

# The Horn Call

MAY 2022



Journal of the

國際圓号協会

L'Association internationale du cor  
Internationale Horngesellschaft

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# The 21st-Century Musician and the Art of Collaboration

by Anna Summers and Larry Williams



Anna Summers

For a musician, the dream career is doing what we love – making music – for a living. However, we know that in the United States, the college or conservatory experience is not a magic portal. Following graduation, most of us usually face a long and arduous process of competing in a saturated market for jobs that, with each passing year, are becoming fewer and less lucrative than the last. Tragically, COVID-19 was the last straw for many musicians who decided that it was time to move on to a more “relevant” career path.

As a graduate student in violin performance, the ominous future as a musician is daunting. It was difficult to want to practice, not because I didn’t enjoy playing violin, but I often found myself asking questions such as “What’s the point?” and “What are we actually *doing* for people in society?”

Hungry for discussion, I started a podcast titled: “Music | Why?” The podcast is dedicated to realizing the value of music and its role in our lives through interviews with music industry professionals. That is how I met Larry Williams, whose life, message, and decades of experience helped me realize that a career in music is more than playing music for music’s sake. It’s about seeking to be an agent for change; i.e., *music* is not the point, it’s about *people*.

The following is a snapshot from July 2021 of an ongoing dialogue between Larry and me as we navigate the challenges and questions that 21st-century artists face today.



Larry Williams

**Anna Summers:** In the last year, I have been curious about the ways people have adapted to pandemic restrictions. As a Yamaha performing artist, what have you been up to?

**Larry Williams:** Normally, Yamaha sends me to music conferences and festivals to conduct horn masterclasses and workshops, but COVID made it necessary to cancel many of the events. Incidentally, I have done more masterclasses this year than I’ve ever done in my life! A lot of events have transitioned to a virtual format, thereby doing more masterclasses. For example, I met with several All-State band and orchestra horn sections online. Obviously, the kids were disappointed because they weren’t able to play together. But we got a lot of work done in their sectionals. While the All-State experience was different from past years, it was still a positive experience for all of us.

**AS:** That’s wonderful! It sounds like you had the chance to connect and bond with students in a way that might not have been possible in past setups. ... Larry, when would you say you knew that music is what you wanted to center your career around?

**LW:** I was born in [Washington] DC. My parents moved around. We lived in Chicago for a few years and then moved back to the suburbs of DC. I went to Penn State for two years. Loved it! But I wasn’t serious about music then. I didn’t know what I wanted to do. The one thing I was really passionate about in high school was playing horn in the marching band. A friend suggested that I should major in music, and I said, “I don’t know. We’ll see.” I didn’t really take lessons until my senior year of high school.

I loved the community of being in the band. I loved

the friendships that I developed and having that feeling of belonging. I didn’t want to give that up when I went to college, but I still wasn’t sure if I wanted to be a professional horn player. That still, in my mind, seemed a little far-fetched. But I ended up getting a scholarship.

That was the first time I heard of people who were *very* serious about playing the horn. They *clearly* had been working on this for *a while!* I was terrified of losing my scholarship. My mom appreciated the fact that they were taking a chance on me, and I did too. For the first time in my life, I got serious about practicing and researching what I might do after college in terms of maybe playing in an orchestra. I worked hard for two years and got caught up to where I should have been in the first place.

Then I started playing with a graduate brass quintet – these really cool graduate students who needed a horn player. We did exceptional things, including attending Aspen together. They were great mentors and friends to me. One of them said, “You should consider transferring to a conservatory! You’re really good and you might want to go to a place that has a more intense program.” Then some of my professors suggested the same things. That’s when I started to look around.

One of my friends at Penn State said, “You’re from Maryland, right? Why don’t you go to Peabody?” and I was like, “What’s Peabody?” I was so *not* into music when I was a kid that I didn’t even know what Peabody Conservatory was, which was right up the road from where I lived!

Eventually I auditioned, transferred, and got my Bachelor’s and Graduate Performance Degree there. After graduation, I played in the New World Symphony Orchestra

for a couple of years, which led to my first teaching appointment at Florida International University, which led me to freelancing in Miami. I played in a professional brass quintet and went on the road with Frank Sinatra's band and performed at the Superbowl. My whole career started to flow from there. However, it hadn't been until I was in college that I was even remotely serious about music and becoming a professional.

**AS:** I can relate to your freshman year naivety! You must've worked incredibly hard. Today, it sounds as though your career has pivoted to more teaching. Where did that pivot from performing to teaching take place?

**LW:** Good question. Nothing was planned. I started teaching in Miami, and I didn't know if I was going to like teaching or not. I had never taught anyone anything in my life, and I was nervous about teaching at the college level. I had just graduated myself! So I *knew* how much I did not know. Luckily for me, they were great people. They were open minded and welcomed me. They understood the fact that I didn't necessarily know what I was doing in terms of teaching, but that I did know what I was talking about in terms of playing the horn. I overthought it, so I had limited success in the beginning. I was imitating things that my former teachers had told me, using their voice and trying to act like some of the teachers I had. It didn't work for me, and it didn't work for the students, and I felt weird about it.

### **When I realized that I loved teaching, I broke down my own playing and my own teaching philosophies...**

When I realized that I loved teaching, I broke down my own playing and my own teaching philosophies, the things that I do to learn music and to get ready for performances. And it worked! I could speak authentically to the students. I was learning along with them because I had never had the luxury of taking the time to break down what I do. I was too busy just playing.

My students responded to that style of teaching, and that's when I realized that I *can* teach! And not only can I teach, seeing them grow and improve and getting to know them as people – I loved it! I got a feeling of joy out of teaching that I had only ever experienced playing my horn. I got really passionate about my studio and my students, and I wanted for my students to be world beaters – we did great together!

A few years later I moved back to Baltimore to go back to the freelancing I was doing when I was a student. I could build a teaching studio and create opportunities for myself. Also, my friends and family were in this area.

Just by coincidence the horn teacher at the Peabody Preparatory Division was on maternity leave. I had sent my résumé to every school in Maryland before I came back. At the time, I wasn't sure if it would be helpful. It turned out to be *very* helpful because when this horn

teacher went on maternity leave, the Dean remembered seeing this letter from me. She called my former teacher at Peabody, who gave her approval. So that's how I started teaching in the preparatory division.

Now I'm starting all over again, teaching students anywhere from beginners to adult students who want to dust off the old horn again. I didn't know if I was going to like this kind of teaching, but I ended up loving the challenge to adapt my style to the needs of each student. It forced me to dig deep into my creativity bag and become a flexible person. It was challenging but I loved it.

Then a few years later I had the opportunity to teach chamber music and horn minor at Peabody Conservatory. Once again, I was starting over with *very* serious conservatory students. By then, I had a lot of teaching experience, so it was just a matter of homing in on what their needs were and doing some mentoring.

That's how I got deep into teaching. All the while, I was still performing. I always had a nice balance between teaching and performing. It was always my goal to maintain that balance. More often than not, I go back and forth like a pendulum. It's easier to specialize, but I've created a career that does both and it's very satisfying. For me, performance and teaching are all the same thing. I get the same joy out of doing both.

**AS:** Both? One might argue that teaching and performing are quite different. Why would you say both?

**LW:** It's all about relationships and connections. Music is not the point. It's a *tool* that we use as human beings to connect and to remind ourselves of our shared humanity. If that's what it takes for us to connect with each other on an emotional, personal, spiritual level, then okay! Let's use music! So whether I'm teaching or having a shared experience with a student or playing in an ensemble or playing as a soloist and having a shared experience with an audience, it's the same to me.

**AS:** Well, now we're getting into the central question. With your diverse career and well-rounded teaching philosophy, I feel as though you're the one to ask. Why would you say that music is important to people and to society?

**LW:** Society is important. Throughout human history, there have been many paradigm shifts into new ages. During these shifts, institutions are called into question. Some institutions go by the wayside, some institutions get tweaked, and new institutions grow. I say, as someone who's been involved in various music industry organizations, that we are grappling with the question, "What is the future in terms of classical music? What is the 21st-century artist? What is the training that the 21st-century artist needs?"

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to using music to bring us together.**

It's interesting to hear perspectives on that. We are probably going to shift from music serving us and our needs to using music to bring us together. Instead of celebrating the music itself only, we'll ask how the music is relevant. We can use it as a tool, not just for our artistic edification and enjoyment. More and more, we're seeing that happen. Orchestras and music education programs are expanding their outreach in dozens of ways. When we understand the impact that music can have as opposed to cloistering it away for a few, we can do some real good with it.

In terms of the 21st-century artist and programs that would serve today's musicians, I'm happy with the way my career has evolved. However, probably 75% of what I do, I didn't learn in school. Yes, the stuff I learned in school was valuable because it taught me the artistic and technical skills that I needed to be able to play my instrument, but there wasn't much discussion about *why* we do this. I've always been equally as curious about the point of playing the music we play. Who listens? Who doesn't listen? Is there going to be an audience? I like all kinds of music and most everybody that I know does too. Why should I dedicate my life to playing only this subset of music?

I have students who have had great success after college. They perform, teach, play chamber music, have studios, do multimedia projects, do stuff outside of music. It has become the new normal. So the training for the 21st-century artist needs to shift. This is one of those paradigm shifts: the curriculum, the faculty, *all of it* needs to be examined to be sure that we are doing the vocational preparation that students need to give them the tools to go out there and not just win an orchestra audition, but to actually create opportunities for themselves so that they can use their music to benefit the community or to do whatever they want to do with it.

We must not only be excellent at performing but also have an impact. On a practical level, the future of a 21st-century artist is to have an impact with your music – to do something with it! Not just display it but to actually use it for a greater purpose.

That's why I'm so happy to talk to you, because I feel that you're asking the central question, which is the *why*. Not the *how*, not the *what*, but the *why*. We spend so much time on the art form and so much time on the techniques and the tradition, but we spend very little time talking about the impact of the music and why every culture in the world has some form of music. If that's true, and my experience has shown that it *is* true, then that means music is something human: experiencing it, reacting to it, is human. And if it's that fundamental, then we should talk of the power of it, not just the beauty of it. When we can truly understand the impact of music in society, we can use that to inform our performances, to inform our teaching, to help us figure out what is next! Like how to make our performances relevant or how to diversify an audience. Your *why* is the point.

**AS:** You bring up good points and questions to consider. In regard to reforming the curriculum, do you have any future projects in mind that illustrate this 21st-century mode of thought?

**LW:** Thank you for asking that. I'm teaching at Washington Adventist University, which has given me an opportunity to build what I would call a 21st-century model horn studio. We start with an understanding that I'm going to teach them everything I've got when it comes to playing the horn – traditions, playing in ensembles, all that good stuff. But layered on top of that is project work, multimedia projects throughout the semester. For example, I'll say, "Create a demo video that will be like an instrument petting zoo to introduce the horn to little kids." If we weren't in COVID times, I would be taking them into a public school. Eventually they'll post their work on our studio YouTube channel. By the time they graduate, they will each have a video portfolio of work and a place where they can post on a regular basis for everyone to see. They will be able to look back years later at that portfolio and see their own growth, their goals, and how those goals have changed over time. That's invaluable to an artist. It's like watching a personal documentary.

**As educators, our job is to create more access...**

**AS:** You're on to something!

**LW:** I hope so! We'll see! So far, they've responded to it. The generation in college now, asking them to do something like this is nothing for them! It's not like it would have been for me when I was an undergrad. If someone had asked me to do a multimedia project, my first reaction would've been that I didn't have time because had to practice, etc. Now, students are more than happy to make time for this because they can already see that these projects are career building and career training – these are the skills that will enable them to create a career that is not only fulfilling but making a difference. It's not a hard sell. As educators, our job is to create more access to impactful experiences with music, projects, and audiences. This ensures that our students can not only make enough money to eat but are seen as valuable and relevant.

**AS:** The word "irrelevant" really stung last year. Having to confront the reality that there is a disconnect between what we deem as relevant and what our audiences deem as relevant was painfully revealing. I appreciate the work you're doing to bring this question of the "why" to the forefront of the conversation in order to produce a new generation of students who are prepared for any sort of pivoting that may be required of them. Who knows what the next ten years have in store for the world!

**LW:** That's the beauty of it. I do not know. I'm betting that if we give ourselves permission to be creative and explore the *why*, we'll be fine! If we keep putting our heads down and not changing anything, that is a future I would be nervous about.

**AS:** From my observations, the businesses that have a clear focus on the why are the ones that survive. As an artist in the 21st century, we are all required to be more entrepreneurial. With that comes the need to be more collaborative.

**LW:** Absolutely it does.

**AS:** However, some might argue that the role of our education is to prepare students for every possible performance scenario – to give them a thorough education on the artform. That in and of itself is already a lot of information for four years of study. More collaborative and entrepreneurial endeavors might distract students from necessary time in the practice room. What are your thoughts on this argument?

**LW:** First of all, we must dispel the myth that individual achievements are the pinnacle of a musician's career. Our ultimate goal is not the pursuit of individual excellence – when you do that, people are going to say, "Great!" and then move on. We hold ourselves to standards that mean we "made it," all the while alienating ourselves from our peers and our audiences. Even people at the "top" can find themselves unfulfilled – why is that? And often, their feelings of unfulfillment lead to burnout, quitting, and in some cases, broken relationships and addictions. Why are people unhappy? Individual achievements are not the point. When we work together, you have your friends, partner, orchestra, *team* – that's usually what draws people to music in the first place. The more I break down my philosophy, the more I talk about collaboration. This next generation coming up, they want to be *connected*: with other musicians, with their communities, with society.

**AS:** What specific advice would you have for an aspiring soloist?

**LW:** Great. Good for them! But as a soloist myself, I've done it both ways. There have been times when I focused purely on my solo role, thinking that I was doing so in order to not "ruin it" for everyone. But other times, I made a point of deliberately turning rehearsals into a collaborative chamber music experience – *turning around, asking questions, and working together*. In my opinion, this way is easier and far more enjoyable because you are sharing the experience with your team. We can do both: become a great artist and learn how to be interdependent. The need for collaborative skills applies to everyone! Focusing on collaboration and inclusion is the key to any successful organization.

**AS:** Most people would agree with that. So there are two audiences for this message: students like myself who are setting the stage after this enormous COVID-19-induced paradigm shift, and seasoned professionals who are either prepping said students or who are having to transform their organizations. We are all experiencing growing pains and are compelled to examine the status quo. Collaboration requires practice to become a natural skill. For each of these

parties, students and professionals, what is your advice with regard to collaboration?

**LW:** Yes. It is not always natural to collaborate. First, we must start with the idea that it's not all about you or even about how well you play the music. The music is about *everyone*.

Students, focus on building your team right away. Many students already do this without realizing it. While you're still in school, create a practice pod of people you really trust who are around the same stage as you. Make sure to keep it diverse! Don't be afraid to cross disciplines or make friends with people across the country. Then, keep track of people. Stay in touch. Ask for advice and be willing to give it when asked! Drawing upon the diversity of each other's strengths is what will bring lifelong friendships and success.

Professionals, it's harder for pros to learn new tricks, and in a lot of cases, what got us here was deep diving into a silo. But of course, we don't actually live in silos. We live in diverse communities and cultures. Here are questions to consider: Are you connecting with your fellow musicians? Are you serving others with what you're creating? Are you connecting with your audiences? How do you feel about playing now? What was fun "back in the day"? Whatever got you to where you are, you won't ever lose that. But what is your "why"? A fulfilled life requires deeply rooted reasons that involve more than just making music and paying the bills – if that were the case, we might as well be factories. Challenge yourself! Put together projects, ask your audiences what they care about, not just music but also contemporary topics!

The final step is to appreciate other people's perspectives. Striving for ultimate happiness means striving for interdependence.

**AS:** The questions you posed to working professionals definitely apply to the student mindset as well. I'm looking forward to this next year of graduate studies without as many COVID-19 restrictions so that I can do more to build my team. Will you describe a few concepts of what a team looks like to you?

**LW:** A team is a group of people coming together with one or several shared goals. I tell all my students that the most efficient way to achieve individual goals is by being part of a team that supports each other. I often say to people, "You can beat me, but you can't beat my team." Group success is ultimate, lifelong, *sustainable* success. Remember, it can be lonely at the top if your only goal has been to "be the best."

Within a team, there are many different roles, but none of them are finite or permanent. It's important to know yourself (your strengths and weaknesses) in order to be most effective on your team. A team that is working to achieve a specific project goal must also be led. A leader is someone who takes responsibility for managing the members of the team and positioning them for success.

**AS:** I love the idea of a team being part of what becomes your lifelong and sustainable success. Coming back to this idea of the 21st-century musician, what is the conversation that we need to be having?

**LW:** I'm excited to be living in these times, that programs, organizations, and curricula are being reviewed. The definition of a 21st-century artist is someone who is a citizen of their community, who works to create a positive impact, who is able to communicate about their art in a way that people can relate to, and who understands the needs of the people they serve. This goes back to the question of how we prepare students. We need to ask ourselves again, what is the *point* of our degree programs? What is an American music education? There is no reason why students shouldn't be oriented to understand that they are playing for people. This means that we will need to program music with a global context that serves a purpose. The future of a 21st-century musician will require a well-rounded education of contemporary conversations on conflicts and problems in our communities and throughout the world.

**AS:** I attended a Performing Arts Study Abroad in Havana, Cuba during my undergraduate studies, and I found so many parallels and lessons from the arts institutions I had the chance to observe. That single experience plays a part in how I approach my own music making today. ... Given everything we just talked about, what is our call to action?

**LW:** Start small. Get into communities outside of your silo. Watch other artists *who are not musicians* do their craft. Then take time to meet them. Talk about their life. Buy them drinks! This can be an easy way to start.

We need to extend our creativity outside of music! This can include joining a class to learn a new skill, going to a public dance, creating a podcast, etc. Seek challenges and be willing to ask for advice, even from people you don't know. It's important for musicians to participate in *group* creative activities that are *not* music. This develops so many important skills and keeps our creativity flowing. The best way to approach this is by finding a friend who is also willing to try new things. When possible, find a partner to delve into these things with you.

After reading this interview, take time to write down the questions we talked about earlier and *answer them* for

yourself and for your institutions. If your current answers do not align with your 21st-century objectives, have the courage to experiment and make the adjustments necessary to realign them.

Finally, be willing to create without the incentive of money. Mentally check in with your career by asking, "If I'm not doing this for money, why am I doing this?" The *why* is what drives you throughout your life. If you're examining your "why" at this moment and are feeling unsatisfied, give yourself permission to amend your "why." If this seems overwhelming to some people, that's okay.

**AS:** Thank you, Larry. I've really enjoyed getting to know you better, and I am inspired by your "why." I feel hopeful that this conversation will be the catalyst for many conversations to come. I hope that on the other side of my master's degree, some of these "21st century musician" elements will reflect in my budding career. Please, let's stay in touch!

**LW:** Absolutely! Thank you, Anna.

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*Hornist Larry Williams is a Yamaha Performing Artist/Clinician and teaches horn at Washington Adventist University in Takoma Park, Maryland. He balances performing, teaching, and administering. Larry recently founded DMV Horn Academy, an arts non-profit focused on creating opportunities and expanding access for students who desire to study the horn. Larry is the Founder and Artistic Director of American Studio Orchestra, a multimedia ensemble that brings together instrumentalists, vocalists, dancers, composers, photographers, and videographers to produce dynamic shows that focus on inclusive storytelling. Larry is principal horn in several orchestras and chamber ensembles.*

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*Anna Summers is studying for a master's degree in Violin Performance and Graduate Certificate in Music Entrepreneurship at Arizona State University. She studies violin with Dr. Katherine McLin and maintains a violin and piano studio of university and private students. She enjoys popular folk styles in addition to classical music and incorporates cultural studies into her pedagogical practices. Her podcast, "Music | Why?" has attracted an international following.*

