



Your Five Next Career Moves

Post-Grad Blueprint for Success

BY ANGELA MYLES BEECHING

Expert music career coach and author of *Beyond Talent: Creating a Successful Career in Music*, Angela Myles Beeching offers targeted career advice for life after graduation.

Elizabeth, a recent grad, met me for coaching a few years back when she was fresh out of a top master's program in voice. She'd done well in school and graduated feeling confident in her abilities as a performer and hopeful about her future. But she came to me nine months after graduation and she wasn't happy.

"I've been taking lots of auditions and networking and I've got a few voice students, but nothing is really happening," she lamented. "I hate my day job and feel exhausted—like I've lost my sense of purpose!"

What was the answer for Elizabeth? In our coaching sessions, we worked on a tailored plan to advance her career and to improve her immediate circumstances. To do this, we first clarified her goals and expectations, her strengths and challenges. Through coaching, Elizabeth articulated long- and short-term goals and what specifically she wanted to change in her current situation. Between our coaching meetings, she had "assignments," which included targeted networking, researching opportunities to perform and teach, and creating potential programs for recitals at local concert series and venues.

Because Elizabeth was motivated and worked on her plan consistently, taking care of weekly action steps, she soon began to see results. She started booking more performances and felt less exhausted—she was getting her career on track!

Whether you're in a position to work with a career coach or not, the good news is you can do much of the needed work on your own. But there's a catch: you need to formulate a concrete, achievable short-term goal and a real plan for how to get there—and then work your plan consistently week in and week out.

Most singers have operatic-sized dreams but are limited in their ideas as to how to achieve them. For most, their only short-term goal is to win a Young Artist Program (YAP) contract. This means their only action plan is to take every YAP audition (often hemorrhaging money in the process).

Sadly, many people buy into the myth that the only path to success is through these YAPs and getting “discovered.” So every year, along with a gazillion other singers, they take the same auditions, making the odds astronomical.

This isn't a career plan. It's putting your faith in winning the lottery.

The good news is there's an alternative—a way to create a practical plan to increase your performance experience while building both your résumé and your network. This blueprint for success demands you take specific initiatives. Welcome to your five next career success moves!

1. Start by Taking Stock of Your Assets

Take a personal inventory of your skills, contacts, and experience. I recommend writing these in three lists, using pen and paper. Go somewhere quiet, unplug all your devices, and work on this for 20 minutes. Writing by hand helps with reflection and makes it less likely you'll be distracted by e-mails and texts.

First list your specific skills, musical and otherwise (from sight-reading, singing German art song, or teaching adults, to editing, grant writing, or speaking Portuguese). Whatever your skills are, write them down. Many of us aren't clear about what we do well, so when it comes time for networking, interviewing, or considering work options, we end up selling ourselves short—we sometimes leave our most compelling selling points out of the conversation.

If you're unsure what your strengths are, ask people you've worked with for perspective and feedback. Ask if they'd write a two- or three-sentence detailed description of you so you can see what they find to be your most important experiences and skills.

Your second list should be your contacts—not Facebook friends or LinkedIn connections—but the people you know well enough to call on them for advice or ideas (musical or otherwise). Think former teachers or classmates, neighbors, family friends, and people you've performed with or attended summer programs with. List their name and organization or work affiliation. We all know far more people than we realize, and because this is such a relationship-driven profession, cultivating your contacts is essential.

Next list your experience—but not roles you've performed as they appear on your résumé. Instead, focus on listing just key experiences you've had that made an impact on you. These might include a year abroad, being an RA in a dorm, working with a particular director or coach, premiering a new work, or gaining experience through a community service project.

The point of this personal inventory is to help you see more clearly the specific assets you have so you can build on them. Making these three lists will help you feel more confident, knowing there are people you can connect with for advice and that you have clear and concrete skills and experience to offer.

2. Reconnect

This career move is about cultivating your *existing* network. Singers often misunderstand networking, thinking it's all about connecting to those in power and hoping to use charm to get what they want (a role, audition, funding). When approached this way, networking is manipulative: our self-serving intentions are all too obvious to the people we're sucking up to.

But here's the deal: real networking is not about any of that. Networking is not all *me, me, me*. Instead, real networking is about creating *us*—as in authentic, two-way relationships.

Ultimately, networking is about cultivating a community of mutually supportive friends and colleagues. People we genuinely care about and get to know as individuals, not simply people we can take advantage of. That's why this important step is titled *reconnect*. Every one of us has contacts from our past we've lost track of. Look at your list from your personal audit.

Identify three people from your past you've lost touch with. Be strategic: these should be people you'd be interested in having a brainstorming conversation with

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or getting advice from (but not asking for a performance, audition, or money).

These neglected contacts might include future collaborators, employers, or donors. And you might be any of those things for them. But without having a real connection, you can't develop enough of a relationship to see what's possible.

Before reconnecting with your three contacts, do a little research on Facebook or LinkedIn. Read about what they've been up to so that you can congratulate them when you reconnect.

Then, write to them asking to set up a time for a phone call or to meet in person. It's fine to initiate the reconnecting by e-mail or FB message, but the goal is to set up a time to talk by phone, Skype, or in-person meeting. Why? Because cultivating real relationships is done in real time, human to human.

To put this in context, Caroline wanted to know how to book recital opportunities at more prestigious concert series. I think she expected me to give her a list of venues and names and the “secret sauce” to getting bookings.

Instead, I asked her a series of questions about her experience and contacts: where had she performed recitals already, who had hired her, and had she stayed in contact or asked for advice from any of these concert series presenters. Once she started thinking differently about her network, she was off and running.

Caroline realized she could reconnect with presenters from her past (the ones she'd gotten to know and who were enthusiastic about her performances) and that she could ask for their suggestions of other places to perform and people to contact. With such referrals, she realized her otherwise “cold” e-mail or phone inquiry to a new presenter would turn into a warm one and that this was to her advantage.

3. Identify New Opportunities

You've articulated your assets and reconnected with some key people to get advice and leads. Now it's time to

identify new opportunities in your local community and region.

I'm referring to opportunities beyond auditions. Of course you're going to take appropriate auditions—but if getting roles is *all* you're focusing on, you're limiting your opportunities to gain more performance experience and build your network and reputation.

My client Kristin heard that a prominent local art museum was planning a big open house day in the coming months. In reading the preliminary event listings, she saw almost no live music scheduled. So Kristin wrote an e-mail to the event organizer and proposed a mini-concert she could do with a pianist colleague in one of the museum galleries—and she proposed a custom-tailored program.

The museum's current exhibition at the time featured women artists, so Kristin and her pianist proposed a program of works by women composers, with possible commentary in between pieces to be given by the exhibition curator and performers. The event organizer was very interested and wrote back immediately asking what Kristin's fee would be. The museum was happy to book their performance, not only to get a terrific mini-recital but also to present a custom program relevant to their exhibition that could draw a different audience demographic. It was a win-win.

Note that identifying an opportunity is really about finding a need that you can fill. The museum had not advertised that they were looking for musicians for the event. But Kristin's proposal clearly connected with the museum's need for a diverse range of attractive and relevant programming. They just didn't know they needed Kristin until they saw how well her proposed program aligned with their mission and goals for the event.

Again, this is not about *me, me, me*. It's about dialing in to WIIFT: What's in it for them. You're looking for a match between needs in the community and what you have and want to offer—and what you're at the right stage to deliver on. Perhaps you have an idea for a way to fill a need but are unsure of how to pursue it (or if you're ready). This is why career moves numbers 1 and 2 are so important: know your strengths and

check with mentors, colleagues, or a career coach for perspective on how to approach people with proposals.

4. Envision

When I work with clients, I typically ask them to fast forward in their imaginations to one year in the future, to picture that we're celebrating the work they've done and the progress they've made in advancing their careers to that point. I ask what we'd be celebrating and to write it down. This is to clarify what exactly the client wants to focus their work on in the coming year and the outcome they want to achieve.

For one client, Alexis, her goal was to be able to sing with more prestigious groups: as an oratorio soloist, in local chamber opera productions, and with some of the new music groups in town. Alexis learned new music quickly and liked working with instrumentalists and composers.

In terms of short-term goals to get her there, Alexis realized that her online presence was weak. Her website was dated, a cookie cutter template, and there wasn't anything distinctive about her bio, photos, and overall image. She came across as a talented young singer—one of very, very many.

So the goal that we worked on in steps was to clarify the brand she wanted to convey and revamp her website to reflect that message. This entailed reflecting on who the “real” Alexis is and how to get photos, video, type, colors, and graphics to more authentically convey her true self and her distinctive strengths.

With an updated web platform and graphic design as well as a clear and focused message, Alexis was able to create a much more polished and memorable first impression.

Some months later, after our work on her website and on making contacts for bookings was done, Alexis happily reported a marked increase in higher-profile performance opportunities.

5. Do

This is the final and most important move because it kicks all the planning and groundwork into gear. It's about taking action and creating weekly steps to get the work done.

And this is precisely where most musicians get stuck. Why?

Because of fear—fear of failure, fear of looking bad in front of our peers, fear of disappointing ourselves or our loved ones. And sometimes we're so afraid of doing

the wrong thing next that we don't do anything. We procrastinate.

My client Lauren was avoiding revising her bio. I'd assign it, and the next week she would have excuses. Of course, the revising and updating of a bio is a basic step for any self-promotion effort, and it can seem like a mundane task. But writing a bio involves taking a hard look at what we've done so far in our careers. And for many of us who compare ourselves to impossibly high standards, or to the successes of our peers, this can be painful.

Keep in mind that Lauren is a terrific singer and an excellent teacher. She had no reason to feel bad about what she'd accomplished. But issues of self-esteem quickly surfaced with her bio writing assignment.

Lauren was avoiding the bio work because she didn't think that what she had for career highlights was “good enough.” She felt she didn't have impressive enough credentials to achieve her goals, so working on her bio left her feeling like a failure.

My job in this case was to help Lauren break the bio writing down into small steps that didn't feel so loaded and to help her identify the specific details of her background that would help her create a lively and engaging bio—effectively communicating her specific strengths.

The good news is that not only did Lauren end up with a stronger, more authentic, and memorable bio, but doing the work boosted her overall confidence.

In everyday interactions she looked and acted more optimistically, stood taller, and seemed more at ease with herself—and this, of course, also had positive benefits for her networking and performances.

In summary, these five moves for career success are yours to put into action. So take stock of your assets, reconnect with key people, identify new opportunities in your community, and envision the success you want to celebrate within one year. And most importantly: get going on it this week!

Angela Myles Beeching is the author of Beyond Talent: Creating a Successful Career in Music and a career coach who loves helping musicians book more work and live the life they desire. Her experience includes directing the Center for Music Entrepreneurship at Manhattan School of Music as well as directing career programs for New England Conservatory and Indiana University. Connect with her at AngelaBeeching.com—and while there, sign up for her weekly “Monday Bytes” and take the music career quizzes.