

# Perception of Current and Former Students towards Attended Music Programs

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**Abstract**— The job market for musicians has always been competitive. This study aims to provide a better understanding of the perspectives of music students, and retrospective perception from graduates towards their training in music schools. The vast majority of participants reported that they are happy with their current jobs. More than half of the respondents ranked music schools as very successful in preparing them for the job market. Majority of the respondents believe that music schools should include more job-preparation courses in their offerings to prepare students for the always competitive music job market. More practical curriculum is advocated by some respondents.

**Index Terms**—*Career Preparation for Music Students, Music Degree Training, Music Graduates, Perspectives of Musicians.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In today's challenging economy, balancing the building of a practical career with one's artistic passion is not an easy task. The recent orchestral musician strikes and lockouts are evidence of financial turmoil in the industry. Many musicians are taught to focus on crafting their musical skills during applied lessons throughout undergraduate and graduate musical studies. When students enter music programs, they do not necessarily have to know their career prospects (except for music education majors); rather, students have to possess certain level of artistic skills and musicianship. This no doubt helps cultivate music students as a skillful performer. However, it is also possible for students to be completely isolated from the realities outside school during their education, as there are always lots of repertoire and other music subjects to learn in school.

In 2010-2011, more than 54,000 students enrolled or graduated from U.S. music schools (which are accredited with the National Association of Schools of Music); 32,994 students enrolled in the bachelor degree programs, 14,450 students enrolled in Master's

programs, and 6,254 students enrolled in doctoral music programs [1]. It may seem that the number of graduates with bachelor and post graduate degrees in music is relatively small compared to other disciplines. However, it is still an extremely competitive job market for music job seekers, especially in academia. Keyboard area, one of the most enrolled music disciplines, can help illustrate the competitiveness in the job market.

In 2010-2011, there were approximately forty-eight job postings in higher education for piano, organ, and related keyboard disciplines -such as collaborative piano and piano pedagogy [2], [3]. There were more than two thousand pianists studying in graduate piano programs accredited with NASM annually [4]. Students from non-accredited music schools (such as the Juilliard School, Manhattan School of Music, and Rice University) were not included in this figure. Also, this figure did not take into account graduates from previous years who are still actively seeking employment. Thus, the probability for a graduate piano student of a given year to obtain a faculty position in a keyboard area is less than 2.4 percent.

Unlike other disciplines such as accounting, engineering, and medicine, the majority of musicians do not share the same prospect of financial security when they graduate from music schools. The financial insecurity of musicians is not a new phenomenon. Musicians from 18th century England during the Industrial Revolution, for example, faced significant financial insecurity even amid the rise of the middle-class for other professionals [5]. Many musicians hold multiple jobs or gigs during and after their training in school to make ends meet, and many music graduates enter a non-music career as well. According to Nagel's study, the Juilliard School once conducted a survey of their alumni inquiring about their primary, secondary, and third occupations, which illustrates the common acknowledgement of musicians having multiple occupations [6]. A research project by Dobson shows that people who choose music as a profession enjoy the

'non-nine-to-five' nature of their jobs, as well as their flexibility and autonomy [7]. This flexibility and autonomy can have adverse effects as shown through the study, where musicians must also take on the burden of financial instability among other things. Nagel also finds that, compared to non-musicians, musicians tend to ignore the dilemma of job satisfaction and compensation in relation to years of training, due to the fact that they prioritize their love of musical creation. This study aims to provide a better understanding of the perspectives of music students, and retrospective perception from graduates towards training in music schools. It also aims as a pilot study for a more detailed research in compensation and employment of music graduates.

## II. METHOD

Participants (N=208) were recruited through electronic messages. The researcher sent out an email message to music colleagues across the States initially, and asked them to forward the email to their acquaintances to consider participation for the study. In addition, one message was posted via a music-related group on Facebook to expand the recruitment of participants beyond the personal network of the researcher. Eligible participants are over the age of 18, and have studied music in the United States.

The study was designed to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. An online questionnaire was given to participants for the study. No identifiable information was collected; all participation was anonymous. Study approval was acquired from the Institutional Review Board at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. A written consent form was obtained digitally from each participant prior to the beginning of the study. Participation to this study was voluntary, and participants were free to withdraw at any time. Written documentation of consent was waived to protect the confidentiality of participants.

## III. RESULTS

185 participants satisfied the eligibility for the study. Of the 185 participants, 44% were male and 56% were female. 97 participants (52%) were age 30 and above, 69 participants (37%) surveyed were aged 23-29, and 19 respondents (10%) were aged 18-22. Education levels of participants include high school (6 participants, 3%), undergraduate (11 participants, 6%), bachelor's degree (16 participants, 9%), master's student (33 participants, 18%), master's degree (54 participants, 29%), doctoral

student (21 participants, 11%), doctoral degree (37 participants, 20%) and others (7 participants, 4%) which include associate degree, performer's certificate and artist diploma obtained after master degree studies. 165 respondents (91%) attended undergraduate music program in the States, and 139 (77%) respondents attended graduate music program in the States.

One participant did not indicate the primary instrument that he or she received training in undergraduate or graduate setting. Of the 184 respondents, 101 (55%) were trained in piano, 34 (18%) in voice, 31 (17%) in strings, 26 (14%) in brass, 17 (9%) in woodwind, and 8 (4%) in percussion. Participants were asked to indicate all sources of income. Responses include K-12 music teachers, private music teaching, faculty or staff at a university, part-time or full-time performers, other music-related jobs, and non-music related jobs. Two most commonly cited sources of income were private music teaching (50%) and being part or full-time performer (43%).

The majority of the participants (165 responses, 91%) reported to be happy with the jobs that they currently hold. 104 respondents stated that the music school has prepared them for work (related to their music major) after graduation. Participants were asked to rate the successfulness of music school for preparation in the job market in general; 114 respondents (61%) rated half successful (56 respondents) or very successful (58 respondents), 14 participants (8%) rated not successful, and 57 participants (31%) had no opinion in this matter.

68 participants (37%) reported that the job hunting experience was harder than they anticipated when they were a music student. 66 participants (36%) did not think it was harder than they anticipated, and 51 participants (28%) had expressed no opinion on this matter. Of those 66 participants who did not believe the job hunting experience was harder than anticipated when they were in school, 41(61%) had discussions with someone about the realities of post-graduate life or career path. Of those 68 participants who believed the job hunting experience was harder than expected when they were in school, 37 (54%) had discussions with someone about the realities of post-graduate life.

125 participants (68%) believed that music schools should include more job-preparation curriculum to prepare the students for the competitive job market. 15 respondents (8%) did not believe the necessity of such curriculum addition. 45 participants (24%) did not express an opinion on this matter.

44 respondents provided feedback on the curriculum that they wish the music school could have included. 14 respondents (31%) mentioned a variety of business classes, including business law, entrepreneurship, finance, marketing and taxation. 8 respondents (18%) indicated the need for pedagogical coursework, mentoring, and practicum. 5 respondents (11%) stated the need for resume writing class or workshop. Some respondents commented on the classes or workshops that helped prepare their job search from the music school. 7 participants listed pedagogy, teaching or method classes. 3 participants listed theory courses. 3 participants specifically listed receiving mentoring from their primary instructor or advisors as helpful.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

The results have provided a glimpse of the perspectives from musicians who have previously attended or are currently attending music programs in the US. There have been lots of concerns about the life of music students and graduates in the 'real world', particularly during the recent economic downturn, from parents of high school seniors or students who have a large amount of student loans. Results have shown that more than ninety percent of music students or graduates are happy with the jobs that they currently hold. Those jobs may not be related to music, but it indicates that music students and graduates have used their skills to obtain jobs that make them happy.

The majority of the participants ranked music schools to be half successful or very successful in preparation them for the job market in general. This indicates that music training has made a positive impact to the job identification of music students and graduates. More than thirty percent of participants expressed no opinion on this matter; the large percentage of participants who reported a lack of opinion may indicate that it is not easy to rank the successfulness of music school training when many music students and graduates hold multiple jobs in music-related and non-related fields. The researcher speculated that using a five-point rating scale system may yield more responses on this topic.

Results showed that there was a close split of perception towards the difficulties in job hunting for music students and graduates, as sixty-eight participants believed it was harder than they thought, and sixty-six believed otherwise. One may suspect that if students received a 'reality check' during the attendance of the music programs, it may give them a better understanding

of the difficulties in job hunting. The majority of those who believed the job hunting experience was not harder than anticipated had prior discussions with someone about the realities of post-graduate life of career path. However, for those who believed it was harder, the majority of them also had discussions with someone about the realities of post-graduate life. Thus, this study did not prove that having a discussion on the realities of post-graduate life would necessarily affect the perception of music students on the job hunting experience. Research speculated that investigating on the perceptions of different aspects of the job hunting experience may result in a better understanding on the effectiveness of reality check.

The majority of respondents believe that music schools should include more job-preparation courses in their offerings to prepare students for the always competitive music job market. This may indicate that having courses which prepare for job search is more valuable for students than only having a discussion on career-path and realities of post-graduate life when receiving training in the music programs. The participants provided a suggestion to comprise a variety of courses in the music school curriculum. Most mentioned were business and entrepreneurship courses, followed by pedagogy classes, mentoring, and teaching practicum. Similar results were found when participants gave feedback on the courses that have helped prepare them to obtain jobs. These course suggestions may indicate the need to reconsider the current music curriculum offerings, and to better equip students with both music and non-musical skills in order to prepare for all ranges of employment opportunities during and after their music school training.

This study provides a general understanding of the perspectives of music students and graduates related to their training and job search experience. As curriculum offerings vary from each music program, the surveyed results provide limited understanding for students in specific types of music programs or institutions. Further studies are needed to understand each topic surveyed here with in-depth analyses. A wider sample and institution-specific study will yield a better data set for investigating the perception of students towards their particular music training, and allow direct comparison of the responses from different instrumental and age groups.

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