

Are You Irreplaceable? [Part I]

Description

I took a class in graduate school which dealt with the business side of pursuing a career in music. It was a great class, but forced many of us to confront the reality of the music industry in a way that many of us had never done before.

On one particularly memorable day, the teacher started off the class by asking us a simple but direct question that silenced the room. I interpreted the silence to mean that either nobody had an answer, or nobody had the courage to reveal their answer in front of the class.

What was the question?

“Why should I take time out my busy schedule and money out of my pocket to hear you play?”

Eek. The good news is that not only will this question help you find your niche in the competitive music world, but answering it will also change your experience of performing. When you are able to articulate an answer to this question, you will find yourself increasingly capable of directing your mind to aspects of the music and your performance that are more conducive to optimal performances and less of the “what am I doing here?” nerves and tentative playing.

Are You Indispensable?

Best-selling author and marketing guru [Seth Godin](#) recently wrote a book titled [Linchpin](#) in which he asks the reader this very question. Most of us, he suggests, end up becoming “cogs” in the organization, company, or profession of which we are a part. We show up for work, do enough to keep our job, go home, and repeat.

Unfortunately, this makes us replaceable. If there is nothing compelling which distinguishes us from the cog next to us, what’s keeping some other cog from taking our place? There are new cogs graduating from schools across the country every day, just waiting to take our place. Cogs may work their butts off, but are nameless, faceless, unremarkable, and eminently forgettable.

“Linchpins,” on the other hand, are not so easily replaced. Linchpins are people who think creatively, risk failure, express their individuality, and ultimately, create something unique, transcendent, and ultimately, irreplaceable.

Who Are These Irreplaceable Folks?

Linchpins are people like iPod designer Jonathan Ive, Virgin CEO Richard Branson, and of course, Elvis.

Linchpins are not just famous folks, but are present in our everyday lives as well. People like the family physician down the street who still does house calls, the friendly waitress at the diner who remembers your name and always has your coffee waiting for you, and Deb, the administrative assistant in my graduate program who always went out of her way to track down faculty, hand-deliver documents, and make the extra phone calls to ensure that our paperwork got processed, our assistantship checks signed, our parking tags renewed, etc., so that we could focus on our studies and research projects rather than getting sidetracked by the administrative hurdles in pursuing our degrees.

So How Does This Relate to Me?

Whether you aspire to a solo career, orchestral career, or teaching career, ask yourself, what makes me different than all of the other musicians out there? What do I bring to the table that differentiates me from the next person? What makes me the teacher I am? What makes me sound like me? What is my “signature” or soundprint, if you will? What makes Bach sound like Bach? What lets you know you are listening to Yo-Yo Ma? What makes Louis Armstrong sound like Louis Armstrong?

And the correct answer is not that you can play faster, cleaner, or with a nicer or bigger sound. A concertgoer is probably not going to pay \$80 just to hear you make fewer mistakes than everyone else when they can hear some of the great performances in history for free on YouTube.

So What *Will* an audience Pay For?

I believe an audience will pay for inspiration. For a momentary glimpse of beauty; an encounter with something that is somehow transcendent and transports them from their normal day-to-day existence. Someone once said that at the end of the day, the only currency in our lives that matters to us is how we *feel*.

Playing faster, louder, more in tune, or with a more beautiful sound aren't the essential ingredients of a magical performance and an irreplaceable musician.

So how do I become irreplaceable, you ask? I'll take a shot at answering this question in Part II...but in the meantime, the more important question might be what is *your* answer?

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