

## **Stephen Schwartz – Advice for Musicians (Primarily Pianists, Music Directors, Conductors)**

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### **Advice on getting job as pianist/keyboardist**

Question:

I was just wondering what kind of studying and work it takes to get to be a pianist or keyboardist on say Broadway, or maybe another large city?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I think there are several things you can work on if you want to be an accompanist/pit musician for Broadway.

1. Obviously, you should work on your piano playing skills. This should include learning to play in popular styles as well as classical -- traditional Broadway show style and pop/rock too.
  2. Sight reading is very important, both the actual keyboard parts and ability to extrapolate from a lead sheet or chord sheet.
  3. Learn to transpose easily and quickly.
  4. Familiarize yourself with a lot of the Broadway repertoire. It's particularly useful to be somewhat familiar with songs that people use for auditions, etc., that are somewhat difficult to sight-read. This would include music by (in addition to myself): Sondheim, Jason Robert Brown, Andrew Lippa, Adam Guettel, Craig Carnelia, and John Bucchino, among others.
  5. It would be good to have a knowledge of synths and MIDI technique in general, as synths are so frequently used in Broadway pits, and your first jobs are likely to be on Keyboard II or III parts, which are usually all synths. If you are a good musician and you master the above, you should have no trouble quickly getting the kind of work you asked about.
- Best wishes, Stephen Schwartz

### **Advice on Keyboards**

Question:

I am beginning to look into keyboards (I'm hoping that my parents will buy me one or part of one for a graduation present!). Anyway, there is so much out there that I really have no idea where to start looking. I was hoping to get the opinion of a professional in the business, because I will be using it in the pit this summer, and probably in place of an acoustic piano at my home while I'm starving and scraping after my arrival in New York next fall! Do you have any suggestions for brands, models, anything relating to this topic? Any advice that you can give, I would greatly appreciate.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I asked my music team on WICKED what their recommendations might be as to what sort of keyboard to ask your parents for as a graduation present (congratulations, by the way.) This may be more information than you actually wanted, but here are their responses:

From Andy Barrett, the synth programmer for WICKED: The trend in synths today is toward "soft synths", which run on a computer and cost far less than hardware synths. These offer a myriad of choices in style and flexibility. Some good choices here would be Kontakt, Mach5, Reason or ESX24 for a sampler and Absynth for synthesis. There are also dedicated sample players such as Garritan Personal Orchestra and Atmosphere, which are essentially small sample libraries of a particular genre. The beauty of this is that you can add new software at a relatively low cost. Of course, you would still need a hardware keyboard controller but since you won't be relying on these for sounds they will be far less expensive than "workstation" type synths. Choose a keyboard with the best action for the type of playing you will be doing. If you are pianist you will want a fully weighted 88-note keyboard. If you are an organist or synthesist you will want a "waterfall" style keyboard. Again, depending on your bent, make sure the keyboard you choose has a good piano or organ sound for those times that you don't want to turn on the computer.

For piano controllers, I like Yamaha's "P" or "S" series. For organ or synth, check out Roland's "VK" series or Hammond-Suzuki's XK-3. For those times when you're on the road, both M-Audio and Studio Logic offer some good portable keyboards controllers without sound generating capability. If you're not computer-savvy and really want an all-in-one workstation Roland offers the Fantom series, Korg has had great success with its Triton series and Yamaha has the Motif series. They are all decent sounding, capable keyboards. The deciding factors would be your taste and your budget.

From Alex Lacamoire, one of the arrangers, assistant conductor, and first keyboard chair on WICKED: The kids today are raving about the NordLead. it's super-lightweight, it's about 56 keys, but it has really great piano sounds, Rhodes sounds, clavs, and organs. All the basic rock synth stuff. no strings or pads, or anything, though. For that, the last I heard was that the Korg Triton (or Trinity, is it?) was the one to get. Kurzweil 2600s do sound amazing, and are very thorough and easy to program. The only caveat is that I've had more problems with Kurzweils crashing and freaking out than I care to mention. It seems every show I've ever done where I've used or rented a Kurzweil 2500/2600 (Bat Boy, Godspell, Brooklyn workshop, WICKED, a gig with Idina in L.A. (where out of the blue and in a sheer panic I called Andy Barrett in the \*middle\* of the gig when it crashed!) I've had some drama with the Kurzweils. Part of it could be that they were mostly rented machines that may have been damaged with all the moving and using. I say buy them at your own risk! (Sorry, Ste and Andy!) But the hypocritical thing is that even though I keep saying that I will explore Rolands on the next gig, I still wind up asking for Kurzweils because of their familiarity, their popularity, and their great sounds. What can I do? It's like an abusive relationship. I should bring this one to my therapist.

From Stephen Oremus, musical director, arranger (also for AVENUE Q and the upcoming ALL SHOOK UP): I know a lot of people really love the Yamaha Motif as well as the Korg Triton. Those seem to be the big ones. As far as controllers go, the Kurzweil K2600's are pretty amazing. They seem to be pretty standard in Broadway pits these days.

So there you have it -- opinions from three of the best in the business. I hope this is helpful and doesn't just confuse you further. Best wishes, Stephen Schwartz

### **The Musical Director**

Question:

I'm an aspiring musical director and would like to know what you look for in a musical director and how they are used in the mounting of a new project

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

To answer your questions in reverse order (because the second question explains the first) -- for convenience sake, I am referring to the musical director as "he", but of course I have worked with many excellent female musical directors as well: The musical director is responsible for teaching the songs to the actors and conducting the orchestra (in some cases, he plays an instrument as well, usually first keyboard.) He is basically the composer's assistant and representative during rehearsals and performances. Very often he will wind up writing some of the vocal arrangements and underscoring. He also more often than not communicates directly with the orchestrator. So you can see it's an extremely important position.

What I look for, first of all, is (obviously) someone who will be skilled at the above tasks. This means not only someone who is an excellent musician, but also someone who is a good communicator, a good teacher who can be clear and patient with the actors, a good conductor who is precise and easy to follow for the orchestra, and someone who is meticulous about his preparation. Not as obviously, but equally important, I look for someone I feel understands my style of music and what I am trying to accomplish in the score. I have had a couple of bad experiences with musical directors who were very good for other people's material but didn't really get mine and didn't serve it very well, so I try to be careful to avoid that. I also try to find a balance between someone who will serve my goals and taste, but who isn't afraid to contribute ideas of his own.

That should give you something to go on. I wish you the best in your pursuit of your goal, as good musical directors are rare and we can never have too many of them. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

### **Conducting**

Question:

In your opinion, what makes a good conductor in the Broadway musicals pit, such as Wicked's, and also, what is the best advice you have on getting to be a conductor in these kind of pits. Thanks so much.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I think a good Broadway conductor needs several skills. Obviously, there are the basics of conducting clearly and with a sense of energy and fluidity for both the orchestra and performers. An affinity for the style of music helps -- sometimes I find that conductors don't quite get the "groove" of some of my music, and so even though there's nothing overtly wrong with the way they're conducting it, it doesn't quite cook the way it should; I also write a lot of rubato and "felt" sections, so a good sense of that is important too.

Beyond that, (assuming we are talking about a conductor who is not the original musical director of the show, which has a whole additional set of requirements), he or she needs to be able to maintain the show well, which involves being able to communicate with the actors if something in their musical performances has gone off. There's sort of an elusive combination of firmness, sensitivity, and clarity that makes the most effective conductors.

In terms of getting started in the profession: Obviously, the first step is to improve your skills and try to get experience in regional theatres, community or college theatres, touring shows, etc. Then, at least in the case of WICKED, most of our conductors begin as subs for one of the keyboard chairs, and then being assistant conductors, and moving up the ladder, so to speak. I hope some of this proves informative and useful to you. Best wishes, Stephen Schwartz

## **Breaking into Broadway Pits**

Question:

My dream is to be a pianist on Broadway in the orchestra pit, I was just wondering, what does it take?  
Kathleen

Answer posted by Michael Cole:

The following is from Stephen Oremus:

My name's Stephen Oremus- I'm the music supervisor of both WICKED and Avenue Q.

The best way to contact contractors (or music coordinator, as they are often called) is to look them up in your playbill, and contact them through Local 802- our musician's union. As I'm sure you know- you need to be a member of 802 in order to play a Bway show. As far as I can tell, the best way to get into the pits is to start subbing. That's what most people do. You contact the players of the specific books you are interested in and see if they have any openings for subs. If you're lucky, you can get a chance to learn a book and play it once for the music director's approval. Then, if all goes well, you are on the sub roster and get a call once every couple weeks to play that show.

As far as landing a job, subbing or otherwise, most of the keyboard jobs go to people that are well established within the Bway or Off-Bway community. So the best thing you can do is get into NYC and play everything you can. Even playing classes at colleges or readings of new musicals, cabarets, etc. That's the way we all started. It's extremely hard to walk into the pits with no NYC experience. It's good to get out there and let the other keyboardists and MD's know your work. There you have it. Hope this was helpful information.-Stephen O

## **Musical Directing - Broadway**

Question:

I am a recent graduate of Music Education: K-12 (Choral) from BYU in Utah. I have decided that I would like to conduct/musical direct on Broadway as my career in the future. I know there is quite a few directors with a varied amount of experience, degrees, etc... I am just curious what kind of degree is most beneficial to get my self into the scene? (or do you even need a higher degree). I am thinking of getting my MM in Conducting. Is that something that will be useful, or ultimately is that a waste of money? I would love to work with, for free even, someone who is in the business and working in that area. This way I could get a feel of what is needed, and what areas I need to work on in my studies. Any help would be more than helpful. Thank you so much!

Answer from Stephen Oremus - Musical Director of WICKED (by way of Michael Cole)

I received a Bachelor's degree in Film Scoring from Berklee College of Music- a far cry from conducting Broadway shows. There is no particular degree that I know of that is specifically required for one to hold a music director position on Broadway. I have never been asked by anyone in the business what degrees I held. Nor was I ever not hired because I didn't have a higher degree.

What's most important is obviously getting out there and Music Directing as many shows as possible, and getting people familiar with your work as a music director/conductor.

To be quite honest, a large majority of shows in regional theater and summer stock are piano/conductor positions, and one doesn't get the opportunity to conduct a full orchestra all that often. I can trace

every job I've ever had back to my first Summer stock job.

There are many different paths. I wouldn't say a Master's in Conducting would be a waste, but it's certainly not a requirement by any means.

"Getting into the scene" can be more complicated-- as i mentioned before: usually through subbing on keyboard books in Broadway pits and getting Conductors/Music Directors familiar with your playing... or developing a large enough resume of reputable theater that MD's and Contractors would know your work. It is not as simple as "Who YOU know"-- it's more like "Who knows YOU (and your work!)"

Again, there are no rules! Everyone does it differently. Hope this made sense! Best of luck in whatever you choose! -Stephen O

### **Keyboard technology/Musician's Unions**

Question:

Often in small local Theaters they have neither the talent nor the numbers to put together an orchestra of any size. Having done shows with keyboard only I have an appreciation of how much technology has allowed these small local groups to raise the quality of the productions they put forward. These groups do not pretend to be professional by any stretch of the imagination but they somehow preserve the joy of performance and help spread the culture into areas that it would not normally go. What are your thoughts on this use of the current technology?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I agree with you. I have heard great things done with synths and other keyboards in school and community theatres recently.

If your message is in response to what I had to say about the current dispute between the New York Musicians' Union and the Broadway Producers' League, let me just say that I feel there is a huge difference between using synths in place of instruments in a small local theatre and substituting pre-recorded or pre-programmed music for live musicians in a Broadway pit for a show for which someone is paying \$100 a ticket.

But yes, clearly advances in keyboard technology are helping the sound of shows at local theatres. Nice to see something that isn't accompanied by just an upright piano and a drum kit (my orchestra when I used to do summer stock years ago). Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

### **Rights**

Preface: I am working at a summer camp. I am the musical director here. It's a very high class summer camp -- it cost 8,000.00 to go here for 7 weeks. Very costly. Question: It's the end of the summer, and they asked me to archive all of their music. As I went through, most scripts and scores were copied. I know for a fact they never get a license to perform what they do. We performed this summer, Charlotte's Web, Disney's Cinderella, and two musical revues (that included some of your songs). They never got permission to perform these pieces. When I asked about copyrights, they said they, "Don't bother -- since it's only camp." As a musical director, and someone who loves the arts, I don't want to take this program away from the children, but at the same time, I don't want this camp to shirk their responsibilities to pay the correct people for using their music and stories. WHAT SHOULD I DO??

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Well, of course, as you point out, what they are doing is stealing. Having said that, let me hasten to add that I wouldn't say that was the case with the revues they put together which have included some of my songs -- that's a bit of a gray area, and for them to clear the individual songs and make deals with each of the composers probably would have been more trouble than it was worth to either them or the writers. But when it comes to finished shows, such as Disney's CINDERELLA, they ought to do the same thing a school putting on the show would do, which is license the rights and pay a royalty. In terms of what you should do about it, you might mention to the camp directors that if they continue to do this, at some point they may get caught and it could prove very costly to them. It would probably be smarter and in the long run, cheaper, as well as more honest, for them to license any complete show they are presenting in the future. The licensing fees for situations such as this one, where they are not charging admission and it is being performed by children, are generally extremely reasonable and shouldn't prove burdensome, even to a camp that charges LESS than \$8000 a kid. Thanks for your integrity in raising the issue. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz