

RESOURCES FOR STUDENT MUSICIANS

Career Story: Trying things out

This is the story of Danish freelance trumpeter Jeppe Uggerhoej, who graduated from his Bachelor degree one year prior to the interview. He talks about how he is building a career in music, the need to be able to perform in different genres, and trying different things to work out what he might want to do in the longer term.

JEPPE'S STORY

I filled in the university forms for biology and filled in the forms for music, just to make sure I had something to do. When I got in here at the conservatoire, it was great. I knew many people who would like to come in. So I thought I'd do the conservatoire for one year, to see what it's like, and I never got out again. It was quite fun when I started to do it, and luckily it is still fun to play.

There was no system of Bachelor degrees at the conservatoire and I thought I should have a degree, so in my last year I started doing university music studies as well. Then when I finished at the conservatoire I started doing economics. I'm supposed to be doing that now, but I haven't got time! Eventually I will get a Masters in economics, which will go along with my administrative stuff. It's a new area, the same as music was about ten years ago, a new area, exciting. You've loads of possibilities when you've done economics, compared to music on its own. When you finish at the conservatoire you really have to see what possibilities you've got. But if you've got music and economics there's a wider range. I hope so.

Right now I play the trumpet and I try to do as many different things as possible. That's why I freelance: I get to play in bands, symphony orchestras, musicals and small ensembles. That's mainly it, playing-wise. I had concerts all year in a military band when I was studying, and for another year after that. I've been lucky so far: I haven't had any gaps in performance work yet. So it's pure luck, and reputation.

I thought I would try to do some more administrative work. Three months ago I became a leader of a talent school on a small island in Denmark. There are maybe a million people there. The talent school is for people from about eleven years up to approximately 20 years. You take all the best students you have on that island, and they get teaching six times a year on a Saturday from teachers who are principal players in Danish symphony orchestras. Besides the teaching on Saturdays, the students get to play with a professional symphony orchestra, so they get some kind of idea what it is to be a musician.

The talent school has existed for four years, and at the moment I am trying to profile the school a lot more because I think it needs to expand to secure the ongoing work. So by 2010 or 2011 I hope the school will not just be the island, but the whole of the south of Denmark. That would be great. I'll try in the next year to build up some samples from the talent school so they've got some PR materials.

It's quite interesting work because you've got the teachers of the school, who as I said before are solo players in the orchestras, and at the same time the students have a usual teacher at their music school. The music school teachers have to follow the student to the talent school to observe the tuition, so the teachers see the tuition by the talent school teachers. And that's great, because it's more education for the music teachers. Hopefully there is an exchange both ways, and talent school teachers also learn from the other teachers.

Besides the talent school, I'm chairman of an organisation called DAO, which stands for Danish Amateur Orchestral Association. DAO consists of brass bands and wind bands, and quite recently we took in big bands as well. The work in DAO is mainly about arranging national contests and courses, taking care of national agreements concerning copyrights etc., and securing the ongoing work in the national youth bands.

I play purely classical, although in the military band we play some jazz as well, mostly big band style. My improvisation and so on is not very good. It's quite crappy in fact, when I play it. It's a shame really. It's the same when you play musicals, because there's a lot of jazz or rock style in that. And it takes time to get used to. So the first jobs where I played musicals were really, really awkward. It's better now. If you see a lot of the new music written, there's quite a lot of improvisation in that, too. It's really hard.

More and more musicians in Denmark are able to do both classical and jazz. In some places you've got the possibility to take lessons with jazz musicians or classical musicians, or to study folk music. I studied in the US three years ago, at the Eastman School of Music, and the students there, the trumpet students, could do both. Mostly the students there started playing jazz, and later on they started doing classical. I think it would be really fun to do improvisation: it would evolve you as a musician.

I had conducting lessons at the conservatoire as part of my course. I'm now doing a bit of conducting for a wind band, and at the moment I've got a brass band. Actually, my wind band just won the Danish title, last weekend, so that's great. The wind band is called the APO and it's sponsored by the mail in Denmark. I quite enjoy conducting because you meet a lot of different people, and the people you meet in the band are doctors, factory workers, whatever. I've conducted since I was in my second year, so right now I'm conducting two bands and playing full-time, and doing DAO and doing the talent school. Too much, way too much!

About two weeks ago I was playing a concert with a really shit band. All amateurs. Sounded horrible, but they loved it, and the audience loved it because they knew the people playing it. And when the job was done, I was on my way back home in the car and I rang up my friend in the symphony orchestra, and they'd just been playing Rite of Spring, or something really great. And I said, 'How was your evening?' He said it was okay, played Rite of Spring and the audience clapped, and that's it. And I said, after playing with a shit band, turns out it was an amazing evening. Really funny!

When you go into the conservatoire, the only thing that really has the high standing, or the high esteem, is a place in an orchestra. But we need to see the other possibilities we've got, and you need to lift these possibilities up so they're at the same level—so a job other than an orchestra position is not less worthy.

I'm just at the moment seeing what it's like to do organisational work because I'm not quite certain that I want to be a trumpet player full-time, which I am now, or if I'd like to do more organisation. So if I do both playing and organisational work for two or three years, I think I'll be able to make up my mind. Doing both means a lot of work at the moment though. I sometimes play in the local symphony, and in other symphony. I also play in a military band, and I play in some musicals. It is a lot, but it fits well with my organisational job so that's nice. I also have two children aged three and two months. I will find performing harder when my children go to school because when I am not working, in the day, they will be at school. That will be harder. So then I have to find ways around that, but that's the benefits of freelancing: you do what you want to do.

The most fun thing I do is playing with groups where the passion is really strong. I really don't care if it's a professional group or an amateur group. I've sometimes been out playing with an amateur band just for one concert, but being in that band you can feel the enthusiasm for music, and the enthusiasm for getting this right. That's great. At the same time, the thing I hate the most in the music business is when you see the passion die—you see this 'factory work' instead of just making music. So I really don't care if it's playing or conducting, or organising. As long as there's passion, as long as there is a will to keep performing, it keeps getting better and better.

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