

Career story: Making the commitment to pursue a career

This career story comes from a graduate who finished her degree and then questioned whether the discipline was what she wanted. The account is a great resource for understanding the identity development involved in career and life decisions. When reading the account, reflect on what you have learned in your degree and what identity or identities are important to you.

At the back of this resource, you will find more information as well as sample questions on learning from biographies and career stories.



Dani's story

“Find out who you are and what you want, then grab every opportunity.”

Dani Rich describes herself as someone “working and living her life as a musician”. After starting with the clarinet in high school she fell in love with the trumpet. In 2010 she completed a Performance degree at the Queensland Conservatorium. This led to a Master's degree at the Royal Northern College of Music in England, but the decision to pursue music at the professional level was far from simple. Dani describes 18 months of doubt following the completion of her degree:

“I was feeling the pressure of what to do. I put my trumpet in its box for a little while. I worked – well, I taught music and worked in cafes and bars and in a law business and that kind of thing – just to see if I actually wanted to come back to trumpet. It is such a big commitment and I wasn't really ready to put all my eggs in one basket.”

What Dani describes is an essential stage of personal and professional identity formation. She challenged her identity. Careers in music are complex, and managing such complex careers requires self-efficacy (a belief in your own ability), professional self-concept (knowing how you feel about yourself as a musician) and self-regulation (the ability to regulate activities and decisions). This is hard to achieve for someone who hasn't yet thought about who they want to be; both as a musician and an individual.

“Maybe 1 or 2% of music students come with a realistic goal ... Take the time to work out what you want.”

Dani's recognition that she wasn't sure whether to commit to a career in music led her to identity moratorium. By challenging her identity, she eventually reached the stage of identity achievement whilst remaining open to new opportunities. This gave her new energy:

“I know it's really what I want to do now.”

Having made her decision, Dani asked her trumpet teacher for recommendations of great teachers around the world, and setting off to do auditions and to take lessons. The result was an audition for the master degree at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, England. Dani had to find ways of meeting the high cost of studying in the U.K.

Again, she was pro-active:

“I discussed [with the teacher in Manchester] how I might afford it and he really helped me to get a scholarship from the college. ... I don't think I could have been able to do it otherwise. Then, for the next eight months, I just worked and practised and saved as much money as possible, and then I moved to Manchester.”

Having made the commitment to pursue music, Dani took every opportunity:

“When I was doing my Masters degree I was really doing it properly – taking every opportunity rather than letting things come to me.”

The casual work with Opera North and two professional access schemes – internships – were new programs when she undertook them.

“In Amsterdam, there was a pilot scheme with the Netherlands Wind Ensemble and they sent three of us there for two weeks to play in the ensemble and go on tour with them. They liked us a lot so they asked us back for their New Year's concert. They were fantastic – that was probably one of the highlights of the two years as the ensemble is completely different to any ensemble I'd ever worked with before. ... It was really great to be able to play in Europe and see what the scene is like there. ... You have to be ready for the opportunities when they are thrown at you and then you just make it work.”

She also advises students to watch, listen and learn to play as much and as varied orchestral, chamber, and solo repertoire as you can. You need to educate yourself on as many styles and sounds as possible, not just on your own instrument.

“Audition for everything possible. ... Grab every opportunity to get experience.”

Reflecting on the decision to move away from Australia, Dani is certain that broadening her experience was a positive move:

“I’m a much better trumpet player and I’m more confident in my ability and choices. It’s easy to get comfortable; I have lived in Brisbane for most of my life and all my study was in Brisbane, and it’s easy to accept that this is all you could be. You really have to push yourself to go and find things that make you work harder. People can find that kind of motivation in different places. For me, I needed to go overseas and get out of my comfort zone for a while.”

Looking back, Dani talks frankly about her transition to becoming a musician. Her comments highlight that university students often study music because of their love for it, only later do they recall and understand advice given to them before they were ready to challenge their identities as musicians:

“I don’t think I had any idea what it was like to be a trumpeter ... I just did it because I wanted to play the trumpet. It wasn’t all I could do – I studied hard and got good grades – but I really wanted to play the trumpet! My teacher at the time was trying to make me more aware of the realities: ‘It’s not like you just get to play the trumpet and someone pays you!’ But I didn’t understand what he was talking about really.

I don’t think I would be happy doing anything else. So that’s what I’m going to do. I don’t mind if I have to work other jobs to support my main goal, as long as I can make my playing my main thing and eventually get a job.”

Dani’s ultimate goal is “to play first trumpet in an orchestra somewhere in the world. It doesn’t matter where”. She is now actively auditioning, so based on her experience in Australia and Europe we asked what orchestras look for when auditioning players:

“I worked it out by just talking to people. That was one of the great things about Manchester – any day of the week you can go and talk with the trumpet staff as they have their coffee! Not enough people take advantage of that, to just go and chat ... but as a nice person, you don’t want to be seen as too pushy.

As a graduate I wasn’t ready to go out and win a job. I’m still not, but I’m very much closer.”

Asked what, if anything, she would change within higher education, Dani remarked that the transition from study to work is one of the most challenging issues for music students:

“When I was in my final year I really had no idea how to make the leap into the profession. Even though I did an orchestral internship during my degree, I had no idea what I was doing in terms of how to play in an orchestra – how to be prepared and what was expected of you. Just on a basic level, the first time I played in an orchestra I didn’t know how to do it at all: for example, knowing how to count rests! It sounds silly, but if you’re thrown into something and you can’t count, you’re no use to anyone. Even if you make the best sound in the world.

This is why I became disheartened I think – because no one can actually teach you that. You have to go out and find ways of getting experience yourself. I didn’t even know about casual auditions, and you don’t know to go and actively seek auditions. ... When I went to England and did auditions there I suddenly realised how much work you have to put into it. It was a much bigger scene and there were loads of players, some a little bit older and professional players, and I realised, ‘Yes, I could do this!’”

Students need to find teachers who are in the profession. It’s completely different, the expectations are different, the talk is different about how hard it is to get an actual job.

“It makes a huge difference if your teachers are actually in the profession.”

Students need to understand the broader relevance of their degree: what it is giving you and why you are studying it.

Higher music education students need to explore their future lives in music, creating expert selves that are sustainable over the career lifespan. For Dani the next year included work with the Queensland Symphony Orchestra before heading back to Manchester for further lessons and work with Opera North, and to take advantage of the proximity to Europe and increased opportunities. She is determined to achieve her goals and she is a young musician to watch!

Learning from biographies and career stories

What do you see when you meet a professional?

Most of the time, we see only the role someone holds now. It is likely, however, that the person has experienced a career with lots of twists and turns.

Get the most out of reading career stories or biographies by asking yourself some of the questions to the right.

1. What do you expect you will have to learn during your career?
2. What might you need to do in order to keep learning?
3. What differences, common issues, and links can you make to your own career journey?
4. Identify and reflect on key decision points in your personal and professional development, and then consider:
 - a. Who played a significant role at these times?
 - b. To whom did you go to for advice?
 - c. What can you put in place for the next time you face a major decision?
5. Biographical accounts raise a number of challenges and opportunities. These include innovative collaborations, work within other sectors, diverse locations, and different modes of work. Look for examples of these in your discipline and reflect on what might be of interest to you:
 - a. What interests you, and what can you do to make this a reality?
 - b. What challenges do you foresee, and how will you prepare for these?
6. Biographical accounts often tell us something about the interests, passions, and motivations of the people involved. Can you think of ways to combine your interests and your future work?
7. What would you like to achieve as a professional?

This resource was developed by Dawn Bennett.