

THE *Savvy* MUSICIAN 2.0

Amplifying Impact, Income, & Inspiration



DAVID CUTLER

Advanced Praise for *The Savvy Musician 2.0*

“Whether you’re a music performer, educator, composer, administrator, or all of the above, this insightful resource is the ultimate guide to rocking the digital age. Learn what it takes to amp up your career game, earn a living, sharpen entrepreneurial chops, and make a profound difference!”

—**Brian Shepard**, CEO, Music Teachers National Association

“*The Savvy Musician 2.0* provides what no other book has managed to pull off: a comprehensive exploration of tools needed to build and sustain a career thoroughly integrated with entrepreneurial thinking. Cutler writes with wit, clarity, and deep knowledge, while never losing sight of the reason why all this matters: the art itself. If I could use the word ‘magisterial,’ I would!”

—**Jeffrey Nytch**, DMA, Composer; Author of *The Entrepreneurial Muse*

“In a world where musicians and music teachers must innovate to stay relevant, this book shares a treasure trove of strategic tips I fully endorse (and am inspired by)!”

—**Annie Ray**, High school teacher; winner, GRAMMY Music Educator Award

“A game-changer for any musician ready to break out of the traditional mold! Combining his deep knowledge of entrepreneurship with a passion for music, Cutler’s powerful guide teaches how to think like a savvy professional and thrive in today’s evolving marketplace.”

—**Aaron Dworkin**, Founder, The Sphinx Organization

“Musicians just want to make a living, please, from the art we love. Cutler prioritizes RELEVANCE as he critiques an educational system that tends to create rule followers. This book provides a reassuringly detailed, provocative map for the good hard work required to seize agency and thrive.”

—**Mary Ellen Poole**, Dean, College of Fine Arts, Carnegie Mellon University

If the “business” side of music has felt foreign or uncomfortable, *The Savvy Musician 2.0* is for you. Practical insights, field-tested advice, and thought-provoking stories of real musicians empower readers to re-examine hidden assumptions and take action—not just professionally, but in life outside music as well!

—**Noa Kageyama**, Creator, The Bulletproof Musician; Faculty, The Juilliard School

“It isn’t enough to play or sing well. David Cutler’s ‘how-to’ guide on becoming an entrepreneurial musician goes into such depth, consider him your personal business coach.”

—**Beth Morrison**, Co-founding Director of PROTOTYPE Festival (presenting contemporary, multi-disciplinary opera-theatre and music-theatre works)

“*The Savvy Musician 2.0* fills out my shelf of groundbreaking books by David Cutler. It is not only a must-read, but a must-library for all musicians interested in greater achievement and impact.”

—**Tayloe Harding**, President, National Association of Schools of Music

“Addressing the ins and outs, ups and downs, and pros and cons of the music business while offering numerous roadmaps to success, **this is the book you need!!!!** In fact, this is the book I needed to unlock several new ways of thinking.”

—**Wycliffe Gordon**, Trombonist, Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra

“The world deserves thriving artists and artists deserve to thrive. *Savvy 2.0* is not just a book—it’s your personal mentor offering a roadmap for sustaining purpose-driven careers.”

—**Joyce Griggs**, Saxophonist; Provost, Manhattan School of Music

“Dr. David Cutler is a highly respected, world-class thought leader in music entrepreneurship education. *The Savvy Musician 2.0* is a masterpiece of professional development for musicians at any career stage. David’s energy, joy, and relevant expertise leap off the pages. Comprehensive and powerful, it invites readers to think, dream, work hard, have fun, and make things happen with distinctiveness.”

—**Michael Millar**, Professional Development Coach

“Every musician is in business for themselves. More than just a resource, *The Savvy Musician 2.0* offers a planning guide for making it on your own terms.”

—**Tonya Butler**, Chair, Music Business/Management, Berklee College of Music

“This is a MUST READ! Lifting the facade of romanticism around being a musician, Cutler breaks things down into pieces that can be ingested and understood by working musicians and students alike.”

—**Jeff Coffin**, Saxophonist with Bela Fleck and The Dave Matthews Band

“Finally!! Encouragement, inspiration, and realistic advice for today’s musician with 0% fluff! David Cutler seems to have a well-prepared crystal ball, challenging and informing us as we progress in this fantastic, scary, fulfilling profession. We ALL need this book – right now!”

—**John Wittmann**, Associate Vice President, Yamaha Artist Relations Group

The Savvy Musician 2.0

Amplifying Impact, Income, and Inspiration

DAVID CUTLER

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Blueprint for Maximizing Income & Impact

The GAME of Innovation

Conquer Challenges. Level Up Your Team. Play to Win.

SuperNova

A Suzuki Tune Explosion

More information:

www.savvymusician.com

*This book is dedicated to the memory of my good friend Lance LaDuke,
one of the savviest musicians I've ever known.*

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This book is dedicated to the memory of my dear friend, euphonium player Lance Laduke. You may not know that *euphonium* is derived from the Latin term *euphonos*, which I believe translates loosely to mean “unemployable.” I used to poke fun at Lance by describing him as a euphoniumist with way more work than he could handle, defying any inkling of logic. Together, Lance and I toured, performed comedy songs, ran workshops, co-keynoted, wrote a book, spent hours imagining the pedagogy of innovation, and laughed way too much. I miss you every day.

Finally, I'd like to express gratitude to you for reading this. Wishing you a life in music that is deeply fulfilling and meaningful. And get paid for your art!

Introduction

A Savvy Question

If you're like me, the decision to seek a career in music was never under much contention. With your talents and passion, any other option feels “criminal,” robbing yourself and the world of incredible gifts. Perhaps you aspire to become a performer, educator, creator, engineer, administrator, business owner, manager, or some other type of music professional.

Despite many strengths, however, you are concerned. Thriving in the “real world” feels illusive. It's not due to laziness. Your work ethic is on overdrive. It's not necessary to be rich either. But there is equipment to buy and loans to pay, not to mention the rising cost of doing business. Someday you might want to raise a family. Or save for retirement. Or balance the books. Or eat lunch. Those things cost money!

What terrifies you most are the statistics. Competition for posted jobs is staggering. Some school districts cut music funding, while others are skeptical about its value. Many record labels have collapsed. Orchestras struggle—with several declaring bankruptcy. Much of the population could care less about the quality music you've spent your life perfecting. How is survival possible? Are you good enough? Was the pursuit of music an unmitigated miscalculation?

Now that I have you hyperventilating, take a breath. Yes, musical professions bring their fair share of challenges. But is this not the case with any line of work? Truth be told, now is an exciting time for our industry. Success is possible—there is a way! However, that won't happen automatically. Realizing ambitions requires flexible visioning, proactivity, and the wisdom to accept that success today requires significantly different strategies from even a few years ago.

Isn't it time YOU got savvy?

SAVVY GENETICS



Adjective: The ability to dream big, turn obstacles into opportunities, innovate solutions, plan strategically, and get things done.

When it comes to envisioning the future, people fall into two categories. The first type has one or two (or maybe zero) ideas about what is possible. If Plan A fails, all is lost. On the other side are those who view the world as an infinite, abundant playground. *The way things have always been* is but one of a hundred possibilities. Their challenge becomes determining which option(s) to pursue. Interestingly, almost nobody lives in the middle ground with—say—four or seven ideas. It seems folks either have the savvy gene or they don't.

This perspective is misleading. Though some musicians are naturally wired innovators, *savvy* is not merely a function of genetics. Rather, it describes a muscle that can be toned and strengthened. Becoming a heavyweight champ requires tools and tricks, courage and creativity, guidance and grit. Fortunately, anyone can develop this aptitude.

Music history classes celebrate savvy musicians. Think about it. Everyone we examine existed within a context yet had the foresight to challenge the status quo, break rules, and think differently. Many of the *masters* flourished despite (because of?) enormous obstacles. Yes, they were creative geniuses. But might there also be greatness within you? The answer is almost certainly “yes.” A more important question: How much do you want it? If your quest for success is matched with an iron-clad work ethic, this book will help you thrive.

ATTENTION: We Need Leaders!!!

The world has a shortage of creative artists committed to experimentation and evolution. Untold opportunities await discovery from artist-citizens who ramp up relevance, instill spirituality, and foster fresh business models. We need visionaries. We need innovation. We need YOU!!

ABOUT *THE SAVVY MUSICIAN 2.0*

The Savvy Musician 2.0 guides musicians to build careers, lead organizations, found ventures, strengthen viability, and make a difference. Industry challenges are highlighted but not dwelled upon. Instead, these pages burst with flexible, actionable success strategies that address a comprehensive collection of issues for professionals of all stripes.

Readers expecting an answer key spelling out exactly what to do will be disappointed. In today's world, where rules and realities are in constant flux, there are no unimpeachable formulas guaranteed to deliver. Instead, you will find provocative questions and powerhouse tools. Your challenge is to build something uniquely extraordinary, elevating personal aptitudes and relevant priorities. If an idea here feels unfamiliar or uncomfortable, I encourage you to consider its merits rather than immediately shutting down.

When my first book *The Savvy Musician* was released, it was a bit of a unicorn. At that time, only a handful of publications addressed practical career concerns for this audience. The term *music entrepreneur* was largely unfamiliar. University programs focused almost exclusively on artistic excellence, doing precious little to harvest professional success. Practitioners were often conditioned to feel guilty if admitting, even secretly, that they cared about financial stability. *It should be enough to chase the art you love!*

Fortunately, there has been progress. Significantly more resources today champion career strategies and entrepreneurial thinking. The current generation is motivated to build sustainable frameworks. Artists pursuing innovative approaches are more often revered than shunned.

When returning to this project, my plan was to craft an updated second edition. Yet, as I dug in, it became clear just how much the world had changed. Topping that list are extraordinary technological evolutions (for better and worse) including artificial intelligence, streaming services, social media omnipotence, deep fakes, virtual reality, cloud-based everything, and a population glued to smartphones. Scientific advances, an international pandemic, political polarization, and evolving views on diversity have reshaped society. For musicians, each rule-bending paradigm shift simultaneously threatens tradition and catalyzes fresh possibility.

It also occurred to me just how much I had grown. Serving as distinguished professor of music entrepreneurship at the University of South Carolina, and through workshops/keynotes around the globe, I have had the pleasure of engaging with literally thousands of burgeoning “creative geniuses.” These forums allowed me to experiment, share ideas, collect feedback, and propel businesses. Extensive reading and participation in organizations/events focused on issues as disparate as food insecurity, AI, health care innovation, whole-child education, globalization, Socratic discourse, and social justice further shaped my thinking.

Another development: I began running immersive problem-solving experiences. Often-diverse teams would progress through carefully architected processes to solve important problems related to the arts, business, education, government, and beyond. It took a while to figure out exactly what these experiences were. (Was it a retreat? A boot camp? A “non-ference”?) After arriving at the term *innovation GAME*, clarity emerged and a new methodology was born. Many gamified techniques my collaborators and I developed were shared in an illustrated book, *The GAME of Innovation: Conquer Challenges. Level Up Your Team. Play to Win.*

As I began reworking *The Savvy Musician*, it became evident this publication should evolve into a sequel rather than a revision—hence the title *The Savvy Musician 2.0*. While core pillars like purpose-driven visioning, opportunity creation, guerilla marketing, people skills, financial literacy, and innovative problem solving remain, a mountain of fresh strategies are introduced. Less than 10% of the original remains. Fourteen chapters morphed into 20. All *vignettes* were replaced, making room for a new set of lessons and artists. (Incidentally, readers with access to both books may reference twice as many case studies.)

That’s what savvy musicians do. We start with inherited circumstances/traditions and then tweak, reimagine, and amplify to create distinctive solutions that meet the moment.

Savvy Vignettes

More than 150 real-world stories about individuals and organizations are cited in gray boxes throughout this book. They represent a broad cross-section of instruments, genres (classical, jazz, popular, world, and beyond), organizational structures, geographic regions, and experiences. While I anticipate you’ll find direct similarities between some examples and your own background, the specifics are largely irrelevant. All lessons are transferable. *Savvy musicians become masters of the metaphor.*

I have intentionally steered clear of famous superstars. If Taylor Swift, Wynton Marsalis, or the Vienna Philharmonic produce something spectacular, it’s easy to dismiss the effort: “Of course they can. They have all the resources in the world!” But if somebody you’ve never heard of from rural Montana achieved a great thing, perhaps you can too.

Interviewing these artists has been truly inspirational. I encourage you to research them further, as all have interesting discoveries, contributions, and ideas beyond that which is included here. People who view the world as a place overflowing with potential seem to discover untapped opportunity at every turn.

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF THIS BOOK

Part I: Entrepreneurial Journey should initially be read in its entirety. Its twelve chapters examine issues like entrepreneurial mindset, defining success, product development, marketing, financial strategy, project management, and legacy. Regardless of professional aspirations, these lessons will prove invaluable. Don’t let the focus on “entrepreneurship” throw you. Such perspectives are paramount to folks in even the most traditional of roles and organizations. No individual or organization is immune from the need for savvy, innovative problem solving.

Part II: Art That Matters takes a deep dive into artistic expressions: live performance, audio recording, video. Beyond practical how-to guidance, it plants seeds for expanding relevance and demand. While not every music profile inherently intersects with all three mediums, keep an open mind. For example, even if video isn’t part of your current portfolio, perhaps it could (or should) be.

Part III: Nice Work If You Can Get It is pragmatic, exploring marketplace opportunities and career development. After unveiling tips that help secure employment, chapters address frameworks related to music teaching, performance,

composition, and the industry at large. Feel free to jump around, studying that which most closely correlates with your profile.

For those who are willing to do whatever it takes but need some help with the roadmap, reading *The Savvy Musician 2.0* may be one of the smartest moves you make. Whether you're a student, breaking onto the scene, or a seasoned professional, take control of your future. Embrace a holistic approach to your livelihood and art. Balance tradition with innovation. Insist upon relevance. Most importantly, get things done. *Become a savvy musician.*

Thank you for devoting your life energy to the noble cause of music. I hope you find *The Savvy Musician 2.0* to be a useful resource that proves pivotal time and again. And now, without further ado, let's get down to business . . .

PART I

ENTREPRENEURIAL JOURNEY

Regardless of musical specialty or goals, it is difficult to imagine a career profile today where entrepreneurial insights are anything less than paramount. This is true even for individuals and organizations pursuing the most traditional of paths. The great news is that such perspectives can be learned and augmented. Better yet, many of the same features are necessary for both artistic and professional success: attention to detail, big-picture visioning, creativity, analysis, critical thinking, collaboration, work ethic, patience.

Part I: Entrepreneurial Journey considers:

- What is an entrepreneurial mindset, and why should I care?
- In what ways is *my* art interesting?
- How can I build a viable business/career/organizational model?
- What will it take to make the money work?
- Which tools help effectively manage projects and time?
- How might I/we leave a meaningful legacy?

Chapter 1

The Path to Remarkable Success

How do you know if you've made it as a musician? When someone reads your resume, website, or obituary, how will they determine if your existence constitutes one of success? When considering a few lines from the bio of fictional character Hugh Kileylee, most will immediately concede his story is one of respectable achievement.

Hugh Kileylee is an international sensation. Stunning audiences with his dizzying technique and high-energy presentations, he has performed more than 3,000 concerts worldwide. His 150 recording credits have earned a host of prestigious awards.

WOW!!! This guy is hot! But bios tell only part of the tale. Consider the next paragraph of Hugh's story, one never included in his electronic press kit.

Due to demand for Kileylee's playing, he tours nonstop. Since he has spent precious few days with his three children, the oldest now refuses to acknowledge his existence. Two years ago, his wife left him for a restaurant employee who treats her extremely well. Most of Kileylee's friends have written him off, aside from the few who exploit his connections. Gradually, this musician's alcohol consumption has gotten out of control. Last year he was arrested for driving drunk and spent a week in jail.

Oh my, how depressing! What a sad, sad story.

It's easy to buy into the myth that there are absolute determinants of success. We convince ourselves that a clarinet prodigy who winds up as a general music teacher or stockbroker has fallen short of their potential, or that winning that special competition/getting that special job/making that special connection will put a stamp of approval on our lives. Many musicians worry obsessively about how they will be judged, constantly comparing personal accomplishments with that of peers and industry superstars.

In truth, many variables contribute to success, both as an artist and as a human being. Savvy musicians understand that *finding a lifestyle that works is more important than fulfilling traditional benchmarks of accomplishment*. The ideal solution for one person might be the worst scenario for someone else. So stop worrying about how the world views you and which accolades will be boast-worthy at your

25-year reunion. Instead, discover a path that complements your unique dreams, skills, and goals. In other words . . . think like an entrepreneur.

An Entrepreneurial Existence

Growing up, Andrea Fisher aspired to become an orchestral flute player. Chasing that dream, she attended Juilliard and practiced long hours. But after witnessing talented friends audition and get eliminated, she forged her own path. “I really like being the first to do something unique and fun.”

Fisher created buzz by selling CDs while performing on the roof of an ice cream truck. She became the first classical musician ever to perform live with multiple holograms of herself. In the video “Dance Macabre,” which amassed more than 2 million views, she plays flute (left hand), organ keyboard (right hand), and pedals (feet) in a glow-in-the-dark skeleton costume.

Fisher’s primary venture, Fluterscooter, sells instrument cases. Beginning small, it has since erupted, manufacturing accessories for flutes, clarinets, and guitars that often match marching band colors. One viral campaign invited clients to post photos with their Fluterscooter product plus a pet. Whoever posted the most “liked” image received a free instrument case. It turns out “fluters” love dogs, cats, horses, snakes, hedgehogs, frogs, even hermit crabs.

During the height of COVID-19, musicians stopped buying instrument merchandise. “I thought, what am I going to do? I can’t just sit around and not make money.” Pursuing a need of the moment, she pivoted and imported masks from China. In total, this venture moved more than a quarter million units! Ah, the entrepreneurial existence . . .

THINKING LIKE AN ENTREPRENEUR

WHY BE ENTREPRENEURIAL?

The word *entrepreneur* has many definitions. For some, it is a business term, strictly reserved for those who found and run enterprises. Throughout this book, however, the expression is used liberally. It describes anyone who creates opportunities, thinks outside the box, gets the “big picture,” and is unafraid to question conventional wisdom. Under this definition, entrepreneurial inclinations influence artistic, educational, financial, and personal decisions. *Entrepreneurship equals creativity*—it is as much an attitude as it is a business practice. Such a disposition can:

1. **Create freedom and gratification.** Entrepreneurs take control of their destiny, building frameworks that embrace “labors of love” and favorable conditions.

2. **Enhance financial gain.** Entrepreneurs amplify income, both personally and for their organizations.
3. **Stand out.** Entrepreneurs invent unique approaches, offering an edge over those who simply do the “normal thing.”
4. **Address job demands.** Aspects of even the most traditional career paths require entrepreneurial solutions (recruiting students, attracting audiences, raising money, etc.).
5. **Increase relevance.** Entrepreneurial approaches ensure quality musical experiences maintain an important voice in society.
6. **Leave a legacy.** Meaningful entrepreneurial action can reverberate for years to come.

As a result of their inventiveness, entrepreneurial professionals often enjoy exciting successes. Employing innovative solutions, they create demand, pack venues, attract media, grow consumers, and earn respectable livings. Savvy entrepreneurs are revered and rewarded.

Having a vision and bringing it to fruition are not the same thing. Much of life is out of our control, making some ambitions impossible regardless of preparation, diligence, or wishful thinking. But entrepreneurs are not simply blessed with the mystifying ability to concoct one perfect, magical revelation. On the contrary, they constantly cook up exotic recipes. Though not every plan succeeds, the baking continues until delicious discoveries emerge.

WHAT ABOUT EXCELLENCE?

The pursuit of excellence is a driving force for large swaths of the musical ecosystem. Competitions seek to identify the absolute best. “Blind” auditions behind a screen ensure that performance quality—and little else—impacts decision-making. Music educators employ powerful pedagogies that help students advance effectively and efficiently. In some communities, 3, 6, or even 10 hours of daily practice is commonplace.

There are now more great players and a higher overall level than ever, thanks partly to a proliferation of university programs, constantly improving learning methods, and online resources. This uncompromising value defines not only our industry at large but also the psyche of individuals. Many musicians become incredibly disciplined humans, expecting and accepting nothing less than high-quality output across the board.

We should be proud of this value. I am an unwavering advocate of excellence, with extremely high standards for my colleagues, students, and self. Recognize, however, that an obsessive focus here comes with risks when other critical values are neglected. Allow me to debunk several myths.

Myth #1: Excellence is enough

Many musicians mistakenly believe that excellence in art secures excellence in career. In reality, quality output is just one of many factors necessary for professional success. Other assets: vision, creativity, financial literacy, likeability, networking, technological fluency, time/life management.

But What If I Just Want a Job?

Suppose you aspire to win a top orchestra job. After landing this impressive position, the contract simply compels you to show up on time, be prepared, and play well. Literature is chosen by others, events are scheduled years in advance, administration is responsible for marketing. No entrepreneurship required!

This argument comes with shortfalls. What if things don't work out? Not every worthy candidate obtains this employment, and few orchestras pay well enough to constitute full-time wages. Even if everything comes to fruition, supplementary opportunities may be helpful to augment income, variety, and fulfillment.

Furthermore, *relinquishing responsibility for an organization's commercial success from its workers may be a flawed notion*. If orchestras are truly in dire straits, wouldn't they be well served by having members actively problem solve?

Imagine a hypothetical model where great playing was only the starting point. Audition finalists face an interview round: "How might we attract new audiences? What education initiatives interest you? Which additional skills do you bring?" Each new hire then becomes responsible for fulfilling at least one nonperformance role that helps the organization thrive. This adjustment favors a different breed of musician. By incentivizing outstanding performers to take more ownership in their employer's success, an entrepreneurial structure might revolutionize even the orchestral world!

Myth #2: Excellence (alone) is marketable

Hopefully, everything you share or sell (be it a performance, recording session, music lesson, instrument, yourself as a job candidate, etc.) is high quality. But from a purely marketing standpoint, is the promise of excellence enough?

Many presenters allege to showcase "the planet's finest musicians!" Similarly, music schools promote their *world-class faculty*. Claims may well be true. The challenge is that most companies, products, and services across sectors assert excellence. Whether they are excellent is debatable; some are certainly better than others. (Can you imagine a business conceding, "Our products are—honestly—around the 65th percentile. But check us out anyway. We smell amazing!") As a result, merit-based declarations often get drowned out. Of course you say you're good. That's expected. What else do you have?

There is an element of subjectivity when defining *excellence*. Some attendees may be blown away by a particular performance, while questionable intonation and

rhythmic sloppiness inflict horror upon others. Additionally, this term means different things to different people. What makes a great show? Zero mistakes? Varied repertoire? Other-worldly virtuosity? Players who smile? Ninety minutes instead of two hours? A famous soloist with great hair? If your messaging centers on excellence, be sure to define what that means.

Furthermore, audiences may not seek greater excellence. Some artists at the top of their game struggle to attract robust followings warranted by their achievement. If a major opera company got 10% better, would they sell even one more ticket? Perhaps not. How about 10% worse? The truth: Few devoted patrons would flee. The reason many arts entities fail to attract sufficient customers isn't because they aren't GOOD enough. *It's because they're not RELEVANT enough.* Or at least, that is the perception. When shaping your vision, make excellence the floor rather than the ceiling. Outstanding performance, plus . . .¹

Marketing, a topic we will examine in depth, is largely about storytelling. Appealing to a potential audience member, student, customer, employer, donor, or grant agency will almost certainly require more than claiming you're good. What message will you send? (Oh, and once you've garnered attention, blow them away with top-notch art!)

Myth #3: Perfectionism is desirable

For many committed musicians, excellence is a gateway drug. The goal morphs into perfection. Flawless execution. Zero errors. While this insistence drives improvement, it also means that failure for mere mortals is guaranteed, every time.

Perfectionism is a brutal disease. It convinces our ego to tie self-esteem to artistic achievement. Worse yet, we don't just judge ourselves on overall ability but rather the most recent iteration. Riding a constant, emotional roller coaster, we beat ourselves up mercilessly when any performance feels subpar. Ironically, nerves are often paralyzed during moments when results matter most (e.g., the audition you desperately want to win).

Be careful not to conflate technical precision with overall worth as a human being.

Myth #4: Excellence and innovation are opposing forces

In a world of exponential change, innovation is essential. Businesses that fail to evolve are buried by those embracing the new rules of today and tomorrow. This brutal reality has reshaped essentially every industry: bookstores, newspapers, travel agencies, encyclopedias, the postal service, and essentially all music sectors. Expect developments with AI to turbocharge this phenomenon.

Unfortunately, too many contemporary musicians fail to view themselves as inspired changemakers. Why? Here's one possibility. We just addressed perfectionism. The archnemesis of *perfect* is a mistake. To minimize that probability, perfectionists (and even many "excellentists") shy away from the bold and

¹ This is the name and theme of Chapter 13.

uncommon. Regardless of potential reward, such risk taking feels too perilous. Status Quo and Safe Choices are the only characters permitted. It's not that they're inherently closed minded. They just don't want to risk making a mistake.

Our education system shapes the priorities of young people. Too often, scant time is devoted to creative problem solving and unapologetic exploration. When taught that success means scoring well on standardized tests, there is a danger of transforming students into obedient rule followers with the sole objective of identifying the singular "correct" answer. Similarly, music training focused disproportionately on technique and replication may discourage curiosity and experimentation. When that happens, not only aren't students being encouraged to innovate. They are taught to NOT innovate.

Are excellence and innovation inherently incompatible? On the contrary, music provides a spectacular playground for celebrating both. But that won't happen automatically. Attention to both sides of the equation is paramount. For example:

1. Music teachers can balance prescribed solutions and technical excellence with creative, personalized decision-making.
2. Virtuoso performers can radically reimagine repertoire or event design.
3. Arts organizations can showcase quality art through unique business models and unprecedented contexts.

Poorly executed innovation is every bit as problematic as obsolete excellence. Strive for artistic achievement AND relevant, entrepreneurial positioning. One without the other will not do. Savvy musicians achieve a balance.

Excellence versus Entrepreneurship

As an aspiring pianist, Susan Zhang was conflicted. On one hand, she believed success required the "traditional path" of winning prestigious competitions that reward excellence and lead to management. At the same time, she was entrepreneurially curious. "Becoming an entrepreneur made me double down on my love for music. To communicate authentically with donors, presenters, and audiences, I had to clarify why I play piano and the value of my art."

After years of planning, Zhang and her partner unveiled The Concert Truck, a modified box truck with stage, lighting, and electric grand piano. This traveling music venue brought concerts to nontraditional spaces: parks, schools, town squares, homeless recovery centers, under a Boeing 747, anywhere a vehicle might be parked. While The Concert Truck generated excitement from day 1, her career took off during COVID-19.² Because socially distanced outdoor performance became the only safe way to share music, demand exploded.

² I have included stories around COVID-19 in the first two vignettes to demonstrate how even an international crisis impacting the entire music industry opened new doors for savvy musicians.