



## The Portfolio Career: Tips for Gigging and Freelancing

### INTRODUCTION

Many musicians draw some or all of their income from semi-regular freelance work, ranging from performances with regional orchestras and theaters to church choirs and private functions. According to a study done by the U.S. Census Bureau and the National Endowment for the Arts (*Artists in the Workplace*, 2008), 44% of professional musicians in the U.S. are self-employed. This handout will offer an overview of the most common areas of freelance work for musicians and cover best practices for building a strong network of contacts and a steady stream of income. The categories of work detailed in this handout are by no means exhaustive and we encourage you to think creatively about how your skills as a musician could be utilized in other fields and/or projects. The Future of Music Coalition is a great resource for exploring different types of freelance work in greater depth. Their income stream index, financial case studies, and research reports provide valuable qualitative and quantitative data to help you envision how you might create a viable and flexible portfolio career.

It's important to note that each freelance community brings its own opportunities and challenges. The first step is to investigate the nature and culture of the freelance market you are hoping to enter by speaking with colleagues who are active in the area you currently live in or would ideally like to settle. Remember that even established artists need to sustain and grow a robust network of collaborators and potential subs—they can also benefit from your exchange. Most freelance musicians are happy to share their industry knowledge and enjoy meeting new artists who can complement and support the work that they do. The work of building a strong professional network and maintaining positive working relationships will be a common thread throughout this handout—it is central to building a diverse and long-lasting freelance career, no matter your instrument, discipline, or geographic location.

### MAJOR CATEGORIES OF FREELANCE WORK FOR MUSICIANS

#### *Orchestra*

While the major North American orchestras have relatively few openings and lengthy, competitive audition processes, there are many alternatives for classical instrumentalists who are interested in pursuing freelance orchestral work. There are hundreds of professional and semi-professional regional orchestras across the country that rely on freelance musicians to support their seasons, which can range from as few as 4 to over 20 performances a year. These orchestras hold regular auditions and musicians who live in close proximity to several regional orchestras often travel between cities and sometimes across state lines to piece together steady performance work with several organizations. If you are interested in investigating opportunities available in your area, there are several organizations that offer audition information and other resources regarding regional orchestras across the country:

- Regional Orchestral Players Association (ROPA), [www.ropaweb.org](http://www.ropaweb.org): ROPA represents over 80 orchestras and 6,000 musicians in North America. Their website offers information about member orchestras in your geographic area and provides resources for musicians to ensure fair working conditions.
- International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians (ICSOM), [www.icsom.org](http://www.icsom.org): ICSOM represents over 4,000 musicians from 51 major symphony orchestras throughout the United States, and is a Players' Conference of the American Federation of Musicians. Their website

offers profiles of member orchestras and publishes a regular newsletter with pertinent news about the orchestral field.

- League of American Orchestras, [www.americanorchestras.org](http://www.americanorchestras.org): The League of American Orchestras is the only national organization that works to promote the health of North American orchestras through advocacy and leadership development for musicians and managers. In addition to sponsoring regular conferences and training programs, the League has an online resource center and publishes the quarterly publication Symphony Magazine.
- The International Musician, [www.internationalmusician.org](http://www.internationalmusician.org): The International Musician is the official journal of the American Federation of Musicians in the United States and Canada, and has regular listings for professional orchestral auditions across the country. Most conservatory libraries have subscriptions (print or online) to International Musician and you can access this information for free as a student or alum.

All major professional orchestras and many regional ensembles have formal substitute lists in the event that a full time musician is sick or needs to take a leave of absence. In order to join a substitute list, you will likely have to take an audition, though it may not be as formal or rigorous as a full seat audition. This can be a great way to get your foot in the door with a particular ensemble and build connections with more established musicians in your area. You can also reach out to established orchestral players in the area to request a lesson or informal audition. This is a great way to introduce yourself to key players and begin to build your reputation in the professional community. Remember that both contractors and instrumentalists need a good, up-to-date list of subs. People are always moving in and out of town, moving onto other jobs. When approaching a more established artist in the community—ask yourself the question: what is this person's need, and how can I help fill it?

In addition to regional orchestras, there are many local opera and ballet companies that employ full orchestras or smaller ensembles to accompany their productions. There are several companies that employ full time orchestras, such as the Metropolitan Opera and the Lyric Opera of Chicago, and these ensembles require a rigorous audition process much like the major North American symphony orchestras. There are many more regional companies that have smaller seasons and may contract musicians through a music director or a less formal audition process. To explore opportunities in this area, it's best to simply research which companies are active in a given geographic location and look-up the audition schedule and process for the upcoming season.

Finally, there is a growing body of start-up, independent, and musician-run ensembles that have very active performance seasons and need regular substitutes or new members. Examples include The Knights, International Contemporary Ensemble, A Far Cry, and the Boston Modern Orchestra Project—full orchestras or flexible chamber orchestras that perform both nationally and internationally. These types of ensembles tend to hire substitutes that have worked with members of the group in other settings or capacities. In this case, building relationships with preexisting members of the ensemble is often the best way to get your foot in the door.

### **Theater**

There are many levels of freelance theater work, from the Broadway theaters in New York, to professional regional companies, and community-run programs. While there has been some attrition over the years, Broadway shows in New York still provide sought after and well-compensated work for freelance musicians. The hiring for Broadway shows, and for the top tier companies in other cities, is generally managed by local contractors--musicians who have extensive experience in theater freelancing and are trusted by particular venues or directors. These contractors are tasked with hiring an ensemble of union musicians who can meet the demands of the job. Each musician that is hired for a show is asked to provide a list of potential substitutes, who may shadow or periodically fill-in over the course of a show's run. Subbing for a show is one of the most common ways that musicians break into the Broadway freelance scene. For touring productions, there may be a core group of musicians selected to travel with the show, or there may be local ensembles that are contracted for each city on the tour. The hiring practices for touring shows vary greatly depending on the type of show and the size of the ensemble.

Many off-Broadway and independent theater companies also employ musicians to accompany their productions, which may run for one weekend or for an entire season. In some cases, the theater companies will employ a core, flexible group of musicians to accompany all of their productions, events and educational programs. In other cases, musicians will be hired for specific productions. In both cases, hiring is generally managed by an in-house music director or a trusted contractor. While it is relatively rare to have open auditions for these types of productions, there are some theater companies that like to audition new musicians for each production.

Finally, there are many semi-professional and community theater companies that employ musicians to accompany dress rehearsals and final performances. These opportunities tend to be lower paying, but can be a good way to build experience and contacts. Again, hiring is typically done by a music director.

### ***Private Function Gigging***

Depending on your instrument, private events such as weddings, funerals, corporate functions and fundraisers can represent a large potential source of freelance income. There are many niches within this market—the first step is to figure out where there is the most demand for your particular skill-set and who are the active contractors/freelancers in your area.

The private function market is partially controlled by trusted contractors who have made strong inroads within particular communities. Active contractors are given general parameters by an employer (budget, length of event, musical style, etc.), which they use to subcontract a band or ensemble for an event.

Contractors generally keep a roster of trusted musicians and hire for events based on who has the best skill-set/repoertoire for an event, and of course, who can confirm their availability.

Depending on your instrument and your primary genre(s), you may be expected to have memorized repertoire or your own book of arrangements. Again, this information can be gleaned over time from speaking with, or better yet, sharing a gig with veteran freelancers who are active in different parts of the scene. Depending on your geographic location, owning a car, or having regular access to one, can make a big difference in how often you get calls. Contractors often prefer musicians who can easily travel to gigs and transport gear/other musicians to an event.

There are also many companies and agencies that provide music services for events. These companies or bands tend to have a core membership, but often need substitutes or additional musicians for larger scale events. Bands will often hold auditions for new members, which can be a great opportunity to quickly step into regular private function work. A great way to find out about these companies is to peruse wedding guides for your area, or look up approved vendor lists for popular wedding venues. This will help you create a short list of some of the more active, established companies/bands in your region so that you can orient your outreach.

It is also possible to build regular private-function work independently of contractors and agencies. For example, many organists or vocalists who are active church freelancers can pick up additional work performing at religious wedding ceremonies. It's important to always investigate the unwritten rules that govern your area of the freelance market. In this example, the staff organist at the church where the wedding is taking place should have first right of refusal for the gig. These types of professional courtesies are important to be aware of.

Finally, many conservatories and music departments also have active referral services that connect local employers with student musicians. If this type of program is available at your school, it can be a great way to build experience, a network of collaborators, and a list of happy customers who can provide referrals for you.

### ***Church and Choral***

Particularly for vocalists, organists and pianists, church services can represent a regular source of freelance income. For vocalists, there are three primary categories of freelance church performance work:

- **Professional Choir Member:** Many churches employ a fully professional choir, with 12-15 members. These choirs rehearse throughout the week (1-3 times) and accompany Sunday and holiday services. While there is a fairly wide range based on the church and geographic location, the pay scale for professional choir members is generally \$55-80 per call (rehearsal or service).
- **Section Leader:** While some churches have large budgets to hire fully professional choirs, many more churches have volunteer choirs that are supported by professional section leaders. These choirs generally have one rehearsal per week and sing on Sunday and for holiday services. In some cases, section leaders also coach volunteer members in rehearsals. The pay scale for section leaders can range anywhere from \$30-\$100 per service, with an additional fee for mid-week rehearsals.
- **Cantor:** Catholic churches in particular tend to hire solo cantors to lead Sunday Mass and other holiday services. For vocalists who are already familiar with the Catholic Mass, this may be the easiest and highest-paying type of church performance work you can secure. The pay scale for a cantor ranges from \$100-\$150 per service.

While some churches post open positions for choir members, section leaders or cantors, it is much more common for church music directors to select new musicians through referral. If you are interested in breaking into this line of work, the best way to do so is to reach out directly to a music director to request an informal audition. Church music directors are generally looking for vocalists who know the service liturgy or are familiar with popular hymns and have very strong sight reading skills. You can also reach out to musicians who are active in the church scene to let them know that you are available and interested in subbing. While church music directors tend to have established substitute lists, some communities ask the musicians to find their own subs. Another great way to break into this scene is to volunteer with a well-established community choir--this will allow you to expand your choral repertoire and build relationships with key directors and section leaders in the community.

Many church communities also hire organists, pianists, small ensembles or even a full orchestra to accompany Sunday or holiday services. While it is more common for a church to hire a staff pianist or organist, some communities with large budgets and a focus on devotional music will regularly hire large ensembles to accompany their choirs or cantors. Again, this hiring is managed by the church's music director and is often done through referrals. There are also many synagogues that hire cantors and instrumentalists to lead Saturday and holiday services. If you are familiar with Jewish liturgy and have facility with Hebrew, this can also be a great avenue for potential freelance employment.

There are also many professional choirs across the country that are not affiliated with church communities, but draw vocalists who are experienced in devotional repertoire. Some of the most well-known examples include Handel and Haydn Society, Lorelei Ensemble, Tucson Chamber Artists, the Cantus Vocal Ensemble, the Skylark Vocal Ensemble and Chanticleer. These ensembles generally hire local musicians by audition, but many will also hire musicians from other regions who are well trusted and respected.

### ***Pop and Rock***

There are two main categories of pop and rock freelance work: shows with major commercial artists and gigs organized by independent artists/singer-songwriters. The former is largely controlled by contractors who are trusted by large venues or the artists themselves. This type of work is also generally restricted to union musicians. Contractors are looking for musicians who have the right skill-set and "look" for the job. You should be prepared to wear latex and stilettos. Again, making connections with local artists who have played these kinds of shows is the best way to find out who the main contractors are.

Independent singer-songwriters often look for musicians to complement their live performances and recording projects. These types of gigs may not pay very well, but they can lead to touring or more regular or better-paying work. The best way to break into this world is to attend shows of artists you like and find a way to connect either at the show or as a follow-up.

## ***Studio and Recording***

Studio performance work encompasses a range of freelance activities, including TV, film and new recordings. While there are some live TV performance opportunities (e.g. Saturday Night Live and other late-night shows), much of the work in this category is for commercials. These jobs are largely controlled by union contractors.

While some film recording work has been replaced by digital instrument libraries, there are still opportunities to record scores for commercial, independent and documentaries films. In the case of independent or small-budget films, these jobs are generally contracted out directly through the film score composer. With large-budget commercial films, this work may be contracted through the studio/film's music director.

Finally, there is still a regular stream of recording work for new albums, ranging from self-produced to large-budget commercial projects. Work on big-budget commercial albums is generally managed by union contractors, while job offers for small/independent albums are most likely to come through preexisting relationships. Recording studios and engineers often have lists of musicians that they can recommend to their clients. Particularly with independent albums, the parameters for pay and time investment can be opaque. It's important to ask a lot of questions about what will be expected and negotiate a fair fee based on the time and preparation that's required. More on this topic is in the best practices section on negotiation.

## **BEST PRACTICES**

While there are distinct cultures and norms within each area of the freelance market, there are basic professional practices that will help you find success no matter what type of freelance work you are pursuing. Below, you will find a brief overview of industry best practices--some will be intuitive and others may feel less so.

### ***Networking***

Much of the freelance performance world runs on relationships: with clients, contractors, fellow artists, administrators, producers and more. There is a tremendous amount of fluidity between the musicians you may collaborate with in other settings and the musicians you will interact with for freelance performance work. Musicians are always "at work." Every gig, concert, or post-concert hang is an opportunity to make a new connection or strengthen a professional relationship.

Being a good member of your artistic community and making an effort to sustain relationships with musicians in your area will naturally lead to more freelance performance opportunities. This means supporting colleagues by attending their performances, recommending fellow musicians for opportunities when you are unavailable and staying in touch with people both online and in person. This is also how you will find out about market rates, active contractors, who to work with and who to avoid, and what the expectations are for different sectors of the market. Effective networking really boils down to being an active, contributing member of your artistic community.

### ***Communication***

One of the most the central ingredients for building an active freelance career is clear, prompt and professional communication. At a time when rapid electronic communication is the norm, contractors and clients alike will expect a fairly quick turn-around time for email correspondence. Simply put, stay on top of email and phone messages. When you do respond, make sure you're providing all of the information that's requested, and responding in a tone that is professional. If you can't accept a gig, leave the door open for future opportunities by expressing gratitude and enthusiasm. As a gesture of goodwill, you may also offer to recommend other musicians for the job.

Once you have secured a gig, the way that you communicate and interact with your colleagues during rehearsals, performances or private events goes a long way in building a strong reputation as a

freelancer. Being prompt, prepared and positive will get you the next gig. Being easy to work with is as important as playing well. Playing well *and* being easy to work with is a golden combination.

### Negotiation

You've probably heard the advice: *say yes to everything when you're starting out!* Yes, you should accept most gigs and remain open to a wide-range of opportunities. You never know what an opportunity may lead to. However, saying yes automatically and indiscriminately is a dangerous professional practice that can lead to low-pay, long hours, and high stress. Contractors and employers want to know two things: can you meet the demands of the job, and are you available. You need a lot more information to figure out whether you should accept a gig:

- How much does it pay?
- How many rehearsals are there?
- Where will the rehearsals and/or performances take place?
- How long is the performance?
- If applicable, what is the repertoire?

Once you have all of the facts, you can make a more informed decision about whether a gig is worth your time. Here are a few questions to ask yourself:

- Based on the number of hours required (active time, preparation and travel), is the pay reasonable?
- In order to make this call, you need to have a sense of what the existing range is for the kind of work you are being offered. Don't be afraid to ask colleagues what they earn for different types of freelance jobs. This will give you a place to start.
- What other factors would make you feel that this gig was worth your investment (new connections, experience, etc.)?
- What other work would you have to give up or shift around in order to make the time investment required?

Here are a few tips for navigating fee negotiation:

- If you can, have the client, contractor or employer name their fee up front. That way, you have a sense of what their budget is for a particular job, and can negotiate up. In many cases, the client will offer this without being asked; contractors will typically do likewise.
- Lead with enthusiasm, and then ask for what you need. Andrew Simonet, in his book *Making Your Life as an Artist* shares the following lucid advice about negotiation: "negotiating is wonderful. And everyone does it except artists. Negotiation does not mean haggling stingily over every last dollar. It means finding agreements that help both sides reach a common goal. I always lead with excitement about the opportunity. 'I'm really thrilled about this residency...' and then I use one of my favorite phrases: 'And here's what will make it possible for me...' or 'Here's what will make it easy for me to say yes...'"
- If there is no wiggle room for the fee, try to negotiate on time (number of rehearsals, length of engagement) or other extras such as travel or food.
- If you have to name a fee, it should be higher than what you would ideally like to get paid. This will leave room for negotiation and a comfortable 'meeting in the middle.'
- Practice saying no graciously. Have language ready for declining a job that will still leave the door open for future collaboration. Here are a couple phrases you might use:
  - "I can't commit to this with my current work load but I would love to stay in touch and find a way to work together in the future."
  - "Thanks for thinking of me. Unfortunately, I not available to do this, but I would be happy to share names of colleagues who could be a good fit."

As with any new skill, you'll make mistakes, and you'll get better with time and practice. To summarize, here are three A's to keep in mind as you navigate job and fee negotiation:

- **Ask** questions
- **Advocate** for the value of your services
- Do it with a positive **attitude** and a sense of shared interest

### ***Writing and Reviewing Contracts***

If you are serving as a contractor for a gig, you will most likely have to supply a contract to the client or employer. This is critically important--don't rely on verbal agreements alone. Follow up with a brief contract that outlines the parameters of the job: time, fee, travel arrangements, cancellation policies, deposits, etc. See the appendix for a sample contract that you can adapt for your usage.

As a freelancer, you will also be asked to regularly sign letters of agreement and contracts for one-time and ongoing work. First, make sure that the contract reflects the verbal agreements you made when you accepted the position. If you are unsure about an aspect of the contract, or feel that there are missing protections, ask questions! You can be in touch directly with the employer to clarify your questions. You can also send the contract to a trusted friend who either has a legal background or is experienced with drafting musician contracts.

### ***Promotional Materials***

Depending on what kind of freelance work you are pursuing, you may be asked to supply the following materials to a potential client, contractor or employer:

- Performance resume: you should have a concise one-page performance resume on hand for auditions
- Short and long bio: for a residency, a concert series, etc.
- Headshot: if you are pursuing TV or Broadway work, you may be asked to supply a headshot
- Work samples: audio or video on your website
- Client references, for private function work

Try to keep these materials up-to-date so that when an opportunity knocks, you can respond quickly with a polished resume, bio, or work sample. For guidance on how to create these materials, see our handouts on resumes, bios, and web presence for musicians.

### ***The Union***

Depending on the type of freelance work you are hoping to pursue, it may make sense for you to join the local chapter of the musician's union. For example, a lot of theater and orchestral freelance work is available exclusively to union members. If you are a member of the union, it does not prevent you from taking non-union jobs (private functions, regional orchestras and theaters, private teaching, etc.), which is a common misconception that prevents many musicians from joining. In addition to job access and secure pay-scale, you may also enjoy other benefits, including access to more affordable healthcare, the AFM's pension fund, and liability insurance.

Union membership can also help you build your professional network. For example, many local chapters hold regular events where musicians who have recently relocated can play for and connect with active contractors. The membership fee is fairly low--\$250 per year--and is fully tax deductible.

### ***Financial Management***

As a self-employed musician, good financial record keeping is essential, both for your own budgeting and for tax purposes. Many of the expenses you incur as a freelance musician—travel, home office, instrument care, etc.—can be deducted as a business expense and lower your overall tax obligation. It is absolutely critical to claim your freelance income, even in situations where your employer will not, so that you have a steady, ongoing record of earning. This track record is crucial for obtaining a loan to purchase a car, a home, or to finance a new business. It is recommended to find a good accountant in your area who has experience with musician wages and deductions—the cost of hiring an accountant to do your

taxes can also be deducted and can result in significant savings. See our handout on financial management for more information about navigating taxes as a self-employed musician.

***Sample Contract***

\_\_\_\_\_, herein referred to as "the artist" agrees to perform for  
(artist name)

\_\_\_\_\_, herein referred to as "the client" on \_\_\_\_\_  
(client name) (event date)

from \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_.  
(time) (time) (location)

**Agreements**

1. The artist(s) agrees to arrive no later than \_\_\_\_\_.
2. The client agrees to pay the artist(s) \$ \_\_\_\_\_ per hour, per person for playing time/ time on site, and \$ \_\_\_\_\_ per musician for every 15 min. overtime.
3. The client agrees to pay the artist(s) \$ \_\_\_\_\_ for travel and/or materials and/or preparation.
4. The total fee due is \$ \_\_\_\_\_.
5. A non-refundable deposit of \$ \_\_\_\_\_ is due by \_\_\_\_\_.
6. The full balance is due on the day of performance.
7. There will be 3 performers, each to be paid separately by personal check or cash.
8. For outdoor events, musicians must have covering or complete protective shade from extreme sunlight and rain in all cases. In the event of rain during any part of an event, the musicians reserve the right to stop, pack up, and move indoors to avoid damage to instruments, music, and other equipment.

Notes:

By executing this contract as client or artist, the person executing said contract, either individually or as an agent or representative, has the authority to enter into this agreement, and should he or she not have such authority, he or she personally accepts and assumes full responsibility and liability under the terms of this contract. In the event of a scheduling conflict or unexpected obligation (prior to the event day), where one or all of the musicians cannot perform, it will be the responsibility of the artist to present a qualified substitute(s), to uphold the terms of the contract.

The agreement of the musicians to perform is subject to proven detention by sickness, accidents, acts of nature or other legitimate conditions beyond their control.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Client signature

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Artist signature