

It's A Pitch

By Michael Drapkin

I've had two careers in my lifetime: as a symphony orchestra clarinetist and as a technology executive. One of the advantages these dual careers have given me has been the ability to apply my business experiences to my love of music. I enjoy my business activities and I love being a clarinetist, and throughout my tenure with the College Music Society, I've used that knowledge to deliver myriad papers, seminars, panel discussions, conferences, speeches that cross both fields. As my colleague, friend, mentor and Dean Bob Freeman¹ once described it, "You've taken what you've learned in music and applied it to business, and what you've learned in business and applied it to music."

One thing that has always puzzled me was that people involved in classical music, and particularly those involved in music career development, have more often than not used the term "elevator speech" to refer to the verbal vehicle used for quickly describing yourself to someone else. Having worked or consulted with over 30 startup firms and having been involved with numerous startup conferences, I knew what an "elevator pitch" was, but I never heard it called an "elevator speech." I filed that one away for future resolution.

My development as a musician went pretty much along the same lines as everyone else in classical music. I made a decision in my teens that I wanted to be a clarinetist, and took lessons, played in ensembles, went to music school and did summer festivals. The difference was that I started taking courses in technology when I was still in high school, continued that on my own during college, and when I graduated I found that it was easier to make money doing computer programming than to wait tables. It also opened me up to a different world and a way of thinking than the indoctrination that I had been given in music performance higher education.

As a classical clarinetist, the only career trajectory that we were being prepared for was to play in a symphony orchestra. Yes, we were taught other disciplines like concert band, for which you need to join the military in order to have a full time job, or chamber music, of which we knew of nobody that earned a living as a full time chamber musician, and I am not sure that has changed. In college, my clarinet teacher summed it up very nicely. "If you play well enough, there will be a place for you in a symphony orchestra somewhere. It may not necessarily be where you want to live, but there will be a place for you." From that, I imagined becoming Principal Clarinet of some orchestra in some rural state or in a remote Canadian province, happily playing Beethoven and Mozart. So it was either get an orchestra job, or you were out of luck.

Indeed, a few years after I graduated, I ended up winning an orchestra job in Hawaii, which seemed like paradise, but was more like being marooned on a desert island. The

¹ Robert Freeman bio: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Freeman_\(musician\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Freeman_(musician))

conductor was not so great at conducting, but was remarkable at being unpleasant. Half of the orchestra was clinically depressed and was either in psychotherapy or on antidepressants, or both. People called it “island fever” – a feeling of being trapped. Even more sobering was the fact that I had to spend the equivalent of a Hawaiian vacation in airfare in order to audition for another job, or see family². It was a rude awakening for me.

I had reached the nirvana of what every clarinet player dreams for in music school. I won a job with a major symphony orchestra, and I was miserable. What I realized was that an orchestra has one Chief (the conductor) and everyone else was an Indian, and I was too much of a maverick to want to sit in an orchestra for the rest of my life being told what to do and how to play my instrument. I came back to the mainland to do freelance music and freelance computer programming. That way, I was afforded the ability to cherry-pick what I wanted to do. Freedom.

As mentioned earlier, one of the interesting organisms in which I became acquainted was the start-up venture. That, in retrospect, was inevitable, since start-ups are usually financially constrained, and being a single man living in a cheap apartment allowed me to do jobs merely because I found them interesting. That got me a ringside seat which let me see capitalism at its finest:

- I got to see people living out their dreams, putting everything they had on the line in their quest for success.
- I met some amazing optimists. These people were all totally convinced that they would be successful at what they were trying to do.
- I saw amazing risk taking and risk appetites. Rather than being paralyzed by fear, they jumped in head first to live their dreams, and were not afraid to commit everything they had - all of their resources and time.
- I came into contact with great salesmen, and learned from them that it is much easier to sell something if you believe in it. I also learned how critically important sales were, and that often the head of sales made more money than the president of the firm.
- I met great visionaries that believed that they saw things that nobody else did and found a pathway to success.
- I met people that were willing to take their vision to the marketplace, and let the marketplace decide if it had value.

The funny part was that nobody saw themselves as entrepreneurs, nor even called themselves entrepreneurs. If you asked them what they were doing, they would say, “I have a startup...” Even then, nobody wanted to remain a startup because they wanted to successfully evolve beyond that, through that phase that some call the “Valley of Death³” where you either succeed or fail.

² To be completely fair, everyone came to visit me in Hawaii. I was a great excuse! “Oh, we *have* to visit Hawaii to see Michael!”

³ See “Valley of Death”: http://www.bootstrapaustin.org/wiki/index.php?title=Valley_of_Death

I learned so much from observing this firsthand. I never could have learned this from a course or through books. Indeed, most MBA⁴ programs now require their students to go out and get business experience before they allow them into their programs. Wouldn't it be interesting if advanced degree programs in music performance required their students to go out and get experience before letting them into their programs? I am afraid that if they did that, very few of them would go back to college as they would probably not see any value in getting an advanced music performance degree after seeing the scant opportunities that the real world affords them as a music performer.

But this all gets us back to that puzzling “elevator speech” business. I could not figure out why this term was so prevalent in classical music. Then one day it dawned upon me:

- A “speech” is a performance, and that is what classical musicians are comfortable doing - performing. That's why some people call it an elevator “speech” because we will perform our little bit as opposed to *sell* what we do. Ironically, if you search for “elevator speech” on Wikipedia⁵, it will redirect you back to the definition for “elevator pitch.”
- A “pitch” is sales, and we've been taught that what we do as classical musicians is fine art, and the act of doing sales is *vulgar*. In other words, as classical musicians we don't sell Beethoven and Mozart – we are above the vulgarity of selling fine art. This may have worked in the days when there was heavy patronage and government sponsorship for the arts, but those days are long gone.

That is the crux of the thinking we've been trying to change in music higher education since I came on the scene at a College Music Society conference in San Francisco 12 years ago touting an entrepreneurship curriculum. Given the explosion of courses and programs that are now proliferating at schools of music now, apparently that is catching on.

That's good, although classical music seems to be one of the last areas of fine art catching on to this idea. Here is what is happening in some other areas of the arts:

- Poets have reinvented themselves and turned into performers⁶ and commercialized their work by inventing “spoken word.” Now they perform in clubs, on TV and in “poetry slams,” and often with music accompanying them.
- Filmmakers are the natural entrepreneurs of the art world, because if you can't pitch your idea and get it funded, you don't have a movie! That's why the business part of film is an integral part of film school.
- Artists sell their works at art openings. People buy their work either because they like it, or see potential that it may appreciate in value if they become famous.

⁴ MBA – Master of Business Administration degree program

⁵ Wikipedia: “Elevator Pitch” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elevator_pitch

⁶ To think that I used to threaten my kids that I would send them to “poetry camp” if they didn't behave.

- Acting and plays have always lowered the barriers to reaching their audiences and we certainly have heard about the “peanut galleries” and “unwashed masses” attending plays back in Shakespeare’s days.
- Composers have found markets for their work by writing for video games, which is a huge market. World of Warcraft, which still has 7 – 8 million subscribers⁷ after launching almost 10 years ago, features 3-4 hours’ worth of music. “That’s like writing an opera,” said their music supervisor Russell Brower to me. “Wouldn’t you want your music to be heard by millions of people every day?”
- While we’re at it, atonal music (or “contemporary music” as they used to call it), flourishes in film music - but not in the concert hall. I think that the break with tonality is one of the single greatest disasters that happened to classical concert going. Do you really think that attendees want to hear 12 tone rows or care? But in film it goes great and can be highly programmatic. I heard a Ruggles piece in Carnegie Hall a couple years ago, and it reminded me of slasher music. I’ve seen this kind of music booed at New York Philharmonic concerts and them changing the order of the concert without prior announcement so that people wouldn’t walk out. Know your customer!

I still remember my clarinet teacher telling me that “if I play well enough...” bit of encouragement mentioned above, and that isn’t exactly true. The reality today is that there are very few orchestras that hire musicians on a full time basis, and my friend Bob Freeman calculated that every year our music schools graduate 20,000 students with music performance degrees. I usually joke that you have better odds becoming a U.S. Senator than getting a job playing the clarinet in a full time full year⁸ orchestra. If you major in music performance, it is extremely unlikely you will get one of those jobs.

What was described in this last paragraph could be described as the “supply side” of the equation. We supply an enormous amount of music labor to the marketplace. What is interesting is looking at the demand side. As a board member of an orchestra in New York City, I got to observe this firsthand. We were constantly bombarded by artists and their agents shrieking “hire me” – about how well they all play whatever it is that they do. That may be the case, but that is probably the last thing that we cared about. What was of paramount importance was filling the hall with ticket buyers and getting corporate sponsors and advertisers in order to keep our organization afloat. You can play the Beethoven Violin Concerto a little better than other people? Who cares unless you can show us how we will make money by allowing you to play your fiddle.

Case in point, I had a friend – a composer – ask me to help him sell his composition to other orchestras so that they pay money to him to play his piece. What I told him was counterintuitive. I said that rather than pitch orchestras using just his good reviews, he should gather up financials that layout how much it would cost to stage his piece, and how much money they should expect it to yield them, and base it on real numbers and experience. In other words, his competitive differentiator should be based on how his

⁷ Activision Q1 2014 Earnings Report

⁸ Specifically, I am referring to an orchestra that can afford to hire its musicians on a full time salaried basis 52 weeks a year. There are probably much less than 20 orchestras in the United States that can do that.

product will help the organization make money, and then they will listen to him. Now that is a great sales pitch, and it is one that will stand out from all the shrieking soloists and their agents, and get the attention of his prospective clients.

But the point here, and the point of this entire essay, is that classical music is in crisis because it has refused to do sales. Why have we ceded the high ground to other forms of music, such as popular music, rock music, etc.? Others are willing to go out and sell what they do, while classical music relegates itself to empty concert halls filled with aging audiences. Are you a classically trained singer? Why are the shows that showcase music talent, like *The Voice* or *America's Got Talent*, filled with untrained voices that win and get recording contracts and concert tours? Paul Potts⁹ won *Britain's Got Talent* a number of years ago singing *Nessun Dorma*, got a recording contract and is still touring and doing what he loves. When I was running a conference at a classical summer music festival a few years ago, I suggested bringing Mr. Potts in to do a lecture about his remarkable success. The answer I got was, “we have students that sing better than him.”

That's the problem endemic in our classical music system. It isn't about singing better, it is about being willing to sell yourself, get out there and take a risk, and go find an audience, just like the start-ups. Make a career for yourself by doing pitches – not speeches.

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⁹ “Paul Potts Sings *Nessun Dorma*” YouTube <http://youtu.be/1k08yxu57NA> As of this writing it has gotten 126 million views. Thanks to Tayloe Harding, Dean of the University Of South Carolina School Of Music for first pointing this out to me.