



When the music stops

Singers and instrumentalists often believe that they will be musicians for life. But what happens when redundancy stops a career in its tracks? *Jane Oakland* looks at ways of working through the experience and coming to see redundancy as a wake-up call, a chance to re-evaluate musical and personal priorities

As Europe deals with its enormous financial deficit, 'being a musician' is likely to become even harder. A reduction of government subsidies could threaten the future of some of our most established institutions. Although politicians argue that it is an opportunity for the arts to develop closer contacts with the private sec-

tor, this could be questionable, given the current financial challenges of many leading businesses. The relatively few musicians who still enjoy the security of full-time, quality employment in our various orchestras and opera companies may face the prospect of ever more 'flexible' contracts and in the worst case scenario, redundancy or early retirement.

It is now 30 years since the Musicians' Union strike against BBC orchestral cuts. Many high-profile musicians lent their support to this campaign which was sympathetically received but only partially successful. Given the accepted need to make cuts throughout the economy, it is unlikely that action on a similar scale could ever be repeated. ▶

Recently, the Musicians Benevolent Fund came up with some sobering figures concerning the average income of professional musicians. The research project entitled *Musicians Have Their Say* found that, despite undertaking years of training, earnings for musicians averaged £16,300. As the Musicians Benevolent Fund points out, this is 27% less than the average national wage. Of the musicians who took part, 37% earned less than £10,000 and 23% less than £5,000. This begs the question as to why anyone would even consider the career of professional musician. Of course, as we all know, it is not always about the money. Musical performance is more than a means of earning a living – it becomes a way of living – but what happens when the music stops?

Musicians tend to believe they will continue to be musicians for life, so when a career ends involuntarily it is unexpected and often without preparation. Even though redundancy may have been imminent for a considerable time, the musicians themselves seldom believe it will actually happen. Reality finally dawns when there is no job to go to and 'Fred the flautist'

REGAINING CONTROL – DAVID

'It's almost better for us to make our own insecurity than for someone else to do it for us'



Loss of control was cited by all of the singers as being a major factor to cope with when they were made redundant. When David realised that redundancies were inevitable in the company he worked for, he opted for voluntary redundancy rather than waiting to see if his would be one of the jobs that would be lost. David moved away from his place of work to start a new life. However, when he started looking for work, he found he had been so wrapped up in music he could not understand what a 'normal' job entailed, the move was initially 'depressing' and the type of teaching work available was not of a standard to satisfy his high musical expectations.

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becomes just plain 'Fred'. There are obviously considerable financial implications attached to redundancy and institutions such as the Musicians' Benevolent Fund give excellent support to musicians in need (see feature on page 36). However, the psychological consequences of job loss are rarely talked about, even though they can be devastating.

I have spent the last four years following a group of singers who were all made redundant from full-time employment. One singer told me, 'I don't think I'll ever heal until I sing again'. Words such as 'floundering', 'disbelief' and 'worthless' were used, as each singer struggled to come to terms with being a different person. However, I found that some singers were able to work through their experiences and eventually see redundancy as a 'wake-up call' to re-evaluate their musical and personal priorities. What follows is a brief synopsis of the journey made by three of the singers to illustrate how a negative, life-changing experience can be transformed into positive growth. Although I am writing primarily about singers, many of the comments I make are equally relevant to instrumentalists. In order to ensure total anonymity, all names and places are fictitious.

David began to label himself as a musician rather than as a singer and he reflected on the way his musicality had been controlled by conductors and directors when he was employed full-time. He eventually found his way into conducting.

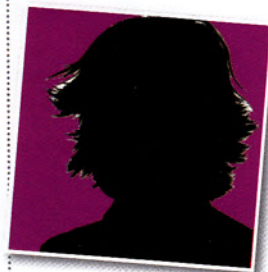
'I need to be able to develop my own ideas, expressing the music in the way I want to. I'm conducting this choir now and that's great for me. I choose the programme, I can drive it the way I want it, and I got to conduct the performance – which I find very exciting'

David realised he had never been totally comfortable as a singer and has now found a new place in the profession where he can be in control of his music, be musically expressive and still enjoy the thrill of performance.

Redundancy focused David's mind on the need to be in control of his personal and professional life. His decision to re-define himself as a musician helped him to withdraw from the singing profession with sufficient self-esteem and dignity to explore other areas of the music industry. David was an instrumentalist before becoming a singer and this may have helped his transition. David the singer is now David the conductor.

REDISCOVERING THE VOCAL SELF – JANET

'I definitely rode on the fact that I was an opera singer, nothing to do with singing but the name of the job and the level of the job'



Redundancy brought home to Janet the extent of her dependency on the 'job' for status and recognition, to the point where she felt she had no identity of her own. Subsequently, without a

professional organisation to support her self-esteem, she experienced difficulties when she tried to make a life in the wider community. Janet initially began a teaching practice and worked so hard that she was forced to stop and re-evaluate her life. The process that followed allowed her to rediscover the core elements of singing in her life. Eventually she was able to develop enough confidence to feel that she and her voice were of sufficient value not to need the endorsement of a national organisation.

'When I sing now, it just feels so good. I feel energised. Singing means energy and expression, not identity now. It was identity for years'

She now mixes a teaching career with professional concert work and feels she is singing better than ever because she now sings primarily for love and not only for money. Janet's scenario shows the danger of relying on a corporate identity for self-esteem. The crisis in Janet's life put her back in touch with her core singing values. She now focuses on the physicality of singing rather than the status that being a singer brings. Janet the singer is now Janet the teacher/singer.

CHANGE WITHOUT TAKING RESPONSIBILITY – JOHN

'I think it was just the euphoria of having been with a company for 20 years and then there being a change in your life, without you having to make any decisions. You can become stale without realising it'



After many years of playing the same programmes and visiting the same venues, even the most challenging of jobs can become routine. John enjoyed the structure of full-time work because

decisions about his life were made for him. Unlike the other two singers, he showed a more passive reaction to redundancy. He realised there was little he could do about the impending change and eased himself into a freelance career, but still took a large amount of work from the company who made him redundant.

'I've been pretty unadventurous until now, but as a freelancer you are more your own person'. It's almost like I'm enjoying it more than I have for a long time. You get a greater sense of fulfilment when you have an audition and get work'

Although John missed the security of full-time employment he began to experience the 'buzz' of getting work on the strength of an audition. However, although he appears to enjoy his independence, his transition was cushioned by the initial availability of freelance work.

John welcomed redundancy as an opportunity for much needed change – and perhaps an element of risk in his life. The challenge of freelance work may eventually give John the confidence to be more decisive about his future. John is still John the singer, but in a more pro-active manner.

These three singers have all started to re-define 'Me', but it is a 'Me' that is still involved in music. Some of singers I interviewed attempted to find work in a non-musical capacity but could never replace the physical and psychological fulfilment that they had become accustomed to as working musicians.

P psychologically, redundancy is commonly likened to bereavement. Although loss of work is the initial focus for grief, for musicians it is the loss of a creative outlet and musical self-expression at a high level that ultimately dominates the grieving process. Ironically, these needs are not always recognised or appreciated until they are under threat.

A study of trauma victims by Payne et al (2007) uses the metaphor of a broken vase to illustrate the individual process of coping with loss. When the vase is shattered, the pieces can be glued together in an attempt to recreate its former state, but it will always be fragile. Alternatively, a beautiful mosaic can be created from the pieces. Janet and David have created a mosaic whereby they have used their past experiences to develop other aspects of themselves and their careers and now see the positive side to being made redundant. John initially attempted to restore the vase by working on a freelance basis but he is aware that the new enjoyment he is experiencing is insecure. It is possible that the renewed energy he has for his singing will encourage greater autonomy and creativity in his career.

Musicians are very resourceful, but when exposed to a severe, life-changing crisis there can be benefits from specialist (affordable) psychological support to help restructure their lives. None of the singers I interviewed was offered any kind of specialist help. The ISM offers free telephone counselling to its members and although this is extremely valuable, the counsellors are not music specialists.

The music profession should investigate the very successful programmes that have been devised by the professions of sport and dance to aid performers through transition. Key to understanding musical career transition is the understanding of what music means to a professional musician.

One of the greatest difficulties for a musician to comprehend is that the power of music is actually powerless against the political institutions that dominate modern life. Musicians dedicate their lives to serving music and when the music is taken away a large part of 'Me' is also removed. Specialist transition programmes could address issues such as these, which are of fundamental concern to musicians. The musicians themselves would then feel they were being helped by 'someone who understands'.

Career transition for musicians may be an issue that becomes far more prevalent in the future, whether it is involuntary or by choice. I hope that by writing about the practical and emotional process of dealing with enforced career disruption some of the stigma that musicians so often attach to talking about their problems may be reduced. Loss of subsidy may not be an opportunity for institutional growth but quite possibly for individual growth.

What happens when the music stops? Music might change but it never stops, providing that musicians remain resourceful and adaptable.

Payne, A.J., Joseph, S. & Tudway, J. (2007) Assimilation and accommodation processes following traumatic experiences. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*. 12: 75-91

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