

CHAPTER TWO

Intonation

Playing Well With Others

The pursuit and development of intonation as a musician is a two-pronged endeavor. As you know, you must possess or develop the ability to hear pitch discrepancies and then be able to adjust your instrument's pitch accordingly. Listening to others and adjusting. If you're unable to develop these skills to a very high level, then you simply will not be able to become a professional musician. The same is true of personal interactions. Problematic personality characteristics—arrogance, aggression, various manifestations of insecurity—can and will affect your ability to get and keep work. There are enough aspiring professional players that technical and musical prowess are a given. You'll find that intangibles such as personality and reliability are some of the things that thin the pack.

It's easy for young, flashy players to be dismissive of older ones who may seem to have rust starting to appear on some areas of their playing. This is especially true when you've just graduated from college and have been in a period of your life when practicing your instrument for hours every day was the only valid way to spend time. But there are a couple of things that are important to note about your new colleagues. First, their years of professional experience have taught them things and given them skills that can only be gained by . . . well, years of professional experience. These aren't things that you can measure with a metronome or polish in a practice room. Secondly, these are often people who balance their career in music with the other parts of their lives. "Other parts of life" may not be things you've had to deal with to this point. They balance paying bills, owning a home, being a husband or wife, and raising children. As you get older you'll realize that your career, like life, is a marathon rather than a sprint. There's more to it than speed of technique and precision of rhythm. Though those things are important, they are not central—it's the expression of emotion that is central. And the mastery of *that* skill, the ability to exist on *that* musical plane, comes from the other parts of life.

It's okay to have swagger and there's real value in confidence. But embrace the concept that there are lessons to be learned and gained from

everyone you meet in “the scene.” No matter how good you are or how big a fish you were in whatever pond you were swimming in, you’re a rookie at the professional level. Enjoy it. Look and listen for the things that your new colleagues can teach you. This humility will not only benefit you musically but will also set you on a path toward creating genuine relationships that will form the foundation of your career. After all the hours in the practice room, it’s strange to think that relationships, rather than the speed of your scales, will form the foundation of your career. But it’s true.

Though it’s essential to be a lifelong learner, part of transitioning into being a professional is recognizing and having confidence in what you bring to the table. In the context of habitually listening to others, view yourself as a colleague—you’re out of school now and trying to work alongside these people. This is a complicated concept. I realize that it sounds like I’m now recommending an approach that is the opposite of what I described in the last paragraph. It’s subtle and could be thought of as a simple mental adjustment. Mentally award yourself a promotion. Yes, there is plenty you can learn from those around you—that’s always true for all of us—but you’re here doing this job because you’ve finished your formal training and someone believes that you’re qualified for the job (whether it’s a church gig, an orchestra gig, or a recording session). So while you can learn from others, perhaps they can learn from you, too—they need to be listening, too. You’re now on a two-way street.

To continue with the two-way street metaphor, it’s a crowded street that sometimes has more cars than parking spaces. Competition is inevitable. I’ve always felt that the most efficient way to approach competition is to focus solely on executing and elevating your own personal best. To look from side to side and to worry about where others are in the race only serves to waste energy. If you truly do your best—and strive to make your best better—you will achieve all that you’re capable of achieving. You may win or lose the race by a mile or by a hair. But if the drive and motivation comes from within, I believe you’ll end up going further. However, this approach is not only about whether you win or lose—it’s also about how you play the game. By focusing on your own game rather than that of everyone around you, you avoid the temptation to throw your elbows and jockey for position. You avoid the paranoia or gloating that might rise to the surface otherwise. You don’t appear as a threat to your competitors, triggering their own fears and anxieties. By playing your own game and avoiding these pitfalls you make yourself a better, more likeable colleague and that can make all the difference.

Lastly, there’s the obvious—don’t be a jerk. I don’t think that needs a lot of explanation. What kinds of players and people do you like to hang out with and work with? Be like that!

Being a professional musician is a very social way to make a living. It can also be very high-pressured which makes “the hang” all the more

important. Assuming you've got your musical stuff together, being pleasant and easy to be around will be a great asset.

Top ten behaviors to *avoid* when trying to get and keep work as a musician:

10. Brag about your college accomplishments to anyone and everyone you meet.
9. Spread news of your successes and busy-ness without regard for the struggles of others.
8. Use warm-up time to run through [insert your instrument's repertoire's most difficult passage here].
7. Consistently take the position that you are right (and that somebody else must've made the mistake).
6. Waste your colleagues' time by showing up late or missing rehearsals or gigs.
5. Waste your colleagues' time by showing up unprepared for rehearsals or gigs.
4. Fail to return calls or emails.
3. Be high maintenance.
2. Jockey for position by speaking negatively of others.
1. Pin a producer against the wall of a studio because he hasn't continued to hire your wife (sadly, a real-life example!).

