Making The Commitment To Pursue A Career

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

Dani Rich - Musician

DANIELLE’S STORY

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, and in 2010 she completed a performance degree at the Queensland Conservatorium. This led to a master degree in England at the Royal Northern College of Music, 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, and 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 actually I wanted to come back to trumpet, because it’s 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 then she set 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, and Dani had to find ways of meeting the high cost of studying in the UK.

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 master 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. Her message to current students is to “grab every opportunity to get experience”.

“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. ... As well 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. Then I came to the Con and everyone was saying ‘there’s no work’ – there’s this kind of vibe everywhere you go because it’s true.”

“But now I have made that decision, 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:
“Someone who makes a good sound, plays in tune and in time – that’s what everyone wants to hear. But also, you have to do something special to show yourself. They’re looking for an understanding of your repertoire and an understanding of how to fit into an orchestra. You have to keep in mind that they are looking for someone they can sit next to and work with every day.”

“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 not 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.”

“The responsibility is shared; everyone is really young when they come to do a degree, and at the time you’re doing the fundamental courses you don’t realise how important they are and you don’t give them your full attention. … I also think the structure is difficult for young people because they don’t know how to put the pieces together. … I knew I loved playing the trumpet, but I didn’t understand how what I was actually studying was going to eventually make me into a musician.”

“However, students need to understand the broader concept of the music industry and take responsibility for their own learning. I didn’t know what happened beyond my own city or about what resources are available: for example, the resources online are incredible. Students also have to be interested in what they’re doing – to be watching concerts and going to classes and finding out what the text of a song means… and getting involved in the music industry as much as possible. They need to find a way of liking the things they do, even if it’s not playing the trumpet! I don’t know how that can be communicated to students because it also relies on them being proactive. And students need to learn how to work to the tight schedules of a professional orchestra where there’s a new program every week or two. That’s really tough to learn on the job.”

“Students need to understand the broader relevance of their degree: what it is giving you and why you’re 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 includes 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!