

Entrepreneurship for Guitarists

By Matthew Dunne

As difficult as classical guitar is to perform, developing a career as a classical guitarist can be even more of a challenge. And yet, despite a shrinking higher education job market and an unstable music/entertainment industry, there are clear opportunities for those guitarists who are willing and able to build their own careers in ways that exploit their strengths. I hope that this article can help guitarists better understand how these opportunities are best utilized, as well as offer some insight into personal characteristics that correlate with successful music entrepreneurship.

Almost every professional musician of our day is an entrepreneur of sorts. Even university guitar teachers, like myself, have often spent much of their careers in developing performances, private teaching studios, and other projects to both supplement their income and, equally importantly, make for a more satisfying and enjoyable life in music. For many professional guitarists and teachers, developing and maintaining their own career is a primary professional activity. This is unlikely to change, and should be embraced rather than avoided. Very few classical guitarists started playing with a clear understanding of the reality of career building, or see their involvement with guitar primarily as a means to a career. And yet, building a successful career in music is often the only way to sustain full time involvement with the guitar over a lifetime.

So, how does one build a career? It's straightforward enough to find high quality music programs with excellent guitar instructors, and with some hard work, develop good performing skills, and graduate with a degree in classical guitar. What happens next? More school? While graduate school in guitar can be a very positive musical and personal experience, continued music training alone probably won't ensure that graduates will have a sustainable career. And even though a graduate degree in music is a prerequisite for any realistic chance at a career in college teaching, it is certainly no guarantee of success. There are far fewer full time, tenure track positions in music higher ed than would constitute a thriving job market. I'm afraid this is very unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.

Interestingly, several leading music programs are beginning to address this issue with career development instruction and resources. It's a welcome sign that schools offering graduate degrees in music are beginning to see the value in helping their graduates forge careers in music outside the higher education job market. However, my experience is that most students will likely need much more in depth mentoring and practical experience-based training to have a significant impact on their ability to flourish in entrepreneurial careers. This is because successful entrepreneurs typically think about themselves, their skills, and the surrounding world a bit differently than do many college guitar students. (This observation is based on a

few decades of college teaching experience!) *The secret in helping aspiring professional guitarists to obtain the tools they need to have a successful career is to help them get into the "entrepreneurial mindset" and as such, view their lives differently than they often do as students.* They need to understand some of the fundamental behavioral and motivational forces that drive musicians as well as consumers of musical services, and how to apply them in settings that are relevant to classical guitarists. It is my hope that this article will provide readers with a small 'taste' of this mindset. Off we go!

Part 1: Get to know yourself, present and future

Many people (students are people!) are a bit reluctant to engage in true self-examination. Unfortunately, it's important to do a bit of this in order to establish a good plan for a music career. I often ask students seeking career advice to tell me what is most important to them in life. (They don't always enjoy these little talks....) Another question I ask them is "Why are you a guitarist?" Students are sometimes puzzled that I would ask this question, i.e. "isn't it obvious, we like it", but what I'm actually asking about is "What is the value of classical guitar, to you?" *When students attempt to articulate the value of music and what it means to them, they are beginning the process of understanding what they might be able to offer to others in a professional music career.* This is a crucial first step.

Understanding our own motivations for choosing classical guitar as a life-long pursuit is not a simple process. Many of us were initially inspired by particularly beautiful classical guitar performances or recordings. However, these singular experiences cannot sustain years of hard work and sacrifice. There must be some ongoing or periodic experiences that fuel the dedication necessary to achieve professional level skills in music. Identifying those experiences is quite important in managing a musician's life. A simple, but important truth about success in music is that one must enjoy the daily life of being a musician, including the repetitive tasks involved, to sustain a career. This includes managing the aspects of professional life that are not particularly attractive. Understanding the specific areas of professional music that we are naturally drawn to and those that we instinctively avoid, and how this affects our professional behavior, is valuable self-knowledge that helps with managing one's own career.

As I mentioned earlier, it's difficult for many guitar students to prioritize what parts of life are most important to them for the future. This involves identifying how important to them are things like family, location, standard of living, finance, etc. These are personal issues, but I always ask my students to consider them as they make their way through a college degree program. Each of these issues can have a profound effect on the nature of our lives, and must be considered as one embarks on a professional career, especially one that requires the focus and creativity of a successful entrepreneur. Developing a clear and detailed vision for one's own life in music is crucial to success as an entrepreneur, and self-knowledge is an important part of that vision.

Part 2: Make sense of classical guitar as a profession

Earlier in this article I referred to an "entrepreneurial mindset." I suppose some readers are wondering if I intend to define this term! An *entrepreneur* is traditionally defined as "a person who organizes and operates a business and assumes financial risk to do so." I don't particularly like that definition; it leaves out essential aspects of successful entrepreneurship and it doesn't describe music entrepreneurship very well. A music entrepreneur would be better described as "a person who builds and maintains a career by providing a variety of musical services to people." There is some common ground between musicians and other kinds of entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs typically create products (services are products) and create markets. The key word here is *create*; music entrepreneurs must create their own specific 'products' and, just as importantly, must create their own markets. The "entrepreneurial mindset" that I referred to is precisely this creativity; not musical creativity as in a beautiful interpretation or composition, but creativity in developing ways to share music with others, and in establishing tangible, revenue-generating value in their products.

Many musicians don't like to refer to their musical skills as products. In fact, who among us has not had a bit of contempt for musicians we consider to have "sold out", sacrificing musical substance for commercial appeal. There's more than a little irony in this; businesses that "sell out" are considered successful, while musicians that "sell out" are artistic failures. Complicating the metaphor is that musicians usually like the idea of "selling out" a performance venue, but don't like the idea of being viewed as "selling out!"

Clearly, in many musicians' minds, there is a conflict between "art" and "commerce" in music. *This conflict can lead to a devastating attitude for anyone trying to build a career as a music entrepreneur.* Even the terms "market" and "product", absolutely central to the idea of entrepreneurship in general, can be distasteful to many musicians. This is a problem in teaching music entrepreneurship, because it demonstrates musicians' common tendency to construct a conceptual or psychological impasse between creative thought in music and creative thought in career building, attaching a negative connotation to the latter. Negativity is generally very bad for creativity.

Maybe if we define the terms "market" and "product" in a way that is useful for the music entrepreneur, they'll be a bit more palatable. Let's start with "product." Fundamentally, a product is something that people want enough to purchase. It does not have to be a "thing"; it can be an experience (like a vacation) or a service (like a massage) or an artistic creation (like music on a non-physical format). Anything with tangible value can be called a product. Because excellent musical skills have

tangible value, most guitarists already have the 'product.' They simply need to clearly define what it is and how others might want to share in it.

A "market" is simply a group of individuals (or sometimes a business) that purchases products. Fundamentally, for our purposes, "market" means "people". In particular, it means people that are interested (or could be) in what we musicians have to offer. This is a much nicer image of "markets" than stock charts or pie charts.

Entrepreneurs go to great lengths to clearly understand, define, and communicate the value of their products. In fact, their value is often completely intertwined with their creation. Because music's value is complex to understand and quantify, musicians often have a more difficult time articulating the value of their products. However, it is a fact that music is a multi-billion dollar global industry, and music is a central part of life in practically every culture on earth, and has been for centuries. So it clearly has value. Another difficulty in quantifying the value of a particular musical product is the fact that music is consumed through a wide variety of mechanisms. Technology constantly changes the way music is bought (or stolen) and sold (or given away). Despite the rapidly changing technological landscape, music is a constant element in most peoples' lives. Music entrepreneurs must examine their own 'products' to get specific ideas of how people can benefit from them.

As a side bar, developing an appreciation for the value of one's own musical products absolutely involves developing a respect for the value of other musicians' products. I am really disappointed when students bring illegally copied music to their lessons. I know from personal experience how difficult and time consuming it is to compose music for classical guitar. *Copying and distributing this music is theft, and even worse, it's theft from our peers and colleagues.* Something every teacher who reads this article can do to help our art is to insist that students understand and respect music copyrights. Students usually don't understand the nature of intellectual property, and to me this is a serious issue. Music entrepreneurs often survive on the value of their ideas and creations. Shouldn't that be respected?

Entrepreneurs spend a lot of energy in trying to understand markets, identifying potential markets for their products, and especially in investigating what specific markets are seeking in ways that are relevant to their products. For music entrepreneurs, this means trying to understand people's interests in music, and identifying groups of people who are most likely to have an interest in classical guitar. *Music entrepreneurs must develop a clear vision of why and how people use music in their lives, and what are the essential qualities of music that they seek.* Remember, for music entrepreneurs, "market" means "people", so instead of thinking about understanding markets and (boring) marketing, consider it as a quest to understanding people and their (anything but boring) behavior. It's more fun that way.

When a "product" meets a "market", what happens? Is it like the opening scene in a romantic comedy for business nerds? In a way it is. If everything goes well, the result is a "transaction." The point I want to make about transactions is that the best definition of a successful transaction is one in which both parties benefit, and even more importantly *feel like they benefit*, from the transaction. Transactions are much more than a simple exchange of currency for a product or service. Transactions are really "micro-relationships" in the sense that a transaction is a shared experience. It's important that music entrepreneurs make efforts to provide their clients with transactions that are positive experiences for both parties. This might seem self-evident, but it implies that the entrepreneur will actively seek to understand the transaction from the other person's (or people) perspective. This returns to the theme of understanding what the value of music is to those who purchase music experiences.

There is one more business related term central to music entrepreneurship that I need to introduce, and that's "vertical integration." This term describes a business as providing several (or all) of the various necessities for the creation and delivery of its products to the end users, or customers. An example of vertical integration in music might be a jazz bandleader that owns a jazz club. Another might be a composer that owns a small publishing company. The reason this is relevant to guitarist-entrepreneurs is because it's very likely that they will need to have a high degree of vertical integration in their professional lives. Concert artists and gigging guitarists will almost always have to book their own performances, provide publicity materials, develop an audience, provide and sell merchandise, etc. Technology can be helpful with this, and I urge all of my guitar students to study website design, basic audio and video recording techniques, desktop publishing, and online music distribution; any technology that allows musicians to better communicate with the rest of the world.

Part 3: Communicating with the rest of the world

I developed a course for the music marketing program at the University of Texas at San Antonio called *Entrepreneurship in Music*. While there are many projects, ideas, and concepts presented in this course, a primary theme throughout the entire semester is about developing communication skills. The way we communicate with those around us in many ways defines us as people, and is absolutely crucial to our success as music entrepreneurs. Written communication is vitally important, and can take many different forms depending on the intended recipients and what effect on them is desired. Verbal communication is also extremely important; in fact, despite ever-changing virtual environments, there is something unique about personal, verbal communication. We tend to establish much deeper relationships with people with whom we communicate in person. This is something to consider when pondering the value of live music. More on that later....

Communication with others is so important to music entrepreneurs because their success depends almost entirely on the relationships that they form within their

professional lives. These include relationships with audiences, students, potential supporters, peers, mentors, business partners, collaborators; anyone that musicians encounter in the context of music. If I were to reduce the essence of success in music entrepreneurship to a bumper-sticker, it would be: *Music is about sharing with others*. If you are not interested in connecting with other people through music, you probably will not have much success as a music entrepreneur, regardless of your musical skill.

Written communication is one of the most important skills a music entrepreneur can develop, and unfortunately, many college music students are not effective communicators in writing. There are many complicated reasons for this that have to do with the nature of our educational system, technological changes in our lifestyles, and other factors. It doesn't really matter; what is important is that aspiring music entrepreneurs learn how to write effectively. Similar to music learning, there are foundational 'technical' skills like grammar and vocabulary, and stylistic skills that allow writers to communicate with their readers in a meaningful way. Appropriate writing style is highly dependent on the intended recipient. As an example, the written style of an opera singer's biography would be quite different than that of a country or pop singer. A grant application would likely be written in a very different style than an advertisement for a teaching studio focused on children.

Although an in-depth study of writing is a big undertaking, one very useful strategy in developing effective writing skills is to read, and read a lot; specifically, find good examples of writing style and try to dissect them for their effectiveness. In the entrepreneurship course I mentioned earlier, we spend a lot of time reading and critiquing bios, advertisements, program notes, sample grant applications, professional letters, even emails. All written communication makes statements to the recipients on several levels, some quite subtle, and reveals much about the writer. The more awareness music entrepreneurs have about these various levels of communication contained within writing, the better equipped they are to send the message and get the response they want from their writing.

One key to effective communication is a basic understanding of the person (or people) you are trying to communicate with. By "basic understanding" I mean an awareness of and appreciation for how someone perceives your communication. This is not an easy skill to learn, and all of us have no doubt experienced the displeasure of a spectacular miscommunication from time to time. But simply making a sincere and sustained effort to become more aware of how your communication is likely perceived can pay big dividends in your ability to connect with others, especially in written communication.

The types of professional relationships we build as music entrepreneurs are just as varied as the types of communication we employ, and equally important in our professional development. What constitutes a "professional" relationship? Basically, anyone that a music entrepreneur interacts with in music should be considered a professional relationship. This includes peers, students, mentors, audience

members, media contacts, competitors, and others. Since the specific nature of professional relationships varies so much, so does the appropriate style of interaction. Some music entrepreneurs are gifted at personal and social interaction with professional relationships, and others have to work hard at it. In all cases, sincerity, integrity, and a positive nature are highly regarded personal attributes in professional settings.

Another (somewhat bothersome) question I frequently ask my students as they are preparing to graduate is, "Who is most likely to help you throughout your career?" I am surprised that many of them don't realize that it's their peers that will most likely help them to build careers as entrepreneurs, not their teachers. (This is true is even with teachers like myself that make every effort to help their students get started in their careers) In professional music, our peers are often our best resource, and these relationships are often built in school. In fact, one benefit of attending a college music program is gaining experience at building professional relationships with peers, and learning to view them as allies and resources, not so much as competitors. I am always gratified by observing the ways in which my students help each other as they navigate the early stages of their careers.

A natural extension of the importance of professional relationships is the idea of building music communities as a tool in entrepreneurship. This idea is hardly unique to music, but it is especially crucial to success as a music entrepreneur. *Music is a social activity, and most people have a deeply ingrained need for social activities.* The study of classical guitar can be a somewhat solitary pursuit, and this can lead some guitarists to underestimate the importance of community-based activities in attracting people to the guitar, either as participants or audience members. (Quick thinking readers might want to point out to me that audience members *are* participants, and I would applaud (no pun intended) that observation.) Again, the bumper sticker: *Music is about sharing with others.* Music entrepreneurs that create active communities around their musical interests will usually experience success; those that do not, will not.

Part 4: This is all very interesting, but what do I actually do?

Finally, I would like to share a few observations about typical career paths for guitarists-as-entrepreneurs. Virtually all professional classical guitarists engage in multiple streams of professional activity. These usually include teaching, performing, composing and arranging, and organizing guitar-related events.

1. Teaching

Probably the most common professional activity for guitarist-entrepreneurs is teaching. This is because many people want to learn how to play the guitar, and the best way to achieve that is usually by studying with a good teacher. In other words, there's a good existing market for guitar lessons, particularly among children.

Unfortunately, most students don't learn to play as well as they initially hoped to. Thousands of young people take up classical guitar every year, but only a very low number of them ever get to perform a concert. There are lots of reasons for this, but I believe there is tremendous room for improvement in teaching guitar, especially to young people. I have personally seen great improvement throughout my lifetime.

It's well beyond the scope of this article to discuss what constitutes "good teaching". However, *from an entrepreneurial point of view, successful teachers will understand what type of experience their students are seeking, and provide them, and their families, with this experience.* This does not mean allowing students to do whatever they want in lessons. It means considering the deeper motivations people have for engaging in music lessons, and teaching in a way that addresses those motivations. Successful teachers will create communities and provide their students with opportunities to share their music experience with others. They will instill in their students the confidence they need to share music, and help them to experience the type of personal satisfaction that the teachers themselves get from the guitar. They will periodically seek feedback from their students and their families, and provide a good mechanism for this feedback.

2. Performing

Practically all classical guitarists want to perform professionally. Creating opportunities for this is a major career activity. The complexity of music performance from psychological, musical, and personal perspectives could easily fill a very large book! For this article, I just have a few observations. One is that performers should try to understand what audiences are seeking in attending. What do they want? (I'm not suggesting taking requests...) Most audiences are seeking some sort of connection and/or communication between themselves and the performer. This is true for all music genres, although the settings can be radically different. A related observation is that guitarist-entrepreneurs should seek to perform in a variety of environments and specifically perform for audiences that are unfamiliar with classical guitar. This is a real learning experience for most guitarists who have spent their school years performing primarily for their peers. I'm often struck by the different ways people perceive the same music. Rather than devaluing the perceptions of audiences that are not our peers, successful performers will learn to connect with audiences in ways that include the differing perceptions of diverse audiences.

Consider the unique value of live music performance; it is the only type of music performance that transcends technological obsolescence. This is good news for classical guitarists, because the character of our instrument lends itself to the intimacy of small venues and thus, good personal connection between audience and performer. Successful guitarist-entrepreneurs will take advantage of this. Live music performance is social in nature, and as the value of recorded music drops precipitously due to instant availability and transportability, hopefully the inherent uniqueness of live music performance will increase in value. Guitarist-

entrepreneurs should do everything they can to encourage and educate others about the value of live music as a social necessity.

3. Organizing guitar events

A time-honored method of building a client base in many entrepreneurial activities is organizing events that introduce new people to the activity and provide a vehicle for professional collaboration and networking. This is nothing new in the guitar world, where small festivals, symposiums, and concert series thrive. I strongly encourage all potential music-entrepreneurs to try their hand at organizing such events. There is a complex skill set associated with doing this on a large, international level, but starting with local and regional events is not too difficult. Some of the most satisfying projects I have embarked on included bringing people together for major guitar festivals here in San Antonio. There are excellent resources for individuals interested in organizing festivals and concert series, but the easiest place to start is by attending several of the kind of events one is interested in creating. Involving peers who have some experience, maybe by inviting them to participate, is a good strategy. Collaborating with existing organizations in the community is also a good strategy, as these organizations often have access to the most valuable element of any successful festival or series; an audience! The important element is the creation of an active community by demonstrating the specific emotional and social value of sharing music. In this sense, organizing these events can draw together many of the essential skills of the music entrepreneur, and provide an opportunity to develop those skills in an enjoyable and effective way.

About the author:

Matthew Dunne is an award winning guitarist, composer, and educator. His *Twenty Miniatures* were described in *Classical Guitar*: “without exception all are extremely well written by a highly skilled composer...some of the best contemporary solo guitar pieces I’ve come across...” Several of his works have been recorded and performed frequently by leading guitarists and ensembles, including the LAGQ, Cavatina Duo, and William Kanengiser. He is an Associate Professor of Music at the University of Texas at San Antonio, where several of his students are enjoying successful careers in professional music. He has recorded four compact discs, and recently released his first film score, for the independent film *Upon the Awful Tree*. In 2014, he founded an innovative week-long guitarist/composer workshop taking place every summer in the beautiful town of Keene Valley, NY, near Lake Placid in the heart of the Adirondack mountains.

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