

# CAREERS IN MUSIC: WHAT DOES IT REALLY TAKE?

by Janis Weller

Ah, no quick or easy answers here. There are as many answers to this question as there are musicians in the field. Each musician makes his/her own way, creates opportunities, continually discovers new abilities, interests, and passions, and assembles the smorgasbord of activities that together produce a rewarding musical career. Ultimately, you just have to live it to understand what it really takes, but going in with some idea of what to expect can sure help.

To start, here are a few important realities of the music world to keep in mind —

## “Jobs” are scarce.

That is, there are many, many more highly qualified applicants for most formal job openings in music than there are jobs in the first place. That’s just a fact. On the other hand, someone does have to fill the jobs that open — why not you? For an impartial look at the music job scene, check out the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* from the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics, [www.bls.gov/oco/ocos095](http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos095). They treat music jobs just like work in any field — accounting, engineering, etc. — commenting on job tasks, working conditions, prospects for employment and the like. It’s a little dry to read, but it’s useful and direct information for gaining some perspective.

## Virtually no musician devotes all her time and energy to only one line of work or place of employment.

Even musicians in major symphony orchestras (where salaries, prestige, and time demands are high) often teach, play chamber music, do recording gigs and the like. Most musicians craft a diverse array of work activities that mesh with their interests, experience, skills, and goals.

Some types of work are steadier (like

teaching) and other activities may primarily lay the groundwork for future career opportunities (perhaps self-producing a first CD, for example). Some of the more “glamorous” performances may pay very little or not at all, while some “background” gigs can be quite lucrative. Not only will your schedule most likely be different every day, you may have many “bosses” and lots of different co-workers in vastly different settings and situations. Persistence, creativity, resilience (there will be lots of rejection along the way, most likely), and flexibility are all traits that will serve you well in creating a satisfying career.

And yes, some days you may do more mar-

keting and promotion than practicing or teaching. One trick is balance — keeping your eye on the big picture while taking care of day-to-day details. Another key is knowing yourself — what you’re good at, what you love to do, and how you want to live your life. The Elision Institute website, [www.elisioninstitute.org](http://www.elisioninstitute.org), has lots of resources for exploring these ideas, including the articles listed below.

## Musicians are entrepreneurs.

Every musician is unique and must, over time, create a personal career package that makes sense. More than likely, the look of that total career won’t be immediately clear to you as you set out, but will evolve gradually over your entire career. The more skills you can develop to a high level, the more open you are to new ideas and opportunities, then the more likely it is that you may create and sustain a satisfying musical career. If you are a terrific musician, “play well with others,” and think like an entrepreneur, your chances of success go up dramatically, regardless of your specialty areas.



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## So how do I get started?

- Develop your skills and artistry — *enter college with as high a musical skill level as possible*. Develop your ear, keyboard skills, and fundamentals of music theory in addition to your major performing emphasis. In other words, practice, practice, practice. (See *The Musician’s Challenge: Enter College as an Expert*.)
- Carefully research and seek out colleges, universities or conservatories that could be a good fit for you personally, musically, and academically. This research will really pay off. (See *Choosing a Music School*.)
- Research private teachers. No matter what your musical/academic focus in college, you will work intensively, one-on-one, with an applied teacher during your college years, honing your skills and artistry in one performing medium. Your studio teacher can be an important influence musically, personally and professionally both during college and once you’re out in the field. Request an interview or, better yet, a consultation lesson with prospective teachers if possible.
- Get out in the music world early and often — attend concerts, network, play gigs, join professional organizations, subscribe to journals. If you have the resources (or can find support or scholarships), attend summer programs, master classes, and youth music programs. (See *The Art of Networking: Hustle and Self-Promotion 101*.)

*Janis Weller is founder/director of The Elision Institute, a catalyst for evolution and growth in the training and support of musicians. She teaches flute at University of Wisconsin-River Falls and MacPhail Center for Music in Minneapolis and performs in the Twin Cities area. Learn more about the resources mentioned in this article at the Elision Institute website: [www.elisioninstitute.org](http://www.elisioninstitute.org). ♪*