

A Musician's Ten Commandments

All musicians, especially those about to emerge from formal education, wonder what path their careers will take and whether they can control their artistic destinies. While there are no proven methods for career control, it is possible to observe the traits common among those with successful and happy lives in music. While embracing these traits can't guarantee a successful career, at the very least they identify assets and practices a hopeful musician should not be without.

I. Know Thyself

Being a musician begins with you. Knowing why you love music, why you must make a life of it, and being able to articulate that, are the first steps to convincing the world that you are in the business to stay. Understanding how you stack up in the music world, knowing what you have yet to learn, is equally important. If you are tougher on yourself than others, you'll be ready for anything.

II. Be an Artist

There are many musicians, but few real artists. True artists, who remake and replenish themselves perpetually, are the ones followed by a loyal public. Decide what you need to honestly call yourself an artist, and go get it. Study the people you consider to be great artists, and emulate them. You can't go wrong spending a day as Mendelssohn, Picasso, or Charlie Chaplin. Put yourselves in their heads and you may see the world differently.

III. Keep Learning

Artists never stop absorbing knowledge and ideas that enrich their minds. Read, listen, watch, ask questions, and stay around interesting people. Don't count out unconventional sources. People who are constantly learning are the most interesting, always changing, always growing. Be one of them.

IV. Work on Your Performance

Don't be afraid to compare your performance to your ideal. Be relentless in your determination to improve. Tape yourself on your mobile phone. Ask your friends for honest opinions. Listen and watch those musicians you admire most. Ask to play for the best musicians you know. You will only show yourself to be more dedicated than others.

V. Make Friends

Careers are not made in isolation. Your friends, colleagues, mentors and industry contact list should be large, ever-growing, and well-maintained. Most often, it will be one of them that opens opportunities for you, recommends you, and shares a new idea that changes your life. A large musical family is not a bad thing to have.

VI. Visualize Possible Lives

Keep an open mind as to the variety of ways you could be a musician. There are many.

VII. Ask Not What the Industry Can Do For You....

Everyone who works in the arts industry faces enormous challenges on a day-to-day basis. The best a musician can do for them is to bring them solutions, not problems. They appreciate all your ideas about programming, creative ways to appeal to the public, and help you can offer to run their organizations more powerfully. Ask what you can do for them.

VIII. Lead by Example

Often the ideas and ideals of a musician are beyond the grasp of all around them. As a rule, the most effective way for you to stand out from the rest is to live the life you believe in. Inspire others through your own work, and opportunities will surely come your way.

IX. Give Back

It is never too soon to begin sharing your experience, knowledge and inspiration with those poised to become classical music listeners, supporters and practitioners in the near and far futures. As an artist and a musician, you always have something to share. And, that you are perceived as thoughtful, generous, and forward-thinking is totally in your favor. Plus, you'll sleep better.

X. Stay the Course

Commitment to your art, respecting your initial reasons for becoming a musician, and rejecting all unprincipled deviations from a course of integrity, are essentials for ultimately commanding the respect of the entire industry: your colleagues, public and supporters. There are numerous temptations in the music world today to stray from a pure course of study and practice of great music, at the highest standards. Musicians, educators and administrators regularly desperately employ short-lived ideas for getting engagements, creating opportunities for students, and selling tickets. Not being among those who doubt the staying power of our art is the only safe way to ensure that at the end of the day you will be trusted and taken seriously.