

What do I need to do to win a gig?

Presented at the Round Top Music Festival 2014 by Brent Phillips

This was a question that I often asked of others and myself while studying at Rice. I spent many sleepless nights in the practice room feverishly working on the excerpts and trying to play higher, softer, louder, longer and accurately. I would look to those who had gone before and were now “successful” musicians in a full time orchestra. All of my teachers had various ideas on how to achieve their level of success. I found in their responses a bit of mystery and achievability. It seemed those mentors/teachers seemed to possess some innate skill or ability that I was lacking. I always left those conversations feeling like there was a missing link to the puzzle; not a short cut or magical mouthpiece but more a missing element of trust or “process.”

It was this “process” that I definitely needed to hone and realize. Perhaps I was a bit too dependent on the advice of others. After all, if I just had a list of steps, ie. “10 Steps to Greatness and Winning a Job, or – if you do A, B, C every day at precisely the right time, you will win a gig.... I know this sounds a bit simplistic, but that is what I thought I was missing. I needed the “Golden Bat” – just like I needed the “Golden Haired Blonde” in my life. If you ask, I will explain what I mean. Many of my teachers seemed to walk with this sense of secret knowledge or special skill set that was only ordained or somehow bestowed on a special few. That special few was somehow dependent on where they studied or how hard they worked or badly they wanted it.

My purpose in this clinic is to give you insight into the “process” of winning a job and the mind set and skill set necessary to reach this goal. The steps are uniquely different for each person but they all have similar characteristics.

What is “Process” and how does this matter?

“Process” refers to the methodology, order and levels of experience obtained over a defined period of time. I will delve more deeply into these questions below.

1. Process – where you study, whom do you come in contact, access to pros/models and most importantly – what drives your process?
2. Why does this matter? More importantly, what is the correct order of this process, what is the proper mental state during the process and why does it matter?

Fundamental process towards the goal of winning a job:

Daily – this is the everyday routine that involves warm up, conditioning, flexibility, fundamentals, listening, mental work and positive input/assessment/feedback

What are the things I need to do every day?

- Warm Up – think of your warm up as just that, a warm up. Rather than an exhaustive session on fundamentals. I try to get all over the horn in a moderate amount of time, focusing on tone and flexibility. Save power sessions for later in the day and never test for max within the first 30 minutes of playing. Stretch, Yoga, breathing and centering are all part of my warm up process.
- Put your day in order – plan around rehearsals and get the “big rocks” in first – keep your priorities in tact and avoid letting jazz rehearsal, WE rehearsal and orchestra rehearsal steal your best notes of the day. Think of every day having a “quota” of great notes, as you gain experience and skill this number will increase. Burn only your best notes during extended practice sessions. Be prepared in ensemble rehearsals but don’t let that be the bulk of your playing that day.
- Make a binder – you should have 6 months of material all in one binder. This will take some thought but it should include difficulty warm up, flexibility, conditioning, challenging etudes, recital material and excerpts you plan to record. Think of making a dossier of recorded excerpts (competitions, first round and festival excerpts) and put these in your binder. Rotate binders every 4 to 6 months.
- Specific daily drills – Arban synch, Arban tonguing, Arban chord studies or other technique (Kopprasch, Blazevich, Bitsch, Kellog) Legato (Snedecor, Rochut, Cancone, Fink legato) also include exercises from Schlossberg, Edwards, Davis 20-minute etc
- Range – work on linking registers every day (Rochut in tenor cliff, tenor clef down an 8vb and then down 2 8vb, Rochut or Cimera in bass up an octave, Fink clef studies, Blazevich, or Edwards Before Blazevich.
- Endurance – this is a big one – think of taking frequent breaks and working in short focused sprints rather than marathon sessions.. When you feel tired, go a little longer then stop. Never go to failure.
- Deep Practice – try to get 4 hours of practice into 30 minutes of deep practice. Learn to maximize every session. Use this time to work on powerful mental focus skills (iPhone away and out of sight, find a hidden closet, practice room or laboratory, not a time to socialize). You are building a highly targeted error focused centered practice habit – you are practicing as if the recital is in one week. You have a blueprint in your mind that you are constantly comparing – drawing the lens in and out all of the time. You need to create flow in your daily practice! Enter the zone of accelerated learning – crack the talent code. Myelin – wrapped layers of insulation or sheath around the neuron pathways from the brain. Cellular insulation that grows with practice and builds with deep practice. Think of

your practice as something that establishes “living circuits” and these circuits grow with practice.

- Talent created by genetics – NO – SKILL IS PRACTICED WITH EACH PASSING SECOND OF DEEP PRACTICE

Weekly – this is the weekly setting of playing goals (ie. Etude preparation, excerpt study, solo work, audition prep and performance considerations)

- Talent pool – begin to think of your studio, peers and teachers as part of a uniquely gifted talent pool that will sustain you on your journey. If you act as an island you will rarely break into the upper levels of performance.
- Toggle practice – shift from light to heavy, high to soft, fast to slow, finesse to power every other day. Think of each day as a building block to a weeks worth of learning.
- Lesson planning – you have the opportunity every week to take a lesson. Try to view each week as a golden opportunity for acquiring skill rather than simply something to check off your week has having completed. When you view your lessons as a performance opportunity and a test of your skill, your preparation towards each lesson will be more thorough. If you have only prepared the required weekly lesson material then you are selling yourself short. Record every lesson and make an iTunes folder – go back and do some random sampling of lessons each month and see what you really sound like. Listen to your teacher. Try to have “ears to hear” rather than being only concerned about how you are doing.
- Group practice – find a “Band of Brothers” and learn to draw inspiration and discipline from each other. Play for each other, warm up together – practice alone..
- Who is the best? – Seek out the best musician in the school and play for them often (not entire concerti, just excerpts of things you are working on). Ask them to play for you, get feedback and ideas on how they practice and what kind of music they listen.
- Decompress and disengage – find something that you love doing away from trombone that brings you joy. For me, enduro motocross, mountain biking, climbing or anything that takes me into the wilderness. Your most creative moments will not come in the practice room. Make sure that you have a light day each week to mentally and physically recover.

Monthly – this is a slightly larger process that involves making recordings for festivals and competitions, taking auditions, recital prep and chamber concerts

- Audition skill – work in to your schedule one audition a month if possible (seating placement, mock audition, regional audition). This is the most overlooked and underprepared skill set. You must learn to love playing for

others and competing. I once attended an audition and witnessed someone picking up his or her deposit check and leaving the audition without playing a note.

- Master class/ extra lessons – never let any guest artist in your field come and go without taking a lesson. Plan ahead, save your money and be ready to play for everyone that visits your school. Travel to nearby cities and take lessons. Go to master classes for other instruments. You should plan on attending major summer music festivals by the summer of your sophomore year.

Hitting your Six-month Mark – every six months you should plan on putting yourself through a stressful process (take a major audition or play a recital). The “Six-month Mark” is designed to provide concrete flow and upwardly mobile movement in your “experience level.” Think of transitioning from student to performer/professional as you move through the levels.

1. **Page** – age 7-14 (moderately advanced tone quality and important concepts of tone and musical phrasing established) Many of you have been in the “pipeline” for a while and need to go back and re-visit band directors and former teachers and thank them for mentoring you. Understand that you did not get here by yourself.
2. **Squire** – age 14-21 (selective training and higher tasks of focused study, key concepts of skill, practice, performance and competitive mental toughness established) This is the substance of skill. What you learn here you will carry for a lifetime. Do it right and stay alert.
3. **Accolade** – age 21-29 (intense musical training and entry level professional experience, proving ground and true tests of mental toughness and commitment established) This is the beginning of the rest of your life. Prove yourself worthy and wise.
4. **Artist/Performer** - age 25-60 (fruits of musical labor, development of reputation as a player, acquisition of skill and ability, multitude of experiences from which to draw, diverse professional experience, ease and effortless production and performance) Live for the bigger picture – it is not all about you. Stay humble and focused and work on the inner game.
5. **Sage** – age 50-75 (mentor, teacher, clinician, master teacher, professor, counselor) Arguably the most rewarding and transcendent time in your career. Live without regrets.

Complex process towards the goal of winning a job:

- Daily – identify with the masters. Find one quality in the masters that you want to model (posture, sound, finesse, style). Work role-play and

modeling into your daily thought process. Learn to enjoy the process of getting better. Accept the challenges and defeats – understand that messing up is a prerequisite for improvement. Learn from your mistakes.

- Weekly – record yourself each week/day, conduct and sing back with an excerpt you played – fix it – do this every week as it builds confidence and reality in your playing
- Monthly – listen to great music often. Pick one night a month and have a geek out session with your friends (listen to great recordings, watch videos, pick apart and study the masters and listen to recordings of yourselves playing in a concert). Identify what you like in the masters and in your playing (what is similar and what is different).
- Hitting the Six month Mark – Read, read, read!! Study art, politics, language, history and develop an expert level of knowledge about a sociopolitical/spiritual topic unrelated to music. Find a physical activity that coincides with your musical skill. Learn to fly-fish, rock climb, tennis, golf, mountain bike, run a 10K, Yoga, P90X – something that helps clear your mind and develop strong hand/eye coordination. Most of my mental skill came from the golf course and bodybuilding. You need to discover what it feels like to develop “flow” in different areas of your life. You can then transfer this into music making.

Putting Process into Practice:

Ultimately, the desire to win must transcend all you do however you must enjoy the process. You can't have it now! It takes time – 10,000 hours to mastery. The desire to win and pursue excellence is not *who* you are, it is *what* you do. If your sense of overall value and self worth comes from how well you play or winning that big gig, you will be like that pro golfer in “Seven Days in Utopia” that is only as stable and secure as his next golf score. Play for the bigger picture. Work on developing your character and don't sell your soul in the process. Balance is the key. If you experience a habit of rattled nerves and panicked auditioning then I suspect you are off balance and your identity is in the wrong place.



Brent Phillips is Associate Professor of Trombone at Baylor University. Prior to his position at Baylor, Mr. Phillips was assistant principal trombone of “The President’s Own” US Marine Band in Washington DC and is currently principal trombone of the Harrisburg Symphony Orchestra in Pennsylvania and the Waco Symphony Orchestra in Waco TX and the Abilene Philharmonic. Mr. Phillips has soloed with the “President’s Own” on thirty separate occasions and has been a featured soloist with the Harrisburg Symphony on five occasions. Most recently, Mr. Phillips was a semi-finalist for the assistant principal trombone position with the New York Philharmonic.

As trombonist with the “President’s Own”, Mr. Phillips has gained extensive experience as a soloist. In the fall of 2000, Mr. Phillips was a featured soloist on the Marine Band’s fifty-two day

national concert tour and has soloed numerous times with the Band at Wolf Trap Farm Park and the National Mall. Mr. Phillips recently gave the world premiere of “Tarkus” for trombone and orchestra with the Harrisburg Symphony Orchestra in May of 2007 and was an invited soloist at the Eastern Trombone Workshop performing “Tarkus” with the US Army Band in 2008. The work received rave reviews and was featured in a recent New York Times article on trombone soloists and commissions. Mr. Phillips premiered “Tarkus” in Brussels and Ostend Belgium and will be releasing a recording with the Baylor Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Stephen Heyde.

Mr. Phillips performs regularly with the Dallas Symphony and Houston Symphony and has recent performances with the Buffalo Philharmonic. Additionally he has performed with the San Antonio Symphony, Richmond Symphony, Delaware Symphony, Maryland Symphony, Alexandria Symphony, Annapolis Symphony, Fairfax Symphony and the Washington Symphonic Brass. Mr. Phillips has released the recording “Stepping Stones for Trombone” Volumes One and Two on the Potenza Music label which contain both moderate and advanced contest solos in the trombone repertoire.

“Stepping Stones for Trombone” is now available at www.justforbrass.com

Mr. Phillips has been a featured artist at the Alessi Seminars in 2005, 2007 and in Italy in 2010 and remains active as a soloist and clinician around the country.