

STRINGS

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Getting Coverage

How to know when you need
a publicist and what you should expect

BY DAVID TEMPLETON

AAARON MEYER MADE A DISCOVERY several years ago that has profoundly affected his career as a professional violinist: every serious performer, sooner or later, needs a good publicist. "The first time I hired a publicist, I barely knew anything about publicity," says Meyer, who lives in Oregon. "I had an idea what a press release was, I knew a little about how to do an interview, how to talk to a journalist—but I didn't really know how to get a journalist to want to talk to me."

Meyer, 33, whose well-produced press materials link his name in big, bold letters to the moniker "Concert Rock Violinist," made his concert debut as a soloist at the age of 11 with the Philadelphia Orchestra. A frequent collaborator with musician Bill Lamb, with whom he's cut a number of CDs, Meyer has toured the world and soloed with the Bangkok Symphony Orchestra. He was a featured performer at the Phuket Tsunami Anniversary Concert in 2005, played for the Dalai Lama in Portland in 2001, and headlined the World Peace Concert in the Hague in 1999. Two years ago, working with Lamb, he was the guest soloist at a heavily promoted (and ultimately sold-out) performance with the Oregon Symphony, playing a 90-minute concert of music composed by Meyer and Lamb.

With each of these events, Meyer has found that with the help of a professional publicist acting as a bridge between himself and the media, his reputation has grown and his audience attendance has increased.

"It's really pretty simple," he says. "To do the things I want to do, I need a certain level of recognition, and especially when I started, I needed a professional to make that happen."

THE SETUP

At various times in his career, Meyer has either had a publicist on retainer (meaning that the publicist was paid a monthly or bimonthly fee to seek out and orchestrate publicity opportunities) or has elected to work with a publicist on a project-by-project basis, calling in the professional whenever preparing for a major event, recital, or CD release.

Meyer, these days, having developed quite a bit of media savvy through his relationships with various publicists, has a pretty good sense of when a professional touch is needed, and, for reasons of cost-effectiveness, usually chooses to hire his publicity people on a project-by-project basis.

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Asked if he'd recommend a professional publicist for an up-and-coming artist, he says, "I'd recommend it for anyone, established or not, who, for whatever reason . . . wants to see his or her public profile get a little bit bigger. I've tried to do the publicity myself, and I have a reasonably good rapport with local journalists, but I'd really rather be doing my music and leave the publicity to someone else."

Publicity is not something most musicians learn in music school, though more and more conservatories are beginning to offer courses in professional tactics for musicians, publicity and marketing included. Sometimes, properly positioning a musician or ensemble for maximum media interest requires an outside pair of eyes and a mind attuned to the ways of the modern media.

A publicist serves as a liaison between the client and the media at large, actively pursuing radio, television, newspaper, and magazine outlets with the goal of encouraging editors, producers, and journalists to cover the artist and his or her concerts, CDs, and upcoming events. In some cases, the publicist will help develop a marketing campaign, designing display ads, posters, and radio or

television spots. Such advertising carries additional expense, of course, beyond the salary or flat fee of the publicist, so the scope of each project has everything to do with how much money there is in the musician's publicity budget.

THE TIMING

So, at what point in a musician's career might he want to consider hiring a publicist? Milina Barry, a prominent New York-based publicist, says a musician should have a fairly active touring schedule and should probably already have a manager in place. Barry's past-and-present client list includes cellist David Finckel and pianist Wu Han, the husband-and-wife team who head up the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and the Music@Menlo festival; the Pacifica Quartet; concert violinist Anne Akiko Meyers; the Tokyo String Quartet; cellist Steven Isserlis; conductor Simon Bychkov; the Boston Philharmonic; and the St. Lawrence String Quartet.

"It's important that management support be there, some representative to be booking and securing engagements for the artist," Barry says. "Of course, there has to be a certain amount of activity and a certain amount of revenue coming in that would give the artist the freedom to take on the expense of working with a publicist."

THE COST

The expense in question, of course, varies from publicist to publicist, and can range from \$600 or \$700 for a small, one-time project all the way up to thousands of dollars, depending on the scope of the work and the experience and clout of the publicist.

Finding the right publicist is as important as making the decision to engage one in the first place. Much like looking for a dentist, music coach, or financial consultant, one can rely on word-of-mouth and seek out the referrals of other musicians or mentors who've used publicists.

"Word of mouth is vital," Barry agrees. "Most likely, being in the field, conservatory publicists will be happy to have their brains picked, and will probably know a lot of the other people working in the musical publicity field."

Barry also suggests that conservatory students schedule an appointment with the public-relations director of the school.

After you identify a possible publicist, you will want to read through the publicist's roster and analyze his or her clients and how solid the coverage is for those clients. If you know that the publicist in question has handled a recent symphonic tour or solo engagement, you will want to ask about it. If you know any of the artists being handled by the publicist, you might want to call them up and ask how helpful the publicist has been in moving them closer to their goals.

"Arts coverage is really tight right now," Barry says. "With newspapers and maga-

zines, on the radio, and on television, the amount of time and space given to the arts and to music has shrunk down quite a bit. With newspapers having less and less room to run stories about the arts, they are now very selective

about what events and which artists they choose to cover."

THE RULE

In other words, you can't just send a press release and expect to land a feature story about you on the cover page. You have to make the media want to cover you, to recognize that a story about you, your quartet, or event is of value and interest to their readers or viewers.

"Publicists are there to lobby for you, to make a concerted effort to secure space on behalf of the client," Barry says. "When a concert artist is passing through Salt Lake City or Philadelphia, there may be a number of other artists passing through at the same time. Whether or not a publicist is there to bring you to the attention of local reporters and editors is really something that can make a difference as to whether or not the paper profiles you in advance—which can lead to greater visibility and boost ticket sales—or maybe sends someone to review the concert, which can help build your reputation and standing in the concert artist community."

Aaron Meyers, the concert rock violinist, agrees.

"With young artists," he says, "the change in profile that occurs after the engagement of a publicist can be especially dramatic, because they are starting from having had no publicity strategy to suddenly having a presence . . . You [have] to make [presence] happen, and part of the way you do that is by using a well-planned publicity campaign." □

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