

Eric Berlin's Workshop

Which way do you swing? Or ... Do you...?

I recently filled in as Principal with a different orchestra for a Pops show. Many things in my career are unique and one of them is that none of my orchestras have a regular pops series. Unlike most orchestras, those with whom I perform have specific mission-driven programming. We concentrate on performing and recording contemporary music in the Albany Symphony Orchestra and Boston Modern Orchestra Project and big romantic orchestral repertoire in Boston Philharmonic Orchestra. The guest artist did a very entertaining Broadway show which allowed me to enjoy my inner lead trumpet player so it was a real blast for me.

This article was spurred by a brief conversation with a fellow sub. As we talked about where we were from and the work we did, he asked:

"Do you play mostly classical or commercial?"

That he had to ask was a wonderful compliment and I thanked him! Unfortunately, I find young classical players able to play convincingly in a commercial style have become more and more rare.

Commercial styles are a different language - there are accepted norms about rhythms and articulations which are not apparent on the printed page. The sound and range demanded often call for different equipment. Playing a convincing Harry James solo or Earth Wind and Fire arrangement are totally different skills than playing Bruckner and Beethoven. Even in my own studio at UMass, I have had trouble convincing some players that they NEED to have these styles as part of their toolbox.

Many people may not realize that for most of my youth, a career as a classical musician was not really on my radar. My plan was to become the next Doc Severinsen/Maynard Ferguson/Conrad Gozzo/Harry James/Herb Alpert/Al Hirt/Chuck Mangione. Wynton Marsalis's double GRAMMY win in classical and jazz opened my eyes to my eventual path in classical music, but I was still mostly playing in the commercial realm as a young student. I loved playing in my high school jazz band and the occasional professional group, and I especially enjoyed playing musicals. Among my most treasured outlets was fall marching band season where I could stand in front of large crowds and wail a high note solo.

I tried to maintain both sides of my playing at the New England Conservatory by splitting my practice sessions between

classical and commercial as well as playing in George Russell's big band. What a rush it was playing those charts with the man himself! Before graduating from high school, I copied my entire big band lead trumpet book and devoted some time throughout the week just reading through these. I even took a "Jazz Ear Training" course as an elective. While still a student, I began to work playing shows and even played in a salsa band that performed in a now defunct Latin club nearby called the Taurus.



Eric Berlin.

When I got out of school, all of this commercial experience paid off. Unemployed with a performance degree, I needed to be able to take anything that came my way. For most of my 20s, this included precious little orchestral work, but lots of commercial playing. This included wedding bands, musicals, big band gigs, and commercial orchestral work backing touring headliners and rock bands like Yes and the Moody Blues. I even had a regular gig at an incredible gospel church with a band every Sunday morning. I became known as a "classical" player that could be convincing in commercial settings. I credit a huge career boost to a random free rehearsal big band that I played in just for fun. It was there that I met an important lead trumpeter and contractor who would provide a significant amount of employment for years in many genres. He was glad to see someone who would also play both sides and loved commercial playing enough to do it for free.

For anyone seeking a career as an orchestral player, look at the schedules for the orchestras that you aim for. See how large a portion of their year is devoted to "Pops". It is a significant money maker that supports the core orchestral masterworks programming that you hope to play. The demands of any orchestral job will be

heavy enough that you will not want to cram to learn how to play a Sinatra act sandwiched between weeks of Beethoven 9 and Mahler 5. It is also important to understand how much of contemporary classical composition is informed more from the commercial development of the trumpet in the 20th century than that of our classical and romantic repertoire.

While you are in school, make sure that you take advantage of the opportunities to speak this language. Although they will be useful, you don't need to have killer improvisation skills (I don't), but make sure that you play in the big band. Connecting with people who make music in a different way can help to open up some of the blocks we put in our own way as classical performers.

As a case in point, I remember one very important lesson from Charlie Schlueter during my first year in the Albany Symphony Orchestra. We had a crazy week with Also Sprach Zarathustra and Planets on the same programme (Planets first!) As I stressed incessantly about all of the high C's he called me on the ridiculousness of my worry and solved the problem with this question:

"When is the last time you worried about a high D on your Bb trumpet in big band?"

That question not only solved the problem with high concert C's but is a constant reminder that the roadblocks we see are most often a product of our own imagination. Thanks Charlie!

It is also important to address the opposite perspective. Those coming out of school with a Jazz Performance degree will be well served to be able to offer a convincing *Trumpet Mandatory* for a bride in a wedding. Matching sound and style while sight-transposing an orchestral second-trumpet part will also prove a useful skill. With so much training in the jazz tradition by ear, listening to recordings is very helpful for style, but some basic instruction is recommended here too.

So, be prepared to take any work that comes your way and do a convincing job of it. Freelancing is the most probable career path for at least a part of our career. From brass quintets to Broadway pits, you will have to swing both directions. If you do land your coveted orchestral job, know that pops conductors are interested in making their time in front of the orchestra as painless as possible on everyone. They don't want to teach you how to play the style on your colleague's time. Don't be the one player that your pops conductor badmouths around the country. Besides, once you learn the style, it really can be a load of fun. Enjoy!