

The Many Facets of Music Entrepreneurship Education

Jeffrey Nytch

University of Colorado-Boulder

Though the field of arts entrepreneurship education is going on 20 years old, it is still common for colleagues to ask me, “What is arts entrepreneurship, and how does it play out in music?” And it is not easy to give a concise answer; in fact, if I tried it would be disingenuous: there are simply too many variations, too wide a range of contexts, too vast a scope of possibilities to get anywhere near a simple answer. An easier question would be, “What is the purpose of arts entrepreneurship education?” That question has a much more straightforward answer: to equip students with the tools they need to have a career that is artistically fulfilling and financially sustainable. It is the “how” behind that objective that gets complicated.

I came to the University of Colorado-Boulder in 2009 as a classically-trained musician serving a body of students who were, with the exception of a small minority of jazz students, classically oriented in their performance and pedagogy. Despite this shared experience, it was immediately clear that within that student body was a wide diversity of career aspirations; the scope was even broader when a non-music major interested in the music business would pay me a visit. I quickly began to identify a set of niches within the complex and intertwined ecosystem of music careers and paths which, in turn, set me out to determine how to deliver coherent instruction in the midst of so much diversity. It was not an easy task, but I came to see that entrepreneurial principles were the key to solving my dilemma. By focusing first and foremost on entrepreneurial principles that were universally applicable across disciplines, I could position the particulars of how those principles play out in a given context as a point for class discussion. Similarly, I could design assignments to have a range of options to choose from depending on an individual student’s own goals. In the end, I was focusing more on the unifying elements and less on the divergent ones.

While I believe that a similar approach applies to teaching entrepreneurship to the whole of arts disciplines, one can take the concept too far. There are, after all, some significant differences between how entrepreneurial principles are applied by, say, a painter versus an actor, or between a potter and a freelance musician. And these differences go beyond the business particulars of one discipline versus another (painters needing to understand how galleries work; musical performers needing to understand the basics of finding a performing gig; composers needing to know about PROs and royalties). There are deeper issues to consider, such as the relationship between artist and consumer (e.g., the fundamental difference between a live performance and a stationary exhibition, to name just one). The bottom line is that educators in every discipline must determine not only how ent-

repreneurial principles are applied in their particular context, but also the deeper issues unique to their field that they must address. Speaking from the standpoint of music, I offer these five areas for consideration.

1. Understand the Range of Disciplines Under the “Entrepreneurship” Umbrella

One of the challenges of defining what entrepreneurship means within the arts is that most of our institutions (faculty, administrators, and students alike) ascribe a variety of things to “entrepreneurship” that those of us in the field do not necessarily see as belonging there. In the music conservatory, these things include arts administration, commercial/entertainment industry studies, general business studies and what I call the “career toolbox”: the nuts-and-bolts skills a professional musician needs to acquire (gigging, copyrights, developing a brand, fundraising, marketing, networking, bios and CVs, etc.). Most commonly, folks in the academy consider the “toolbox” to be equivalent to entrepreneurship; others see entrepreneurship only in terms of starting a venture in the form of an organization. Managing these varying definitions can be frustrating at times, since with a given definition comes a particular set of expectations on the part of the definer. But rather than push against this, I have instead focused on one aspect of entrepreneurship that is not often discussed: its flexibility and ability to be applied in all manner of ways to serve all manner of outcomes. After all, entrepreneurial thinking and action have an equally essential role to play in arts administration, the commercial music business and the single performer’s portfolio career. Moreover, successful new venture creation—whether it be a new arts entity or an individual artist launching their career—will in turn draw on elements of non-profit arts administration, business acumen, the career toolkit and possibly elements of the commercial/entertainment business. In other words, given the choice between operating with a relatively narrow view of what it means to be an artist-entrepreneur and embracing a wide and inclusive view of arts entrepreneurship, I will always choose the latter. After spending many years trying to convey the difference between entrepreneurship and the other things attributed to it, I ended up gathering all those elements under the same umbrella, with entrepreneurship acting as the binding force for all of them.

This shift in how I view the meaning of entrepreneurship has several benefits. The first is simply a practical one: as noted above, any professional activity in music will draw from a wide range of elements. It simply makes sense from a resources and efficiency standpoint to coordinate those elements within the confines of a single program. The second reason for this inclusive view is more strategic. Rather than seeing the lack of shared understanding among students and faculty regarding the meaning of “entrepreneurship” as a challenge or a barrier, I use that murky understanding to bring as much as possible into the entrepreneurship space. Administration, the “toolbox,” business skills, innovations in performance, music technology, community engagement, you name it. Entrepreneurship becomes the thread holding these diverse elements together, equally able to generate meaningful results in each case. This approach results in a much wi-

der swath of the student population acquiring the basics of entrepreneurial thinking and action while also giving students some universal skills that they can take with them regardless of where their career leads them. In an era when it is commonplace for individuals to have different jobs/careers over the course of their working life, this flexibility of skills is of more than passing importance.

Of course, in bringing all of these disciplines under the rubric of entrepreneurship, we have also created a problem for ourselves: it is simply impossible for any individual faculty member to possess equally strong expertise in freelance performing, not-for-profit administration, music entertainment, marketing, intellectual property, tax law and any number of the many other topics we are expected to address in our classrooms and workshops. True to the entrepreneurial spirit, however, we can turn this challenge into a benefit: addressing so many different topics is a golden opportunity to bring in outside experts who can teach from the standpoint of their own experience. This helps keep a class or one's co-curricular programming fresh and diverse, while bringing our students into contact with a range of role models who put a "real world" face on the concepts discussed in class. Knowing where we are in the diverse music entrepreneurship landscape at any one time allows us to teach more efficiently, more effectively and has the added bonus of raising the visibility of our programs within our communities and beyond.

2. Recognize that Many Music Students Struggle with Creativity

If you were to survey the general population and ask whether or not they thought musicians were "creative," 100% would likely say, "Yes, of course!" That is obvious, right? How could one be in the arts and not be creative? What is interesting, though, is that I have taken to asking my students that same question, and time after time only a few of them will answer in the affirmative. Instead, the vast majority sort of smile ruefully and admit that, on the whole, they do not see themselves as very creative.

What is behind this gulf between the creativity the general public assumes we possess and our students' lack of identifying as such? I posit that it has to do with how musicians are trained—particularly in the classical music realm. Unlike actors and dancers, who are well versed in improvisation, or visual artists, who are partaking in the act of creating something all the time, classical performers are mostly in the business of recreating something that already exists. And in training students how to go about that process, we tend to take a binary approach: either you played the correct note or you did not, either you are in tune or you are not, this is an appropriate tempo, that one is not. Understanding the deeper layers of musical meaning and how to bring out those layers in performance is not something addressed in depth until much later in a student's education, by which time the die is cast. To be clear, I am not saying that musicians are not creative—that would be painting with an inappropriately-broad brush. What I am saying is that most music students are not empowered to exercise creativity within their music-making, particularly in the early stages of their training.

Naturally, this paucity of creative capacity presents challenges when teaching entre-

preneurship. In my experience, one cannot just dive into the deep end of the entrepreneurial pool and get students to start creatively addressing needs in the marketplace. They are simply not ready to start thinking in that way. Consequently, entrepreneurial training of musicians needs to begin with intentional exploration of creativity and creative problem-solving. Using experiential, collaborative in-class exercises and employing process-based approaches like Design Thinking can help students develop an understanding of creativity grounded in an understanding of themselves, what the creative process feels like and how they tend to look at problems. These experiences also help free up students to take risks, suggest something outlandish or just give voice to a “what if” proposition. Without first developing these elements, it becomes extremely challenging for music students to go to the next level of applying creative problem solving in an entrepreneurial context.

Despite these efforts, there will still be students who have a difficult time activating their creativity. There is always at least one student in my class who simply “can’t come up with anything” they feel strongly about. This is a problem when the final project for the class is to determine the feasibility of an original entrepreneurial idea and pitch it to their peers! It is important to remember this, not only because it inspires empathy for the student, but also because it helps us to be on the lookout for students who might be struggling in this area so we can offer additional guidance and support early on.

3. “Broaden the Aperture” of Career Options

This issue may not be unique to music, but it is important for music entrepreneurship educators to recognize that their students are likely to see their career options in extremely narrow terms: K-12 educator, freelance performer, orchestral/chamber player, college professor. And while many of our students will pursue successful careers in these areas, many more will face rejection, frustration, and end up concluding that they “don’t have what it takes.” This problem is akin to the creativity gap I addressed above in that their training progressed on the assumption that “successful” musicians are those who occupy those traditional positions. Students simply are not exposed to entrepreneurial musicians or those who have taken unconventional paths. (Worse yet, they may even be actively discouraged from following them). As educators tasked with helping students determine their career paths, it is important to recognize and address this dynamic. Discussions about career paths is a perfect opportunity to bring entrepreneurial thinking into the equation, whether in the context of a career skills course or that of an individual mentoring session. Find real-life examples of unconventional careers or career paths and dig down into how the artists profiled ended up doing what they are doing. What entrepreneurial principles can we see at work? How might the student apply entrepreneurial principles to assessing their own options? This approach means we have illustrated a process by which students can find a unique career for themselves, one that might be very much outside of the traditional options. It also brings entrepreneurial practice into the heart of how they think and talk about their future, rather than something that lives on the periphery of their education.

4. Music Students Must Develop a Deeper Understanding of Live Performance

Just as musicians tend to have a narrow view of their career options, they have what might be an even narrower view of the range of possibilities for live performance. And once again, their training plays a big role in this: classical music students expect to perform in a concert venue. Opera students expect to perform in a theatre. Jazzers and pop musicians expect to perform in a club, bar or other entertainment venue. This is not to say that musicians of all stripes have not branched out to perform in unconventional venues, such as a homeless shelter, a prison or the city park. “GroupMuse” organizes house concerts; the organization “Opera on Tap” brings opera singers into bars; some musicians make a significant portion of their income playing in retirement communities. These kinds of performances are not typically modeled for students, however, and students certainly are not instructed in best practices for performing in what is a fundamentally different context from the concert hall. What does a young musician inspired to take her music out into the community do? She more or less replicates a traditional performance in a non-traditional venue. Occasionally it works, most times it falls short. Through trial and error, she may find a working formula, but that process could (and should) be facilitated by a better conceptual understanding of live performance elements and how they can be manipulated to better serve an audience.

There are five key elements every concert organizer must consider in order to create a compelling experience for the audience: Intent, Narrative, Focus, Time and Space. These elements apply to virtually all artistic presentations, but they are especially relevant to musicians. Visual art gives us something tangible to respond to; theatre has dialogue; even modern dance, though not always explicitly narrative in nature, has potent visual cues from which we derive meaning. But unless there is text or an explicit “program” to it, music exists more in the abstract than other genres. Moreover, this abstraction unfolds in time but, with traditional concert settings, inside a space that remains mostly static. Taken together, these factors position classical music at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to delivering an engaging experience in today’s visual and multimodal world.

Below, I present brief summaries of these five key elements of musical performance:

Intent. The question “What do you want this performance to accomplish?” might sound like an obvious one, but when I pose this to students they often cannot muster more than a generic “I want to move people” sort of response. But these days, when we are all awash in media of all sorts, musicians need far more clarity of purpose in order to promote and deliver a product that will get their audience’s attention and leave them wanting more. Unless you are Yo-Yo Ma (or the equivalent), an audience will not flock to you solely by virtue of your name or to hear you regardless of what you are performing. So how else can we frame the music we wish to present so that it has clear relevance to our community? Defining a clear intent is the first step.

Narrative. The intent of a concert leads very neatly to the next element, Narrative. The narrative of a concert is that which facilitates communication of your intent: once you have determined the purpose of the concert, then you need to envision how the

content and sequence of events communicates that intent. Narrative does not mean there is an explicit “story” being told, like that of a play or even a programmatic piece of music. But it does mean that there needs to be a logical progression of energy, emotions, tension and release that serve the concert’s intent.

Focus. In traditional concert situations, the audience may not be directed toward any particular focus. If there is a soloist performing with an orchestra, there may be more focus on the soloist than the rest of the group, but that is an assumption that may not be correct. With chamber music, there is not usually any differentiated focus on certain players over others. And in between pieces, particularly if there is a set change, there is no focus whatsoever. In order to take the audience on a journey—for them to experience your narrative—you must maintain engagement. And without focus you cannot do that. This is where a host of other elements—lighting, careful stage choreography, etc.—can be extremely helpful, just as they are in all of the other performing arts. The most important thing about Focus is that it must not be left to chance or be assumed to be self-evident.

Time. As mentioned above, music is a temporal art that, unlike theatre, dance, or film, does not traditionally employ a cohort of other elements to create narrative flow and focus. Consequently, it is imperative that concert planners consider the element of Time when designing their shows. Time is more than duration, though that is obviously one element. It also includes the scope and arc of the experience we wish to provide our audience. Given the amount of tension we have built, how much time will we need to relax that tension? After an intense section, what kind of reflective time do we want to offer? These questions are of course informed by Intent and Narrative, meaning that a concert that disregards Time will have a harder time conveying Intent and Narrative.

Space. The last element to consider is Space. There are two aspects to this: (a) how we want to use the performance space (and how that interacts with the question of Focus), and (b) how we might use the space of the venue itself to help reinforce our overall Intent. To illustrate the power of this, think about how fun and novel it is to go to an orchestra concert in a traditional hall and suddenly have a brass ensemble play from backstage or up in the rafters. Something as simple as relocating the music to an unexpected space has a tremendous impact! Now think about how that might be expanded, perhaps even outside the performing space and into the lobby? In front of the venue? Outside in the parking garage? There are so many creative possibilities, all of which can, if thought through carefully, serve to clarify and intensify Intent.

Failure to use these elements in planning a concert is not only due to a lack of training and exemplars for students to emulate. It is also driven by something much deeper: a mindset about the nature and purpose of live performance itself. Musicians, especially classically-trained ones, tend to see their role as delivering the music they perform at the highest possible level. They assume (wrongly) that if they deliver a polished performance the audience will, by virtue of the music itself, have a positive experience. Ask a student why some random member of the public should come to their recital and they will likely be stumped. They simply have not been encouraged to think about the audience’s experience at all, much less what their role is in shaping that experience. (This is of course driven by the mostly re-creative mindset of preparing the existing repertoire that dominates most conservatory training.)

An entrepreneurial approach to concert planning forces students to see performance in a completely different light than they have experienced elsewhere in their training because it requires the entrepreneur to serve the needs of the audience—not simply their personal desire to perform. This means they must first determine what those needs are, determine a clear Intent and then engage in a creative process of meeting those needs using the elements discussed above. The challenge with this shift in approach is that it will cause students to butt up against a range of assumptions that have hitherto gone unchallenged, assumptions ranging from what constitutes an acceptable venue, what repertoire certain demographics want, how long the concert should be and how both performers and audience should behave.

In the traditional concert model presented both in the conservatory and out in the world, virtually every aspect of the performing experience is determined by the performer and shaped by a myopathy regarding the needs and sensibilities of the very people they seek to attract. This myopathy is reinforced by their education, which rarely requires any sort of presentation outside of a concert hall and which places almost no emphasis on turning out an audience for their performances. Senior recitals dutifully check off the required repertoire and are usually attended by no more than a handful of students and close family members. Publicity for a concert amounts to putting up posters. And any deep conversation about why live performance matters—about the role that performance plays in nurturing community, about how what we do contributes positively to the human condition, about what it means to connect with an audience and how we do that—is largely absent.

Challenging traditional assumptions, viewpoints and paradigms is an essential element to entrepreneurial training, which is why deep conversations about the purpose of live performance and the best ways to deliver it to an audience belong in the entrepreneurship space. At the same time, upending the traditional concert apple cart is a large part of the reticence—and sometimes outright hostility—towards entrepreneurship education on the part of some faculty and students. In seeking to implement “change within markets through carrying out of new combinations” (to quote Joseph Schumpeter), entrepreneurship is an implicit challenge to all that is held sacred within the academy.¹ It is a subversive force that asks uncomfortable questions. This is particularly true for classical music, with its performance paradigm remaining essentially unchanged for nearly 200 years. It is also why entrepreneurial programming is so essential for all music students: they are not likely to encounter these things, either philosophically or practically, through any other means.

5. Have Serious Conversations About the Nature of “Value”

In the last decade, I have had countless conversations with faculty and students suspicious of entrepreneurship playing any role in the arts. Entrepreneurship, the argument goes, is about appealing to a mass market and putting profit ahead of content—and such thinking is antithetical to the creation of “art.” There are lots of ways to counter that

¹ Joseph A. Schumpeter, *The Theory of Economic Development* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1934), 68.

argument, of course. You could point out the many artists of all genres who are or were both widely popular and among the greats of their field. You could point out the clever ways that composers and performers funded some of their greatest works, or look at the greats of Renaissance music and art who had to satisfy demanding patrons, navigate tricky political situations and work within the limitations of religious doctrines and established styles. But anecdotal arguments rarely sway the other side, and in any case, I believe they miss the point. In my view, the root of suspicion regarding entrepreneurship in the arts lies in a misunderstanding of value.

In my book *The Entrepreneurial Muse: Inspiring Your Career in Classical Music*, I discuss what I call “The Entrepreneur’s Maxim,” which states: The market will value the product that meets its need.² There are a number of challenging concepts for musicians loaded into that sentence, including overcoming any resistance to viewing one’s music as a “product” and the difficulty in defining and articulating the many layers of “needs” that can be met through the arts. But I think the most important element in The Entrepreneur’s Maxim is “value,” in large part because it is the most misunderstood.

First off, one must understand that there are two types of value: intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic value is intangible and subjective, and it is the “value” most folks are thinking about when they say that you cannot put a price on a great work of art. How can one possibly quantify the financial value of Michelangelo’s *David* or the Brahms Requiem? On the other hand, some folks might not think *David* is that big a deal, and there are surely folks who dislike Brahms (though I have a hard time understanding why). The point is that intrinsic artistic value is in the eye of the beholder. As I state in *The Entrepreneurial Muse*,

[Intrinsic] value is inherent in the work itself, and that value exists as an intangible value to society, to individuals, to the nourishing of our collective sensibilities, and so forth. Art’s intrinsic value is not influenced by or contingent on popularity, the cost of a ticket to experience it, or the price a work of art fetches at auction. A work’s intrinsic value is determined only by itself.³

On the other side is extrinsic value, which is tangible and objective. It can be quantified and measured and produces a tangible return (whether in Facebook “likes,” money earned, bartered goods or some other form of exchange). Of course, intrinsic and extrinsic value can both be active at the same time; in fact, they nearly always are. Because of the intrinsic value to me of a favorite opera, I will ascribe considerable extrinsic value to it in the form of an expensive ticket to see it. Conversely, a treasured family object might have no extrinsic value in the marketplace but holds enormous intrinsic value to me.

In my experience, the vast majority of folks wary about entrepreneurship in the arts are mixing up these two types of values. They see entrepreneurship as a system by which extrinsic value rules supreme over intrinsic artistic value—or even ignores intrinsic value altogether. But this is not the case. For one, extrinsic value can only exist when

² Jeffrey Nytech, *The Entrepreneurial Muse: Inspiring Your Career in Classical Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

³ *Ibid.*, 59.

a need has been met. If that need is utilitarian in nature (e.g., a power tool), then I will ascribe a monetary value to it based on its usefulness to me. If the need is artistic, then the extrinsic value resides squarely in step with the intrinsic value I derive from it. You cannot have one without the other. The lesson of this is not to “pander” or “dumb down” your artistic product, but rather the opposite: only your most personal and authentic output will have intrinsic value to anybody. Compromise that, and you have compromised your most valuable asset—in both the business sense and artistic sense.

The other element to consider when discussing value is the relatively modern concept of “high” and “low” art. A great illustration of this is how long it took conservatories to take jazz studies seriously. Jazz was viewed as a less valuable pursuit than the European classical canon—a “lower” form of music. We are still fighting the same battles with regard to world music, folk music and pop music occupying equally-legitimate spaces within the conservatory. How the “high/low” dichotomy came into being is beyond the scope of this essay, but it absolutely plays into the question of “value” as well as the question of why entrepreneurship still runs afoul of some faculty and students in the conservatory realm.

As you can see, discussing value gets right down into the heart of a musician’s identity, making it an essential topic to explore with students. It is also essential to developing an entrepreneurial mindset: students must see entrepreneurship as a mechanism for delivering their artistic product to the world. It is the manifestation of their intrinsic value such that it unlocks extrinsic value in the marketplace. It is about empowering their most authentic artistic voice, not compromising it, and without regard to preconceived notions of “high” or “low.”

In this essay I have outlined what I see as essential differentiating factors between entrepreneurship in music and the other arts. I have also attempted to make a case for why entrepreneurial studies belong in the very center of conservatory practice as opposed to the periphery where they usually reside. In the end, entrepreneurship goes far beyond the business of music or mechanisms for monetizing artistic content. Because of the critical relationship between intrinsic and extrinsic value, entrepreneurship becomes the element essential to translating the former into the latter. As a result, entrepreneurship gets right down into the very center of the art itself. The notion that entrepreneurship is simply a tool for delivering an already-made artistic product to the marketplace misses this point entirely: fully embraced, entrepreneurial thinking shapes and inspires the artistic process itself, uncovering new and novel ways to bring the power of art to a world that desperately needs it.

In these challenging times, we often hear our cultural leaders say that we need art now more than ever. And indeed, we do: between pandemic, widespread civil unrest and the worsening effects of climate change, there is no shortage of issues that art of all kinds can and should engage. Unfortunately, I do not yet see many musicians or musical organizations actually doing that effectively. We are certainly seeing many musicians and organizations scrambling to deliver their content remotely, but the results are often mediocre at best. The reason for this is that musicians are by and large trying to force a traditional paradigm into a channel that is not particularly designed for it. In addition, statements and programming intended to support oppressed communities often come

off as tone deaf or, worse, even counterproductive. What is missing is the entrepreneur's perspective, one that starts first with understanding one's customer, listening to their needs and understanding their sensibilities; one that recognizes that with great disruption comes great opportunities to find those "new combinations" Schumpeter talked about; a perspective that seeks to transform a challenge of a disrupted marketplace into a benefit. This sort of creative engagement with crisis and upheaval is at the very heart of entrepreneurship, and it is also at the heart of what our society needs today. Our role as educators is to make sure we give our students the tools they need to continue to thrive, make an impact in our communities and play an active role in advancing the good of society.

Bibliography

Nytch, Jeffrey. *The Entrepreneurial Muse: Inspiring Your Career in Classical Music*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Schumpeter, Joseph A. *The Theory of Economic Development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934.