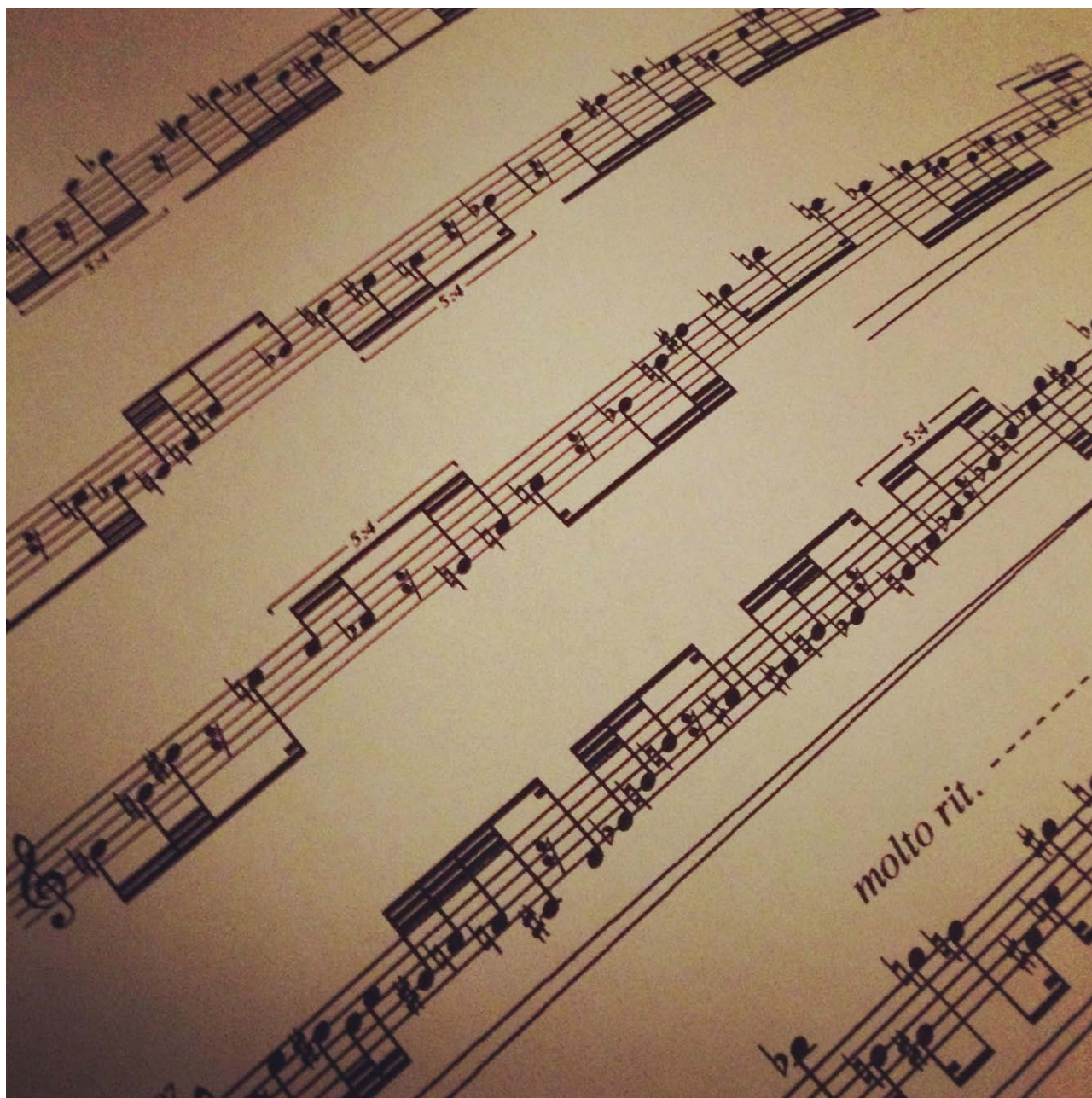


Advice to a College Music Student



“Barely Breathing”

by Brett William Dietz

I started teaching at the University of North Carolina Wilmington right after finishing my Master’s degree at Indiana University in 2012. While I wasn’t expecting to get back into academia so quick, it was enlightening to get the teacher’s perspective, especially in

a smaller school environment.

I went to two universities with very large schools of music. It's difficult not only to see everything that happens within these schools, but even more difficult to interact with everyone on a consistent basis. One nice benefit of being at a smaller school is that I interact with both students I teach and other students that are in the department.

In the last year and a half, I've seen the many differences between large established schools of music and smaller developing departments of music. For us teachers, we are trying to train our students for the professional world, but most of the larger universities are already at the same level as professionals. This relativity can be discouraging to students in a smaller school, and the biggest thing I have noticed so far in my teaching career is where professional ability lacks, potential replaces. It's up to the student to see their own potential and develop it.

Below is some helpful advice that I have for students of music, especially at the undergraduate level. Some of these were the reasons why I was very successful in school, some were things I learned and realized as I progressed through school, and some I learned the hard way. If I knew then what I know now...

Your professional career starts as soon as you step foot on campus.

Your time in school has much more of an impact on your professional career than you think. The people you meet and the experiences you will have will directly affect your success when you graduate and are long gone.

Most importantly, people's perception of you is what carries the most after you've graduated. You wouldn't believe how many groups today have members that went to high school or college together. Once you're out of school, the network of people that you created will stick with you for the rest of your career.

What that means is you have to make the best impression you can while you're *in*

school. Your peers will be your colleagues, and your teachers will be your references. If you develop a history of being unreliable, unprepared, late to rehearsals and performances, or just plain unpleasant to work with, people will remember that about you. Once you've fallen into a trap, it takes twice as much effort (or even more) to rebuild your reputation.

It's OK to make mistakes, that's what being in school is for. What's most important is how you react to those mistakes. Sometimes a simple apology in person is all it needs, or making up for it by making sure it never happens again.

Be prepared.

Or better put, stay on top of things. When you're in school, you have so many things to work on all at the same time. Ensemble music, private lesson materials, outside projects, theory homework, music history listening, those pesky general education courses, the list goes on...

The absolute worst thing to do is procrastinate, especially with practicing. What worked the best for me is if I had things to do, I prioritized and did them before extracurricular activities. It's OK to postpone socializing to stay on top of your work. Give yourself ample time to complete what you need to do. What may work for one person may not work for another, so find the system that's right for you and stay on top of things. To-do lists work really well for me, but it only works if you make sure it's cleared as soon as you can. I like to get things done at the beginning of the day, so I have my evenings free.

I also recommend not cramming as many hours as possible into one semester. All of those classes (and the work associated with them) can pile up. When I was an undergrad, I never went over 15 hours. It took an extra semester to graduate, but it was nice being involved in more performing related activities than bookwork.

With all of that being said, if you find yourself not prepared, don't make excuses for it. Be honest with your professors. The best things you can say are "I'll do my best" or "It'll

be better next time”. Your professors can tell if you did the work or not, so don’t try to cover it up.

Be reliable.

By being prepared, you’ll be more reliable. You’ll have your parts learned, have better lessons, and become a better musician while doing it. I always appreciate and admire players that are “solid”: they always bring their “A” game, play their parts beautifully, and they look effortless while doing it. Their bad days are better than the great days of some.

Reliable musicians are always on time, always engaged, and always willing to contribute to the music as a whole than their own personal gain or ego. They’re always professional too. They treat every practice session, rehearsal, and performance like it’s the biggest gig they’ve done.

These guys and gals get the calls first.

Practice your ass off.

It should go without saying, but school is the time to hit the practice room hard. It’s very true that you don’t have as much time to practice when you’re not in school. (I didn’t even have as much time as I wanted in grad school!)

It’s not so much that you’re practicing, but it’s the intent of which you practice. You can get the most out of your practice time by really thinking about what you’re doing and how you can make it better. Practicing is more about problem solving than anything else. A good teacher will give you the tools to make your problem solving easier and more effective.

What I really learned from my teachers is how to teach myself.

Record yourself often.

This is something I wish I did more in school. You should always record yourself in many different situations. Record practice sessions, rehearsals, lessons, performances, etc. Not only should you listen to them immediately and use that for personal feedback, take a moment a year later to listen to the same recording. Progress can only be measured over long periods of time. You may not notice your progress in weekly increments, but it's surprising to listen back to what you sounded like a long time ago and how far you've come.

Listen.

I can always tell who will be great students from the very first conversation I have with them. I ask them what they listen to. You'd be surprised how many students coming to school to study jazz don't listen to it!

The best resource for any musician is the music itself. The more you listen to the music you want to create, the more it will become a part of you, and of course you have a model for your own development.

When I was studying with Ed Soph, he would always ask me what I listened to. He would follow my answer with, "What makes he/she/it sound so good?" I thank Ed almost every day because he taught me how to listen to music with *intent*. By recognizing the qualities that make the music successful, it will be easier to incorporate those qualities into your own playing.

Listen to everything you can. Listen to the music you want to create. Listen to things you don't normally listen to. Find and listen to recordings of what you're working on, whether it's solo, chamber music, wind ensemble piece, symphony, big band chart, etc. There are so many resources available now like Spotify, YouTube, CD's, your school's library, et al. Find multiple versions. You'll gain more perspective on different interpretations of the dots and lines you see in front of you. It might also answer any

questions you have about the music.

Don't get discouraged.

The old saying goes: "Rome wasn't built in a day."

But sometimes in school you have to. There is so much material that has to be covered in four years, and as a result you may have to push through an idea or technique that isn't fully realized.

Don't let that be discouraging to you. With time, you'll eventually grasp the concept that seemed daunting to you. When things get tough, try not to let emotion get to you. Discouragement can kill your brain's ability to learn something new. Trust that you'll get it with time.

Honestly, most of the concepts I learned in school finally clicked for me well after I graduated. So give it some time.

Save everything.

Now this is something I didn't do and I surely wish I had. I did a little bit during grad school, but I'm still kicking myself for not doing it thoroughly.

Save everything. *Everything*. Yes, even your textbooks. (I know, it's tempting to sell them back, but don't.) The more information you physically have when you're out of school, the more resources you'll have when you don't have access to all of the resources available when you were in school. That one time you forget how Neapolitan sixth chords work...

My advice is to catalogue every course you take. For physical media, keep a separate binder for each course with all of your notes, assignments, tests, etc. and file it away at the end of the semester. You can do the same digitally. Keep a "College" folder, organize that by semester, then by course. Keep PDF's, Finale/Sibelius files, audio files, and all of

the other things you accumulate during the semester. Organize it in such a way that you can find things easily later down the road.

You'll be glad you did.

Perform as much as possible.

Play as much as you can in every possible situation you can find yourself in. Try to be in every university ensemble you can play in during your four years, and then play some more outside of school. Play in symphony orchestra, play in a chamber group, sightread duets with friends, help someone on their recital, etc.

If your school has something unique like steel band or gamelan ensemble, do that too.

The more you play, the better you get, and the more people you'll meet.

Get out of your comfort zone.

This almost ties in with performing as much as possible. At least once you should participate in something completely out of your comfort zone. It may be a format you're not familiar with, or the music might not be your cup of tea. Whatever it is, go for it.

I've found that participating in something out of my comfort zone made me appreciate and respect that particular art form much more by being *involved* in it. It actually helped me come to appreciate free jazz — not only do I enjoy playing it, I enjoy listening to it as well.

You may actually find that something you may not like will turn out to be incredibly rewarding.

Don't be afraid to ask for help.

I will be forever grateful to Christopher Deane for all of the help he has given me over

the years.

Never be afraid to talk to someone if you're having trouble. It doesn't even have to deal with music. When I was in school, I used to suffer from perfectionism issues: so much so that I would become really discouraged in myself if I felt like I didn't play one single note perfectly. I would become overwhelmed with anxiety.

But then I asked Mr. Deane for help. I told him what I was experiencing, and he had no problems talking to me and helping me work out these issues while working on pieces for my lessons. As a result, the lessons were phenomenal, and I will forever call him a mentor and a friend. (I still am a perfectionist, but it doesn't bother me anymore.)

So don't be afraid to ask for help. That's what your teachers are there for.

Last but certainly not least, have fun.

Music is such an enjoyable experience: listening to it as well as creating it. No matter where you are in your studies, while you are always striving to be a better musician and artist, always remember to enjoy this process. Be happy with the gift that you have: the ability to create great music.

So have fun, and create beautiful music.

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