

#JadeTalks to Mark Powell: A Leading Voice in Arts Leadership

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An author bringing a challenging counter perspective
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Even before I interviewed Mark Powell, a Ford Foundation award-winning conductor and popular instructor in the Institute for Music Leadership at the Eastman School of Music, I already knew I would be talking to one of the true luminaries on the national discussion about leadership in the arts. Still yet, I had no idea that I was going to be hearing from a man so dedicated to artist empowerment and so committed to the process of molding a stunningly capable and magnanimous musician; the one capable of impacting far beyond the music on the page and into the hearts of the audience members who come to hear them, as well as the staff that they might one day lead.

Up for discussion on this occasion was the trending and blending of entrepreneurship into arts curriculum on the university level. I was curious as to his take on the merits and the successes, as well as possibly the shortsightedness of some approaches. What I got in the way of responses came from someone deeply entrenched in not just the philosophy of music business, but in passing along the importance of the process and the power of immediately applicable education.

JS: Of late, there's been some debate over whether there's even such a thing as an artist entrepreneur, a feeling that we've appropriated the term wrongly. What's your definition?

MP: As a definition, for me, it's really very simple. An entrepreneur is someone who creates value. I believe that the very act of being an artist places one squarely in the entrepreneur realm.

If an artist is to be this savvy new hybrid of art maker and small business owner, are today's institutions equipping them properly? What would you add to the curriculum?

There has been a marked increase in bringing to the education of artists (musicians, writers, sculptors, painters, etc.) more and more materials that could be defined as entrepreneurial in nature. But, I would argue that all of the things with which we equip a university student, or should be equipping them, are of immediate use to an artist. For instance if you can't assemble media that is of a professional level, you're sunk. So, recording your work, writing with a purpose and being able to articulate why your art is important are all crucial skills for anyone, artist or not. Your term business owner is prescient. It implies having to pay attention to the myriad details associated with any organized effort and that certainly applies here.

I've seen a lot of new "arts entrepreneurship" programs pop up in the last 10 years, but aside from the basic courses on grant writing, putting together a press kit and how to not run a non-profit into the ground, I'm not seeing much innovation or concrete strategy for career building in the classroom. What have you been teaching that may be off the beaten path?

True, they're appearing everywhere now; degree programs, too. You're spot on with some of the examples above. But, the programs with some mileage pay attention to things like directed communication, multi-generational sensitivity, fundraising, the ability to speak as well as you write and vice

versa, the ability to lead change, gain trust and program content. All of these things are part of a well-rounded approach. The good news is they are, all of them, teachable. I think what you're edging toward here is a definition of leadership, too.

My teaching has encompassed non-profit governance, communication strategies as they apply to both gift and earned income, programming and leadership, in addition to my own applied music disciplines of conducting and clarinet. I've spent a good deal of time mining the professional and academic realms to assemble an approach that is both active and immediately useful, and informed by the expertise of previous generations.

It seems one of the most immediately useful pieces of information to gather would be about the relationship between the artist and his audience. But as I've been studying aspiring artists in their career pursuits, I've been astonished at how often the audience is the last thing they consider. I've noticed this in terms of knowing the audience they hope to play for or understanding the audience they intend to reach out to in terms of support and fundraising.

Understanding the dynamics of an audience is paramount now. Arts audiences are, largely, segmented. Just because someone goes to a symphony concert doesn't mean that they're likely to go to a dance or theater performance. The reasons for what they choose to attend differ. I remember the first time I traded a mailing list with another organization, you'd have thought I sold the building for a handful of magic beans. The fact is, an opera audience contact list isn't necessarily going to get you ballet patrons.

You do have to be very familiar with some basic information such as how long you have to make an impression that will result in someone staying on your website to read and listen.

This goes for how long you have their full attention on stage as well!

Indeed!

If all we're teaching solo artists or chamber groups to do is be better freelancers, then to me, we're not teaching entrepreneurship. How do you help artists see that their career doesn't have to be at the mercy of presenters or even managers and agents?

It's not hard to convince a member of the present generation (a New Millennial) of that. They've grown up with instantaneous communication. And the immediacy of communication is what can place a career outside the mold of a presenter or manager. Speed of communication changes how we reach and serve an audience. What you're describing above is a question of structure as well. And, it's important to realize that in every field of endeavor there are what many people have termed "gatekeepers." The gatekeepers are obvious in a field of endeavor like medicine. They are other physicians whose experience and specialties are used to set the standard to which a medical student must rise. There was a time, fifty or so years ago, when the gatekeepers for musicians were agents, concert promoters and music directors. These were the people with the most resources to put forth in promoting musical talent. But, one never left conservatory or university musical training knowing just who these gatekeepers were and how to get them interested in what you did. A competition win might help, but was never a guarantee or a clear path.

There are still gatekeepers, but the ways around them now are exponential. In fact, it's fairly easy to bypass the traditional routes to popularity and success. Audiences get their music from an enormous market now that is very easy to enter. What you do to gain an audience still doesn't change — you produce the highest calibre music you're capable of. You approach performance with

a perfectionist's ear and eye and produce what you believe in. The audience you serve is the audience that will stick with you.

I'm going to challenge you a bit because I think you might have been spoiled unknowingly!

How so?

Well, you said it's not hard to convince a member of the present generation that they must engage in some level of purposeful, sustainable career building outside of relying on the gatekeepers we mentioned earlier. I've found the opposite to be very true, unfortunately. As webcast host for some prestigious international music competitions, I found it astounding how the majority of the competitors who aspired to major careers did not even have websites, let alone an active social media presence or a proactive concern towards audience-building. Outside of practicing and competing, not much thought had gone into how they would make a career outside of the hope of being "discovered". So, I think you've been spoiled by the students at Eastman. Many of them are my colleagues and they are quite remarkable in their attitude and proactive natures, in addition to their talent.

You are right about Eastman's students, I must admit. It must be said the the school has been leading the charge of developing the complete artist decades ahead of most other institutions. Aspects such as teaching not just the importance of, but the how-to of conducting arts outreach for kids, focusing on application over philosophy and engaging in professional development have been mainstays of the Eastman education. Anyone who comes to the school is taking on an element of risk and self-reliance that demands they invest themselves in achieving success in every possible way.

The institution requires from both its students and faculty a forced larger perspective.

When many of these music entrepreneurship programs started popping up there weren't enough people who "walked the walk" teaching this important curriculum. How has that changed today and what makes you uncommon in what you bring to the table?

I will say that there are more people entering the field now than there were even five or ten years ago who are qualified. And, they're not just entering teaching positions, but posts in which they can have a direct and positive impact on entrepreneurial arts education. The best of them are musical professionals, educators and funders whose backgrounds are germane to the material they're teaching. What do I bring to the table that's unusual? Well, thirty years of navigating the map that we've just laid out — from steering my own ship, to performing, to teaching, earning income, seeking and gaining gift income, employing colleagues and being lucky enough to have the time to pass on that experience to other artists. For me, it happens in the ever-evolving laboratories of masterclasses, residencies, guest lectures, workshops and university classes. I am exceptionally lucky in that regard because aside from performing, teaching this remains some of the most fulfilling work I do.

Once the head of a prestigious summer institute told me they didn't need this career-building piece added to their curriculum because their artists were the best in the world and would have these things "taken care of for them". The irony was that it was students from his institution who'd contacted me to come in. At the highest levels, at our best, most legendary institutions, do you think there's still a bit of denial going on? Why and if so, how do we counter that to get students the information they need?

I would say in the case above that you describe, that yes, there is absolutely some denial going on. Because, more and more, everyone is being expected to do for themselves things that were once done by other people. This is not just applicable to the career of an artist either.

It points to the difference of mindset between employee and employer. Think about the way your parents and my parents (the Silent and Baby Boom generations) who are now in their 60s and 70s talked about the future of their children. "Go to college so you can get a good job." The thought was we could trade our time for money and security. It's fairly easy to see that today in any field of endeavor, the idea of simply trading one's time and expertise for money and permanence has changed drastically. The average person no longer has just one career in their life. They may have two or three. So, the idea of creating value, of being entrepreneurial, is now required in most fields of endeavor. You can either be an employee, which has been the implicit message up to now, or you can create the work, and create the value and find a market that will reward you for what you do. Artists have to do this all the time.

As to how we counter that, the field is going to demand that we supply this information. Musicians' success will come more and more from diversity in a skill set than just one thing done well. So I would argue that the instructions we have received for the past 40 years of going to college so you can get a good job are now being supplanted by the kind of activities that immediate communication, large markets, niche markets and precise expertise all open up.

All of this of course still plays off of the concept of security you mentioned, right?

Yes, a good job will be secure. Your future will be secure. The faster we move into the 21st century, the more we realize that security above a very basic level is dependent upon how we run our lives individually. What we do with our money, the amount of effort we expend to earn that money and how we make that money create more money. All of these things point to an expanded environment in which everyone, not just artists, have to function.

You know, some still have trouble with this concept of artists being too “commercially-minded”. I happen to think the point is not commercialism, but rather developing a mindset of viability and accepting without apology that one’s art has considerable worth. Do you even bother with that debate?

I’ll toss a small incendiary in here. Leadership is leadership. And, the moment you apply those skills to yourself in the same way you apply them to an organization, you’re no longer a free lancer, either. You’re an artistic director, a managing director, a CEO, an executive director. You are a member of a staff that now provides direction. You may be a staff of one, but the roles and their requirements don’t change.

If you are going to invest the time, money and energy to gain a university degree in music, then you are primed for the kind of thinking that will exclude you from being solely an employee. If you have a complete music education then you are poised to be an entrepreneur — to create a market in which your contribution is of value. Now, in some instances that may still be as an employee. If you win an audition to join a major ensemble, you are going to be an employee of that orchestra. Your hours will be heavily regulated. You will be well rewarded in salary for your time and expertise. You will also have to operate within a structure in which you must be able to function. Keeping to a schedule, interweaving other activities like teaching with rehearsals and

performances and maintaining your skills at a very high level are all part of that job.

And you believe the best programs will teach from this starting point?

The fact is in the best programs, we're not preparing people in an entrepreneurial mould solely; we're preparing resilient artists to lead our field through change. And if you're not an artist first, with an intimate knowledge of why what you do is special, then the effort is handicapped from the beginning. Anything you try to communicate about the value of that art, whether it's dance, music, the plastic arts, poetry or anything else, is incomplete.

Speaking of the "Why"? What's yours?

For me, the entire universe, all of spirituality, human involvement and why we're here exists between the pages of a score. The way someone thought about music and wrote it down for someone else to perform is one of the great miracles of all time. I love an orchestra rehearsal because I don't think there's a better laboratory for life skills. Language, intent, body language, collaboration, kindness, listening skills, interaction, motivation, movement, they all happen inside of how you successfully rehearse an ensemble. Nothing has moved through my body more powerfully than sound. Nothing has made my mind think about things that were lovely like music has. It does for me what other arts did not do, or other physical activities (I love swimming), music still wins out. I agree with Bernstein, I could not go a day without music.

Your students whether at Eastman or in residencies across the country are lucky to have such a passionate and informed spokesperson for the art. What is it you ultimately aim to help them do?

At some point, and it's not always right away, but the day will come when we must be able to address a larger world, one outside of the practice room. I aim to be a part of preparing them for that moment.

Learn more about Mark Powell at www.markpowell.org