DECKS - What Makes a Musician an Artist

The critical facets needed to be successful

If you're looking for an ultimate ice-breaker at social gatherings, you could take advice from the writer David Sedaris and use the questions you get asked on the language app Duo Lingo. His favourite was: "How long have you known your dentist?" Perhaps though, you should opt for something more inspiring; more thought-provoking. I like: "if you had the chance to do it again, what would you change?" - not a question you typically find on Duo Lingo! And note, this is distinct from the question, "what would you do if you could do something else?". No, we're only allowed to change the parameters of our own past encounters, and doing so gives an illuminating insight into what you value most about your career or artistic journey. Perhaps it reveals knowledge that you wished you had access to earlier, but more usually, it's knowledge that in the final analysis, you value the most.

For me, I would have liked more career guidance, but not necessarily of the kind you think. Sure, in professional music for example, the common career paths and expectations are vital to know, and one of the greatest improvements in understanding around this has been: *in order to be it, one must see it.* To the chagrin of the hardliners in the DEI debate, the indisputable fact is that those marginalised from the industry (an increasingly diverse cohort nowadays!) are most inspired to try their hand, by following and emulating those who *look* like them, and really nothing else. No amount of open days or open access will have the same effect as simply seeing someone like you make a success of it before your eyes.

No, what I sought was not just which path to walk down, but what *kind* of person took which decisions. A young person is in need of many things when they're considering their future, but unfortunately the capability that would best predict their success is also the capability the young lack most acutely when they are young - the answer to the question "Who Am I?!" There is too much emphasis in educational institutions on 'career options'. Options in careers are easy to demonstrate, and interesting; but far harder to elucidate and teach, is the self-knowledge that he or she must attain, to know if a particular option is right for them. It is the difference between what I define as Planning, and Strategy.

Planning and Strategy are very often conflated as one in the same thing, frequently by individuals, but much more commonly by institutions seeking to best optimise their future in an uncertain world. Those who get it wrong spend their time formulating many plans for a game they're not in fact good at playing. What they should be doing instead is defining what game they are good at playing, and then seeking to play that game as best as possible. Their Strategy is to position themselves in the game they play the best. This is as true for the individual as for an institution.

What follows then is my best knowledge; based on academic and scientific research, and a life of performing and teaching music. It talks about musicians (my experience) but applies equally to artists in all disciplines. 'Options' can wait for now, what a budding performer must seek to be, if they're going to be a success in the artistic world, is DECKS.

D: Dedication

Everyone instinctively understands the hours of lonely practice it takes to achieve the standard necessary. What is less understood however is the notion that practice is not just a means to a definable end - that of being able to play the piece - but a pursuit of excellence in its own right. One must seek to be better continually; and indeed, sometimes treated with suspicion, is the fact that you should never cease seeking advice and training. Elite Athletes for example, spend all their careers with one or more trainers, no matter how good they become. There is never a sense that they can win a contest by simply relying on ingrained knowledge attained years ago at the gym. So it is with musicians. They should train, and seek feedback - either from peers, or teachers - throughout their lifetime, and delight in that undertaking.

E: Entrepreneurship

Easily the most consistently lacking facet of a musician. Entrepreneurship is the ability to broadcast yourself in a field of contemporaries that all share similar skills and knowledge. It's also the ability to seize opportunity first, when it arises. In the modern world, skills in this area are related to content creation online, as well as networking and working collaboratively with ease. The ability to generate opportunities that demonstrate you as a 'product' takes an extroversion not often present in classical musicians, but is nonetheless vital and necessary. Entrepreneurship shares a frontier with the next facet in our list.

C: Creativity

The backbone of a natural musician is the ability to play with ideas and notions. This is obviously crucial in the interpretation of music, but it also applies in the wider music ecosystem. A creative person is open minded about novel proposals. They are able to hold two or more disparate ideas in creative tension, without feeling uneasy. They are good at creating what Edward de Bono calls an “intermediate impossible” - a staging post that joins unrelated ideas.

Being also open to opportunity, learning, and new environments relates back to being entrepreneurial - able to create or exploit opportunities. Being Creative suggests you are flexible and useful in different aspects of musicianship.

K: Knowledge

Knowledge of one’s own instrument and repertoire is of course vital, and should extend to all corners of that discipline. A successful horn teacher, for example, could also give talks on the history of acoustic horns in ancient human civilizations, and perhaps would own a number of animal conches.

A fully rounded artist however must also cultivate something far rarer and much more valuable - **Connoisseurship**. Connoisseurship is essentially a keen aesthetic understanding, built on a deeper theoretical knowledge of music, history, art, philosophy, and a wide appreciation of the genres of these mentioned. Being knowledgeable and interested in these ideas cultivates our other facets of Creativity and Dedication, and over time promotes a reputation of confidence and specialisation that others can appreciate and trust in.

S: Skill

In our great efforts to fully utilise all these corners of our insufficient personality, there remains an inescapable truth that hides in plain sight. You must have talent. Innate facility in music is not *required* to be good at playing an instrument. If any reasonably intelligent person were forced at gunpoint to practice eight hours a day at a piano, they too would eventually get quite good! Talent however is the only thing that makes such an undertaking possible to anyone not at gunpoint! Folk with innate skill progress more easily, and as such enjoy the activity more - thus creating a feed-back loop of advancement.

If this seems obvious, it may be worth noting the difference between competence and skill. In China for instance, it's very common for the government to auto-enroll huge cohorts of children en masse into collectivised, highly focused activities like table tennis or - more pertinently - piano classes. They are dedicated to finding the next prodigy from the thousands that partake. Many of these children become very competent over their time in the programme, but only one or two will go on to show a true facility that can be nurtured into a career. Even fewer of them will go on to show DECKS.

EG vi.25