

Piecing it Together

So often today music students feel they must score that one big job or they are a failure. Many people ask why I do so many different things. The simple truth is I grew up in Silver Bay, Minnesota, which, at the time, was a 'company town' involved in supplying iron ore to all the steel mills in the major cities on the Great Lakes. When the company went under due to the influx of foreign steel, the town went down. Most of the wonderful people in that town suddenly had no way to earn money to support themselves or their families. That event had a major impact on my life. I vowed never to have, as they say, "all my eggs in one basket". My entire life has revolved around numerous jobs both in and out of the music industry. There are some of us that were or will be fortunate enough to win a major job. However, most of us teach and play outside jobs. This not only supplements our income but, most important, enriches our lives. Players today don't realize that Arnold Jacobs played rodeos. He also played string bass for Marshall Field Style Shows and WGN TV when they had live orchestras on the air. Then there were all of his students, plus radio and TV commercials. As he told us repeatedly, the orchestra is the centerpiece but one needs to be as marketable as possible by knowing all styles and being able to excel at all of them.

Though I earned money playing every year since 1971, and even with a full-time orchestra job, it sometimes isn't enough income to cover family expenses, including college costs today, and saving for retirement. I also know many players that would rather 'piece it together' because it often is less of a grind than the week-in-week-out demands of a full-time, 52-week season. Especially these days as organizations struggle with ever-present economic issues, if your only job experiences a 20-30% hit. However, if you teach, gig, or have some type of business then the impact may be eased.

We can't sit and wait for the phone to ring. So what can we do? Start a chamber group, find some kind of business that is interesting (making mouthpieces, opening a store, building a better mute, making lamps out of old instruments). The sky is the limit. We need to keep our eyes and options open. There was a fantastic tuba player when I was at The Juilliard School who told me "I don't think orchestral playing is for me." He followed his heart and dreams. Today, you can see him on The Late Show with Stephen Colbert on live national TV five nights a week. I think you would agree he has met with great success.

Today, the premiere service bands are some of the best jobs in the United States. Great pay, often more than many orchestras, and benefits way beyond anything I have ever had. Don't kid yourself - the players in the bands are amazing! There are 17 (+/-) full-time orchestra tuba jobs in the U.S. Most are closed for 60-75 years by 2 or 3 players. The bands have 45 (+/-) positions just in Washington, D.C. and they turn over at a fairly good rate.

My final advice- be disciplined, work steadily every day. Learn to play as many genres of music as you can. Become a total musician, be a great team player. Keep your eyes and options open. Life is out there. Experience as many things as possible.

I wish you all the very best as you piece together your career journey.

David T. Fedderly teaches tuba at The Peabody Conservatory of the Johns Hopkins University, The University of Maryland, College Park, and formerly at The Juilliard School and DePaul University. He retired after 31 years as Principal Tuba in the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. He also performed with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, Boston Symphony Orchestra, and Philadelphia Orchestra. He cleaned bear cages to earn money to buy his first tuba. He also worked construction, replacing siding and windows, and painting during strikes. He owns Baltimore Brass Company, a retail music store and is part of Musician's Lip Service, a Baltimore-based trio that includes a plastic surgeon physical therapist and him that assists injured players. He teaches and gives master classes at colleges and universities around the country. He also clinics school bands and judges at performance festivals.