

The Juilliard Effect: Ten Years Later

By DANIEL J. WAKIN

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Correction Appended

FOURTEEN years ago, Chad A. Alexander took his bassoon and headed east from a small California town, assumed a coveted place at the Juilliard School and began training for a job in one of the country's great orchestras.

"Everything seemed possible," he said recently. "Going to Juilliard makes you feel very special and privileged and in awe of the history of the school." He graduated and quickly won a three-year position in the New World Symphony, a training orchestra based in Miami. But his career fizzled with a succession of fruitless auditions, dwindling freelance gigs and mounting debt.

He needed a day job. But a Juilliard degree had not prepared him for much besides playing. "When you go to a conservatory, something as specialized as that, you're basically from a different planet," he said. He cast a wide net, but the only outfit that offered him a job was an insurance company in Long Beach, N.Y., on Long Island. He played a few jobs in the evenings. But he was earning his living as a customer service representative.

Last May, Mr. Alexander finished out of the running in yet another audition, for the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, and saw his finances on a precipice. So in what he called a heartbreaking moment, he sold his bassoon for \$5,300 to pay credit card bills. "It was time," he said. "It got to the point where you're just tired of being poor." Now he lives in Phoenix and works as an assistant underwriter.

Eric Crambes is another former resident of Planet Juilliard. A charming French violinist and a native of Lyon, Mr. Crambes studied at the Yehudi Menuhin School in Britain as a child and then with the teacher Tibor Vargas, living at his home in Switzerland. Ready for a change at 17, he broke away from Mr. Vargas and came to Juilliard.

Since graduating, he has moved smoothly into a flourishing career. He has forged a role as a fill-in concertmaster with respected European orchestras, and he commissions pieces, directs a music festival and plays as a soloist with dancers from the New York City Ballet. "I don't want to label myself," he said. "I have a very large spectrum of activities, and I like it that way."

Both Mr. Alexander and Mr. Crambes graduated from Juilliard 10 years ago. Their stories suggest just two of the many varied paths that superlatively trained musicians can travel after leaving one of the world's premier conservatories, which next year celebrates its 100th anniversary. To give a more comprehensive picture of those paths, Arts & Leisure took a close look at the Class of 1994, whose members are now solidly in their 30's and mostly embarked on careers and family life.

The results suggest how hard it can be to live as a classical musician in a society that seems increasingly to be pushing classical music to the margins, even as Juilliard and scores of other music schools pour out batches of performers year after year. Orchestras and chamber ensembles are under increasing financial pressure as subscriptions have dropped and government arts financing has dried up, the recording industry has shrunk and the median age of classical audiences is not getting any younger.

Sometimes the struggle is just too much, and many drop out, perhaps disillusioned with a once-sacred endeavor that has come to seem a cold, unforgiving trade. Others, like Mr. Alexander, are simply sick of the financial grind: the low pay, the lack of benefits, the scramble for work. But many others make it, and what also came clear from the analysis of this class were the high levels of dedication many of the graduates maintain and the satisfactions and excitement of expressing oneself through one of the purest forms of communication: the making of music.

The class of 1994 includes Justine Flynn, a French-horn player who has battled alcoholism and, after bouncing from job to job in and out of music, now plans to become a tax preparer; Mark Inouye, a baseball-loving, happy-go-lucky trumpeter with the Houston Symphony; Gwen Appel, a clarinetist who gave up the grind of public-school teaching for a diamond grader's job at Tiffany's; and Ittai Shapira, an Israeli dynamo with a flourishing solo violin career.

They were among the 44 instrumentalists who graduated in 1994, excluding pianists, who generally follow a distinct career path of their own. Of those, 36 were traced. Eight could not be found; they have left little trace in Google and none at the Juilliard alumni office, all of which suggests that their involvement in music has also dwindled.

At least 12 are out of professional music performance. Eleven have full-time orchestra jobs. Another, a cellist, recently quit the Hong Kong Philharmonic to move back in with his parents in Dayton, Ohio, and audition for American orchestra jobs. Four are freelancers who survive by teaching; five more consider themselves full-time freelancers or chamber musicians; three consider themselves mainly soloists.

All of those now outside music have struggled to come to terms with their new identities. Surrender can be a wrenching adjustment for people who have lived their whole lives in the intimate embrace of an instrument and whose talent brought them glory at a young age.

LIKE many Juilliard graduates, Ms. Appel, the clarinetist, was burdened with debt after graduation: \$28,000 in student loans. Then still using her maiden name, Santiago, she taught music in New York public schools to support herself and pay off her loans. (Juilliard's tuition now runs \$22,850 a year.) But the grind kept her from practicing. "I found it very depressing," she said. "It really had nothing to do with what I was doing before."

She quit her job, went back to practicing for auditions and married. But something had changed. "I didn't have that drive anymore to practice four or five hours a day," she said. Deep down, she knew that the chances of landing a good orchestra job were small. "I wasn't in denial about it. Some people are. I see people struggling, close to 30. I just didn't want to live that way."

Answering a longstanding interest, Ms. Appel took a six-month diamond and gem appraisal course in 2001 and went to work at Tiffany's as a diamond grader and saleswoman. (She is now on maternity leave.) She still plays as an amateur in chamber groups and community orchestras. And as with many of her classmates who quit professional playing but kept up with the instrument, the experience proved liberating. "The less stress I had with it, the better I sounded," she said. "Sometimes it sounds better than when I was practicing four hours a day."

The violin is an easier instrument than the clarinet to ride to stardom, and three of Ms. Appel's violinist classmates have managed to do just that: Mr. Crambes; Nicholas Eanet, who is one of two concertmasters in the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra; and Mr. Shapira. What many of the Juilliard class have learned over the last decade is that when it comes to making a career, talent is rarely the most important quality. It takes discipline, focus and energy - and connections, often formed at Juilliard.

"At Juilliard I met a lot of people that I still work with," Mr. Crambes said. "It's a very important part of our job, to have relations with people." Relationships emerge not so much from class membership as from studying with the same teacher or playing in the same groups. Few of the members of the class of 1994 have kept in close touch, although a number were aware of what others were doing. Several reconnected recently after the suicide of a contemporary at Juilliard.

Mr. Shapira, represented by the International Management Group's touring department in London, performs around the world, and he gave the premiere of a piece by Shulamit Ran at his Carnegie Hall debut last year. He has issued a dozen CD's, produced concerts, toured with the jazz pianist Dick Hyman and started the Ilona Feher Foundation, which supports young Israeli violinists. "This is my passion," he said.

As a student, Mr. Shapira said, he did not pay much attention to teachers who talked about a changing music world. "I practiced and did what I was told," he added.

But he has learned.

"Just because you play really well," he said, "that's not enough. You need vision, you need persistence, you need passion for what you do, and you need to provide something unique."

"I've formed relationships with conductors and producers. We found out what we like to do with each other in a changing market. Rather than be the missing part of a puzzle, you can create a puzzle around you."

Mr. Shapira, who still lives four blocks from Juilliard, credits the conservatory with giving him a solid musical foundation and a base of operations. For a few weeks every year, he plays with the group Concertante, which consists of Juilliard grads. "The key to enjoying what I do is the focus that I thank Juilliard for," he said, "but also variety, versatility."

FOR many students, Juilliard was a rude awakening. They often arrived as minicelebrities in their musical communities, perhaps the winner of a local competition or the best player in town. And they joined a group of people just as accomplished, just as driven and often just as unprepared for the tough job market they would someday face.

"When you're 12," said Matthew Herren, an accomplished cellist who moved last year to Lawrence, Kan., where his partner got a job, "no one says, 'You're going to have to carry that thing on the B train to Queens to do some cash job for 75 bucks.' "

It was a hard fall for Ms. Flynn, the horn player, an engaging woman with an explosive laugh.

Ms. Flynn said she grew up with a young mother in a single-parent household and felt the burden of providing her with emotional support. "For me, music was my religion," she said. "It was my reason for being. The rest of my life, I wasn't so crazy about."

"When I got accepted and was 18, it was sort of like a dream coming true," she said of Juilliard. "I'm going to go there, and it's going to be beautiful and wonderful."

But she hated Juilliard from the start. "It was cold," she said. "It was professional. That's what it's supposed to be. I was not ready for that." Before, music had provided a sense of belonging to something greater than herself. "I got there," she said, "and the message I received was, 'It's a business, kid.' "

The drugs and drinking came in the first two years there. Ms. Flynn took a year off and came back, more focused on the horn. After graduation, she went back to her original home in Portland, Ore., with hopes of working on a pilot arts program for public schools, knowing deep down that a real go at a career would have meant staying in New York. But she was searching for something else.

She described her questions at the time: "How can I be useful as a musician? What's my purpose? What's my point? I was very conflicted about being a classical musician."

In the years since, Ms. Flynn has worked as a groundskeeper at an arboretum on Long Island, played fourth horn in the New Mexico Symphony, received a master's degree in composition from Wesleyan University, composed, played horn and trumpet in bands, shaved her head, directed a choir in Albuquerque and most recently taught band and chorus at a school outside Phoenix.

Ms. Flynn, who said she became sober two and a half years ago, recently took a tax preparation class. "I got an A," she said, laughing. "It shows I can do something else other than play the French horn." Over Thanksgiving she moved back to Portland, where she said she had been warmly welcomed by old friends and was applying for jobs preparing returns.

"I feel my life is better than it's ever been," she said. "I have hope, hope in the sense I don't have to be real specific what my life has to look like. I have an opportunity to live it."

The sorts of questions Ms. Flynn asked about the relevance of music applied to many of her classmates, who sometimes wondered what point there was in playing the same war horses over and over, to what seemed to be inexorably aging audiences.

Some sought a way to make music more immediately and directly relevant to the world around them, like Rivka Gottlieb, a British harpist who was buffeted by a bitter custody battle and family illness before discovering music therapy as a career. She has just finished post-graduate training in using music in psychological counseling and teaching the disabled from the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London. "To be able use to music as a tool to help people - it's something I had always dreamed of," Ms. Gottlieb said.

ALANNA HONORÉ describes herself as one of those people who needed stability and a sure way to pay the rent after graduation. She taught viola students through her time at Juilliard, earned a public school teaching credential and now teaches 200 third, fourth and fifth graders in the Ossining, N.Y., school system. It is a job she clearly loves. Ms. Honoré, known as Alanna Wheatley at Juilliard before she married, still practices and plays community recitals.

"The way for me not to get bitter or depressed is to keep playing," she said. "I had to create my own reality and performance venues. You get rejected and can't take it personally. You have to create your own success and play for yourself primarily. Then it doesn't matter if it's not to someone's liking."

Juilliard's uniquely high-pressure atmosphere, its fame and the brilliance of its teachers provoke contradictory feelings about the place from its offspring.

Some alumni complain that it failed to prepare them for orchestra playing or teaching, bread-and-butter work for musicians, or for the practical aspects of running a career; or that it squelched creativity and individuality. Still, many said that their Juilliard years were among the happiest of their lives, a time of intense musical development with beloved teachers and a source of lifelong musical collaborations.

Juilliard's president, Joseph Polisi, said he was not surprised by the number of undergraduates who do not have performance careers. "They came in as 17- or 18-year-olds," he said in an interview. "They're very talented, they're very focused, but at the same time they are becoming young adults and finding themselves in ways that may not have anything to do with music." Yet he acknowledged the prime goal was to create excellent performers.

Over the last decade, the school has developed courses in how to shape careers or teach, but they are often electives. It requires at least one class a term in the humanities, which most students barely tolerate. At the same time, Juilliard has an obligation to create a "sense of excellence" by having a critical mass of students approaching professional level, Mr. Polisi said.

"We're providing the curriculum, the tools and the experience to have a shot at this incredibly competitive profession," he said. "But there is no guarantee."

When asked how he expected a typical class to turn out, Mr. Polisi said, "I want them to be at peace with themselves and with whatever they are doing with their art."

Mr. Inouye, the trumpeter, seems to have arrived at that point. Mr. Polisi recalled him as the young man who used to joke about turning Juilliard's open spaces into a beach volleyball court. Mr. Inouye has a wry take on the laments of classical musicians. He tells this joke: "How do you get a musician to complain? Give him a job. How do you keep him complaining? Give him a better job."

Some of those interviewed who travel from gig to gig like modern troubadours welcomed the variety but yearned for the stability of an orchestra. Orchestra players said they liked the stability but felt stifled.

Mr. Inouye defies his own joke. "When I get tired of music, it'll be the end," he said, "I love it. All I need is one person to inspire me or push me or find motivation from," he said of orchestra playing.

Mr. Inouye arrived at Juilliard with valuable perspective. He had spent two years as a civil-engineering major at the University of California, Davis. "It exposed me to other people, other things, other backgrounds, other ways of thinking," he said.

He is now playing principal trumpet in the Houston Symphony while on sabbatical from his permanent post as second trumpeter in the San Francisco Symphony. "I always said I wanted to get a job in a National League baseball city," he said. "But the Giants! That's the team I grew up with."

In the end, maybe going to a conservatory is like being a compulsive gambler: It is one big bet, but the drive to study music is so blinding, and doing anything else so inconceivable, that young players are oblivious to the risk. Sometimes it is hard to determine whether they are driven by single-mindedness or they live in self-denial.

Once at Juilliard, they discover the inherent paradox of being a classical musician. You are called on to be expressive, imaginative, creative, somehow in touch with the mystical reaches of art, as an individual. But you are also called on to ply a craft with exceeding skill, meshing a complex of minute physical activities in the service of black markings on a page and the composers who wrote them, often submerging yourself in the crowd. And you do it all with the purpose of making a living.

Inevitably, many will be disillusioned; some, enough so to leave the profession. But every one of those graduates has an indelible stamp.

"Even if my instrument was destroyed," said Nora McNerney Fuentes, a violinist who works in public relations for Time-Warner, "the gifts that I was given and what I've done with them - no one can take them away from me."

More on the Graduates

THE ORCHESTRAS THEY PLAY IN INCLUDE:

San Francisco Symphony
New Jersey Symphony
Taipei Symphony Orchestra
Singapore Symphony Orchestra
St. Luke's Chamber Orchestra
Taiwan National Symphony Orchestra
Buffalo Philharmonic
Metropolitan Opera Orchestra
Netherlands Radio Symphony
Simón Bolívar Symphony Orchestra (Venezuela)

OCCUPATIONS OF THOSE NOT PERFORMING INCLUDE:

English teacher in Japan
Fitness trainer
Stay-at-home mother
Art museum bookkeeper
Software engineer
Music therapist
Saleswoman at Tiffany's
Public relations assistant
Insurance underwriter
Public school string teacher
Network engineer for the Federal Reserve Bank in San Francisco

Blair Tindall and Tom Torok contributed