

A Review of “Beyond Talent: Creating a Successful Career in Music,” by Angela Myles Beeching

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BOOK REVIEW

Beyond Talent: Creating a Successful Career in Music, by Angela Myles Beeching. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, 373 pages, ISBN 978-0-19-538259-4 (softcover), \$21.95.

“Practice, practice, practice!” is famed pianist Arthur Rubenstein’s oft-quoted retort to the New York City tourist’s question, “How do I get to Carnegie Hall?” Rubenstein was witty and on-spot: practice is what propels a musician to Seventh Avenue and 57th Street. But today’s classical musician knows that Carnegie Hall is more than just a place; it is a career ideal and many paths must be taken to get there. A successful career will require maps and strategically placed benchmarks to maneuver these paths.

In the second edition of *Beyond Talent: Creating a Successful Career in Music*, Angela Myles Beeching provides the maps, unfolds them for easy reference, and points out the benchmarks that musicians can depend on as reliable indicators of career direction and progress. There is something remarkable about how she accomplishes this in her book—*Beyond Talent* borders on the interactive. Beeching employs lists, plans, insights, and discourse as if they were online, but the reader never touches a keyboard or clicks an icon. She integrates so many places for the reader to pause and think about a point or answer a question she has posed that it is as if she were sitting beside you, engaged in discussion.

Tapping her experience as director of the Career Services Center at Boston’s New England Conservatory, Beeching treats each topic as a one-on-one career counseling session on career paths. *Mapping Success*, her first chapter, is an indicator that there will be a bit of cartography in this book. She starts with the basics of how to get from point A to point B in a music career. Then, step-by-step, she lays out the route, pointing out the many milestones, obstacles, pitfalls, short cuts, and even the opportunities of paths less traveled. More than anything else, she points out the many resources available to musicians as they start their journeys or make midcareer course corrections.

While it includes myriad examples and styles, *Beyond Talent* attests to Beeching’s organizational skill. She begins with the musician as an individual and explains the need for self-assessment as the foundation for establishing and achieving personal career goals. She then addresses the many facets of advancing toward those goals and describes the building blocks toward these ends. Tips and tools for expanding support networks, promoting image development, making recordings, and developing an online community feature prominently. Interjected lists, how-to’s, anecdotes, and musician profiles complement the flow and logic of the presentation, making the book exceedingly easy to follow.

Beeching concludes most chapters with a “Career Forward” section in which she

engages the reader with questions and exercises. She enjoins the reader to abandon passive ways and take immediate action: "How do *you* define success? ... What do you want to accomplish this month that will advance you toward your short-term goal? ... What is it you want your website to convey about you as a musician, person, and citizen?" Or she will give an assignment: "Write out a story idea for a press release that you could send to your home-town weekly newspaper."

Musician profiles and career stories help to break up the call-to-action that dominates the book. The profiles chronicle how musicians navigated their career paths and, through samples and summaries, present their approaches to publishing biographies, recording demos, and developing promotional materials such as photographs and press releases. Beeching's strategy of interspersing the profiles throughout the chapters and breaking them up into segments that correspond with the subject at hand provides interesting variety and softens the list-driven objectivity with personal touches.

The profiles illustrate the technological, audience demographic, and economic challenges confronting today's musicians. Musicians, Beeching declares, have responded to these challenges in kind, "finding new ways to connect music with audiences. Musicians are no longer content to perform only in traditional, formal venues, disconnected from audiences and from communities. Musicians today explore ways to find a sense of immediacy, connection, and relevance" (4). Along these lines, Beeching encourages musicians to think local and small, to find and create their own performances opportunities.

Such strategies have potential, but there is no substitute for effective planning. Just as a healthy, stable organization undergoes routine strategic planning—the process through which managers, marketers, and board members define their objectives (where they want the organization to go), their strategy (how the organization will get there), necessary resources (what it will take to get the organization there), and evaluation (how they will know if the organization got there)—planning is equally important for the individual musician or ensemble. Can dreams be a centerpiece of your plans? Beeching recommends "backward planning," or working in reverse from one's goal and breaking down bigger responsibilities into smaller tasks, as a way for musicians to take control of their own career directions.

Midway through the book, Beeching cuts to a chapter called "Interlude: Five Fundamental Questions." She poses difficult questions that require deep thought and some soul-searching: "Why are you in music? How do you define success? Is your thinking getting in the way? What kind of partnerships are you creating through your music? How meaningful is your work?" Self-assessment is a critical and necessarily repetitive touchstone in the musician's career.

Of course, in this book as in life, the routine and the mundane also have their place. Beeching explores lesser-known but still important subjects, including performance health, residency programs, grant opportunities, commissions, fee negotiation, taxes, and unions. She addresses the business dimension of music: self-management, booking gigs, selling records. She promotes do-it-yourself actions: "Here's the reality: handling publicity is part of a musician's job. You are the best person to tell the story. The challenge lies in creating promotional materials that effectively communicate who you are and what is distinctive about you and your music" (46). Recognizing that grants and fundraising are key to the business side of music, she explains the fundamentals of grant applications and funder committee reviews. The explanations are somewhat elementary, however; serious grant applicants have to do considerable research, hone their writing

skills, and require training in grant processes.

Beyond Talent helps to fill a void for musicians (and, on a broader scale, for artists in general) that is prevalent because colleges typically are not paying adequate attention to career planning. In its May 3, 2011 report, *Forks in the Road: The Many Paths of Arts Alumni*, the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University's School of Education reported the results of its 2010 survey of 13,500 arts graduates from 154 institutions. Focusing on the educational experiences and career paths of arts graduates nationally, the survey revealed that

Graduates went to arts school to learn art; by and large they think their institutions trained them well. To this point, nearly three-quarters (74%) of alumni report that their institution contributed a great deal to developing their artistic technique. . . . An even larger proportion of alumni (89%) are either very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with their classroom, lab and studio teachers and the quality of instruction they received concerning their artistic craft. While arts alumni generally gave their schools high marks, *more than half (51%) of undergraduate alumni were dissatisfied with the career advising their school offered as were 43% of graduate alumni.* (italics added)

This book can serve as an excellent resource for faculty who advise undergraduate music students coming to the end of their time in college as well as for arts management faculty who have musician entrepreneurs among their student body. Further, the book is a valuable call from the field, reminding arts administrators and arts administration educators about the current state of the artistic job market and how artists might be supported by our programs, institutions of higher learning, and arts organizations.

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REFERENCE

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