam tam), 26” w/stand

#### Accessories
- 6” triangle
- Tambourine (10” to 11”, double row jingles)
- Castanets, mounted
- Woodblock
- 1 pr. maracas
- 1 pr. claves
- Temple blocks w/stand

#### Keyboard Percussion
- Orchestra bells (2 1/2 octave)
- Xylophone (3 1/2 octave)
- Vibraphone
- Marimba

#### Timpani
- 1 pr. pedal (29”, 26”), portable

#### Miscellaneous
- Drum stool (drumset, timpani)
- Music stand
- Tray stand(s)
- Tray stand(s) top (padded)
- Trap case
- Mallet/stick case (see page 33)
- Hand truck
Symphony Rehearsal: 2 1/2 hrs.
Opera/Ballet Rehearsal/Concert: 3 1/2 hrs.
Overtime is paid in 30 minute-intervals beyond the maximum time.
In the concert or show world, particularly the classical idiom, the term “service” is used to describe a rehearsal or concert. The common weekly schedule for an orchestra or opera is 7–8 services per week. An orchestra rehearsal usually lasts 2 1/2 hours, and the concert lasts no more than three hours. (This is modified for operas and ballets.)

Freelancers commonly consider being on an orchestra’s “extra” list as part of their playing activity. An “extra” is a player that is hired when there are more parts that need to be played than can be covered by the normal section. It used to be that the extras were usually former or current students of the orchestra section members. In the past 20 or so years, it has become common for orchestras to hold auditions to select players for the “extra” pool.

A jazz/rock/commercial service can be called a “gig,” “jobbing,” “the outside,” “club date,” “general business gig,” “casual,” and more, depending on the geographical location. There used to be many playing opportunities for “pick-up” groups—bands that would play for weddings and nightclubs, etc. This type of playing opportunity has been diminished by “top 40” bands (bands that rehearse and simulate the current pop songs), solo or duet groups that use “synthed” (synthesizer/drum machine) accompaniments, and DJs. I observed the most glaring (and insulting) example of this at a club in one of the Las Vegas casinos. There was a five-piece band playing with a drumset set up behind sound reflectors—with no drummer!

A performer in an ensemble is referred to as a “side-man/woman.” A contractor is the person who hires you and provides the rehearsal, concert, and salary information. The contractor is usually paid 50% in addition to the usual musician (side-man) fee.

When you play in a different local from the one in which you are a member, you must pay the work dues for the job to that local. Contractors expect you to do the work and not bother them with too many details, although these may seriously affect your being able to function. They have many other musicians’ issues and venue technicalities to be dealing with in addition to percussion details. Contractors can get “possessive” about their musicians. When they call you, they expect you to be available to them and say “yes.” If you repeatedly turn down a contractor’s request, you will be removed from his or her call list.

The Musician’s Union regulations provide fee rates for “doubling” and “cartage.” “Doubling” is defined as playing more than one primary instrument (or instrument group, like a drumset) per service. For percussion, rates can vary by local but include:

Doubling: 50% additional to regular wage.

Categories: drumset, timpani, keyboard percussion, Latin percussion.

Cartage (examples):
1. 2 timpani: $30.00; each additional drum, $10.00
2. Drumset: $15.00
3. Xylophone, vibraphone, small marimba: $15.00 ea.

In the Philadelphia area there is a cadre of about 200 musicians. They usually function in either the classical music or the jazz/rock/commercial genre. Musicians sometimes work in both genres but often cannot, simply because the performances are concurrent. For example, the classical and commercial performances take place at the same time but with different ensembles in different venues. If musicians do work in both areas, and there is a schedule conflict, they will send in a “double” or “sub” to cover their part. Most contractors frown on this but some will allow it.

In freelancing there is a hierarchy of musicians who are called to play in a certain order. As you progress successfully in the business you move closer to the top of the “call list.” This means you have become a “first-call” freelancer.
Beginning freelancers start by playing many jobs for free and then gradually work their way up from minimum to better paying and higher quality groups. The best way to get a good start in freelancing is to study with a teacher who has had extensive performing experience in the music business. It is common for new performers to be recommended for a job by a teacher who is among one of the first-call players. Most freelancers have gotten their start this way.

The next source for getting work comes from other players who were on a previous job with you, liked your work, and feel comfortable recommending you.

**THE PLAYING SCHEDULE**

An example of the kinds of services that I played during one busy period is as follows:

**Orchestra 2001 (new music ensemble). Program: George Crumb, “Music for a Summer Evening”**

**Concerto Soloists (Baroque ensemble). Program: Bach, “B-minor Mass”**


Club Date: jazz quartet

Some orchestras, like the Philly Pops with Peter Nero, feature soloists or entertainers who bring in their own rhythm section (piano, bass, drums). This means that when you are playing in the orchestra, you have to know when not to play some of the drum/percussion parts found in the orchestra music (e.g., Bernstein, “West Side Story Symphonic Suite”). You need to check with the drumset player to see what parts they are covering.

A common experience for freelance percussionists is playing jobs that require a large battery of instruments and performers, but only two percussionists are hired. Bernstein’s “Chichester Psalms” (5–8 players) and Orff’s “Carmina Burana” (7 players plus timpani) are good examples. Italian opera parts are notorious for having parts for seven or more players—one part for each instrument. You have to decide what parts can be left out by seeing if other instruments (e.g., piano, woodwinds) are doubling your part, and by checking with the conductor. You have to know how to compress the parts and notate them in the main part so you can cover as many instruments as possible.

One of the banes of the freelance experience is having to read from instrumental parts that are in poor condition. They have poorly printed or written manuscript, are too old and falling apart, have been damaged by misuse, or have scribbled pencil (or even ink) markings from previous performers. You have to become accustomed to dealing with this and have a good eraser!

It is essential that you can perform basic emergency repairs of equipment—such things as replacing a head, fixing a stand, locating and fixing “buzzes” or “rattles” that can occur with the larger drums and timpani or vibraphone.

The “Freelancers Checklist” that accompanies this article is based on a type of list that I used when freelancing. It represents most of the questions you need answered before taking a job.

**Reality Check!** Some of my colleagues bemoan the fact that "the business" has changed. This is true. But it’s always been true. Thirty years ago no one could have imagined that someone would be called to play steel drum, djembe or MalletKAT. New music and musical genres continually emerge. There may not be the same kinds or numbers of music jobs that existed in the past, but there is still a strong demand for talented, well-prepared, and properly educated percussionists. One has to be musically, mentally, and physically prepared, remain aware, be proactive, have a positive attitude, make opportunities happen, be willing to work hard, and be patient. This is a tall order, but it can lead to an exciting, successful, and rewarding career.

**SUGGESTED RESOURCES**


Gartner, Kurt. “Working with the Click and making...”
A FREELANCE PERCUSSIONIST’S CHECKLIST

Contractor name ____________________________
Contractor phone number ____________________
Contractor e-mail __________________________
Date of Concert _____________________________
Dates of Rehearsals __________________________
Pay/per – Rehearsal $ _____ Concert/Gig $ _____ Services $ _____ Total $ ______
Organization/Ensemble ______________________
Union _____ Non-Union _____
Type of Performance (Classical, Jazz, Avant-Guard, etc.) _____________________________
Number of Percussionists in Section __________________________
Section Leader Name _________________________
Section Leader Phone _________________________
Service Location(s) __________________________
Address ___________________________________
Location Phone Number ______________________
Map Directions ______________________________
Travel Time _________________________________
Parking ________________________________
Music ______________________________________
When/How/Where to get the Music __________________________
Instruments Needed (What does the venue have? What will be rented? What do you bring?) ______________________________

Mallets/Sticks ______________________________
Preparation/Practice Time ____________________
Stands/holders/Misc. _________________________
Microphone/Monitor _________________________
Lighting ________________________________
Cases/Trunks ______________________________
Load-in Time ______________________________
Set-up Time (Leave set-up?) __________________ Tear-down Time __________________
Playing Area (main floor? pit? risers? setup room?) __________________________
Special Transportation (car, truck, plane?) __________________________
Loading Area _____________________________
Loading Area Access to Performing Location (loading dock/ramp/number of floors?/steps? elevator, door widths?) ____________________________
Rehearsal/stage area same? __________________
Stage Hands (available/required?) ______________

Checklist Notes
1 “Service” = rehearsal, concert, gig.
2 Some situations will have your instruments “miked” or you will have to hear the ensemble from a monitor or head-set.
3 Some venues (performance locations) have stand lighting for the music.
4 Some services require that you tear down your setup and re-set it for the next service. If so, where can you store your equipment between services?
5 Air travel has become a serious matter for musicians post 9/11 as well as the recent economic dilemma. Airlines are requiring that all baggage be checked in or they require that you purchase an additional seat for your instrument. Our “stuff” sets off alarms! My aluminum-handle, Hinger timpani mallets gave the guards at the Moscow Airport a scare!
6 Some venues require that stagehands load-in your instruments.

Glenn Steele has performed with the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Oklahoma City Symphony, the United States Military Academy Band, the Philly Pops, Orchestra 2001, the Opera Company of Philadelphia, the Grant Park Symphony, and the Mozart Society Orchestra; musicals such as 42nd Street, Oklahoma, and Man of La Mancha; numerous jazz/commercial ensembles, and with notable artists such as Tony Bennett, Mel Tormey, Doc Severinon, Chubby Checker, Luciano Pavarotti, Joan Sutherland, Rosemary Clooney, Henry Mancini and Leonard Nimoy. He has recorded for the Columbia, C.R.I., C.R.S., Candide and Gasparo labels. He is Professor of Percussion at the Esther Boyer College, Temple University.

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