

Bridging the gap...

You cannot learn how to swim on a stool...

Pierre Boulez

1. The transition

The transition from higher education to professional life, in all fields, will always constitute a difficult moment. It is true of artistic professions as well as others, including business. The adaptation process is more or less the same for a young graduate in business studies starting as a car salesman as for a language teacher being awarded his or her diploma, or for a novice plumber finishing his or her last internship.

The reasons for this are both technical and psychological.

Whatever the quality of students' training, how these competencies are applied in a given professional – and, by definition, new – situation is critical, particularly on a technical and artistic level. A violin player starting to teach children or playing in an orchestra will face a change in the 'centre of gravity' of his or her daily concerns, which are no longer filled by Paganini, Bach or Sibelius' Violin Concerto, but by teaching children to position their left hands in order to play in tune without clutching, or learning how to play with the same bowing gesture as fifteen other colleagues in order to produce an homogeneous ensemble sound in a Brahms symphony ...

Moreover, this transition from the status of a student to that of an adult behaving *responsibly* is, symbolically speaking, an important moment. In all so-called primitive societies, this passage, corresponding to the end of an initiatory rite, takes the form of an extraordinarily formal ceremony. Ceremonies designed to 'incorporate' manual workers – stone-cutters or carpenters – into their corporations are centuries-old and solemnly mark this accession to mastery and professional responsibility¹.

How does a musician today accomplish this transition?

Let us first consider the distance, or gap, between education and the professional world. For a long time these worlds have been clearly distinct.

2. *Les chiens de faïence* – To eye each other suspiciously, or as the French would say, like 'china dogs'

In French, *se regarder en chien de faïence* – meaning 'to glare at one another' – is quite a colourful expression: you imagine two similar china dogs² facing each other without budging... To a certain extent this metaphor could also apply to the relationship between education and the world of work. Both present contrasting viewpoints.

¹ On this point, I regret not having reintroduced a graduation ceremony at the Paris Conservatoire after taking office eight years ago. At that time, this kind of event seemed utterly ludicrous to me. But in fact, I think schools need these symbolic moments, even if they are mocked or ridiculed...

² In Greece, the arrangement of these dogs used to have a specific meaning. Greek prostitutes would place them in front of their rooms according to a specific code: when the dogs were placed at an angle one to another, it meant the lady was busy; when they were facing each other, the lady was available (or the opposite...). I didn't learn this through personal experience, but from a brilliant friend of my parents, Eriphili Kartalis, the widow of a Greek minister...

In schools, the world of work is viewed as cold and inhuman, whereas the world of work finds fault with schools, criticizing them for providing inadequate training relative to the needs of the profession.

Fortunately, for a number of years now, the need to reduce the gap between school and professional life has become clear to a majority of managers in all fields of education and business. The most striking example is the shared willingness to ease the transition from higher education studies and scientific research to professional life (pharmaceutical industry or car manufacturing, etc.).

How can this transition be made as smoothly as possible for musicians? To reiterate Pierre Boulez's metaphor, when learning how to swim one does not move directly from the stool to deep waters: life-vests do exist, as do sloping bottoms...

In music, this transition can be gradual. Before returning to the current situation, however, I would like to muse a bit on ancient traditions: in Europe, tradition had it that apprentices should learn from a master, as do student cabinetmakers or glassmakers. It was by observing, and later by gradually carrying out various tasks, from the most subordinate³ to the most important ones, that students would gain knowledge and know-how. The French writer George Sand beautifully illustrates this in two of her novels, *The Master Pipers* and *Consuelo*, respectively relating the lives of an apprentice bell ringer and of the young Joseph Haydn. This type of career path still exists in oral music traditions, for example in the study of *sitar* in India.

In order to learn how to play in an orchestra, there is a custom that has always existed : music teachers often ask their best students to play as substitute musicians in their own orchestras. More recently, numerous internship opportunities have been implemented, enabling many music students to gain experience in professional orchestras.

In the field of education, the mentoring or tutorial system is also an old-fashioned way of training teachers, steadily increasing their responsibilities for young pupils.

These 'gentle slopes' constitute an outstanding progress and contribute greatly to ease the transition from student to professional life.

I would like now to move on to the orchestral audition, an essential moment in this transition, and a crucial meeting point between the worlds of education and work. Now that I have responsibilities 'on the professional side', I may be well tempted to criticise schools... which I will do, by listing what, in my opinion, seems to be lacking today in the preparation of candidates for these auditions in France.

3. The lack of preparation for orchestra auditions

It is no small paradox that a performing art such as music would take on such a harsh form of assessment, and such a competitive one at that. Music is neither a sport nor an exact science. Nevertheless, in the French system, competition can be seen everywhere, from a child's initial music studies to the professional musician's entry in the job market.

My own experience as a member of orchestra juries has led me to conclude that unfortunately far too many highly talented instrumentalists take this examination without any preparation whatsoever.

This is especially true of instrumentalists with a broad solo repertoire: violin players above all, and cellists, flute or clarinet players to a lesser extent. Those who are not fortunate enough to have many classic or romantic concertos in their repertoire, and thus the chance to pursue a career as a soloist, are less likely to have this problem: violists, double bass or bassoon players, etc.

³ Today, rumour has it that in the movie business, the role of an assistant consists mainly of making coffee...

Violin players applying to orchestra positions are the worst candidates. In spite of great technical progress since the post-war years, notably thanks to the Russian influence, our instrumentalists still enter these examinations with two disadvantages:

The first, alas, lies in the difficulty of mastering *spiccato* playing (or with a ‘bouncing bow’⁴). This light bowing gesture can be found in all classical works, especially in the orchestral repertoire, from the baroque period to the present day. It requires a great mastery of the right hand and arm; the movement that makes the stick bounce on the string can only be achieved through a great suppleness of the arm combined with precise control of the gesture. You can never cheat when playing *spiccato*: some violin players may give the public the illusion that they master this technique in concertos of major repertoire (Brahms, Sibelius, etc.) but they then proceed to fall apart when faced with two pages of the Finale of Schubert’s *Ninth Symphony* or Bizet’s *Symphony in C*.

The second technical difficulty results from a lack of preparation of virtuostic orchestral passages. The programme for an orchestral audition⁵ includes a fairly complete set of works; for example, for strings it includes movements of a Bach Partita and a classical concerto, as well as an important set of orchestral excerpts. These repertoire excerpts are generally short, and are known to present specific difficulties. For violin players, this type of test often includes fragments of symphonies by Beethoven, Schubert, Berlioz and Brahms, excerpts from Debussy’s *La Mer* (The Sea) and Ravel’s *Daphnis et Chloé*, bits of the Viennese School (Schönberg, Berg or Webern), and a smattering of Strauss’ *Don Juan*, etc.

Generally speaking, violin players fail these auditions due to insufficient preparation. There are a variety of reasons : some think that a brilliantly performed concerto (that the candidate has often rehearsed for years) will allow the jury to cast a blind eye on the poor performance of orchestral excerpts. Others, technically well-prepared, disregard the original context of the orchestral score: tempo, sound balance, dynamic, texture of the vibrato, style, etc. Very few candidates actually study the orchestral score and listen to different versions of the piece. For these instrumentalists, the analysis course should focus primarily on their own repertoire.

Furthermore, the psychological dimension is of course critical in any preparation for this kind of audition.

The first condition of success is simply to arrive with confidence and the conviction that one is going to succeed. This is easier said than done: having a sense of confidence depends on so many factors. The level of technical preparation is of course crucial. Instrumentalists who master perfectly the works featured in the programme are less likely to get flustered than those who arrive insufficiently prepared. Confidence and conviction constitute a state of mind for which one can prepare, even when one does not feel inherently confident. Between World War Two and the fall of the Berlin Wall, East-German athletes were keenly aware of this issue, and competing teams systematically included psychologists. Without overrating this psychological dimension, it is, nevertheless, important to properly prepare mentally for this kind of audition, if only by reflecting on what is at stake and one’s own wishes.

Moreover, it is also very important to perform one’s programme in public. Too often, it is only the very day of the audition that candidates perform their programme for the first time in front of a real audience – apart from their teachers or fellow students. This situation causes a great deal of unnecessary strain; if possible, it is essential to become accustomed to playing one’s programme in front of an audience. And playing for the woman or the man you love, for a close relative, an old amateur musician or one of your teachers gives the music multiple meanings, as if in so doing the musical work was enriched by the understanding and listening brought by each of these audiences.

⁴ See article ‘Bow’ in the Grove Dictionary of Music.

⁵ These programmes are very similar from one orchestra to another and from one country to another.

There are many recommended methods for dealing with stage fright which mix body work and meditation techniques. These include yoga, tai-shi, and various forms of meditation, etc. Some artists may need these and there is no reason to exclude them, provided they are monitored by real professionals, as opposed to charlatans. Extensive literature on issues related to stage fright exist.

Self-image is yet another aspect which is taken into account far too little by musicians. During the eight years I spent at the head of the Paris Conservatoire, I was very surprised by the little use made of the exceptional audio-visual equipment on offer. Only a few professors chose to include it in a significant way in their teaching. One of the reasons is doubtless due to the disagreeable feeling one gets seeing oneself on camera, and performing at that! The image reflected by the camera often constitutes a rude awakening, for in it we measure the gap between the inner sensation we have related to gesture and its impact on sound produced. The relationship to the text may appear more clearly, and the camera can show unintentional tempo changes, tuning, rhythm, timbre, dynamic, or form problems. It is true that a musician's sensibility might well be offended... The lesson includes self-criticism of physical attitudes: our appearance when we play (who is able to play without twitches?), the way we arrive in front of the camera, the way we behave after playing the last note, or the way we greet the public.

4. For a better integration of young musicians in orchestras

Schools are not the only institutions that need to bridge this gap: orchestras should also strive to ease the transition for young musicians.

Before setting about to play the first semiquaver in an orchestra section, orchestras should establish the habit of welcoming people in a friendly and symbolic way. This can be achieved through simple actions: introducing the new members to the entire artistic, administrative and technical staff of the orchestra and guiding them through the premises. The way an orchestra operates has now reached a considerable degree of complexity owing both to formalized rules in collective agreements as well as oral traditions.⁶ New recruits should be informed as to the various operational aspects of the orchestra: **pay for additional work**, private health insurance and other insurance policies, occupational medicine, holidays, expenses, bank loans for the purchase of a better instrument, the organization of chamber music rehearsals, to name but a few... In order to help musicians understand the system, the *Orchestre National d'Île de France* is currently drawing up a 'welcome booklet' which is turning out to be highly complex to write and finalise. I am confident that it will be finished by 2012!

In addition, it certainly would be valuable to inform musicians taking up a position within the orchestra of the outline and principles of programme planning.

Furthermore, it is important that heads of sections provide real technical and psychological support during the first programmes. These will vary from section to section. For example; heads of string sections can pair young musicians with experimented instrumentalists during their first sessions. It is also essential to enable young musicians to feel part of the orchestra community; usually this happens spontaneously. The involvement of newcomers in a series of concerts by the orchestra chamber ensemble is a good way of speeding up the process.

Finally, for the unfortunate candidates having failed the audition, and in particular for those who got to the finals, members of the jury should be ready to share advice and suggestions. Nothing is worse than not understanding the causes for one's failure or not receiving helpful comments and encouragement, all of which allow for reflection and progress. It is important that the jury formulate its remarks in a positive way, so that young musicians can learn without losing their confidence or having their morale shattered. Certain truths are hard to hear when one has just failed an audition : unfortunately some jury members have been known to be less than tactful in sharing comments.

⁶ Jean-Philippe Rameau's *Traité d'Harmonie* or Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* could almost be viewed as child's play compared to these collective agreements...

5. Inexorably optimistic...

I would like to temper this critical stance by an optimistic note: paradoxically, despite all the difficulties I have pointed out, we actually succeed in recruiting orchestra players who turn out to be outstandingly effective in their job shortly after their arrival. This proves that our schools do not work so badly after all, that orchestra auditions are not so defective, and the juries not too stupid...

Of course, it is in all of our best interests to reduce the gap between education and professional life. And in this respect it is simply a matter of common sense to make this entry into the professional world as gentle as possible by offering imaginative solutions and by being attentive to artists.

Our action is, however, limited. We must bear in mind that experience cannot spring up out of nowhere. In much the same way, wine and cheese cannot be artificially matured: when quality is there at the outset, we can be confident that things will sort themselves out over time.

Marc-Olivier Dupin, February 20th, 2007