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# Larry Williams

FALLING INTO  
HIS CALLING



# A HEROIC JUGGLING ACT

Larry Williams has turned juggling into a superpower as he continually seeks new challenges and opportunities.

BY ELIZABETH ANDERSON LOPEZ



ASHLEIGH TOWNSEND



JOLESCH PHOTOGRAPHY FOR MEA

If hornist Larry Williams were a superhero, he might be called The Juggler. Williams' music career spans decades and includes his current status as a performer, instructor, collaborator and administrator — and that's just a few of his roles.

"I didn't know I was a juggler until I started juggling," he says. "Right after graduation, I was the principal horn with New World Symphony for two seasons. During my second year, I fell in love with teaching. I loved both equally. Being balanced between performing and teaching was true happiness for me."

As with any good superhero, Williams has a fascinating origin story. He started playing the trumpet in his elementary school band. "I was the last chair, but I didn't care — I just wanted to sit with my friend," Williams recalls. "In middle school band, I was the last chair again. ... Then the teacher asked for volunteers to play the French horn. I was dismayed when my friend raised his hand."

Realizing that his sole reason for being in the band was going to move across the room, Williams raised his hand too. "My teacher, Olivia Gutoff, was skeptical based on how

bad I was on the trumpet," he says. "My friend played two notes, and she told him he was in. With me, she said to come after school, which I did. I started to play, and it felt right. She must have thought, 'Holy crap, he's a horn player!'"

The French horn was a lot easier to play than the trumpet for young Williams. "Olivia was a horn expert, which I didn't know at the time," he says. "She wanted me to take private lessons with her."

Though he originally declined, Williams took Gutoff up on her years-old offer to work with him during high school when he decided to major in music for college. "I learned so much from her that I earned a scholarship to Penn State [University]," he says. "I later transferred to Peabody [Institute at Johns Hopkins University] and eventually started my career."

## THE MULTITASKER

Williams' career has flourished despite — or because of — his constant juggling. "I'm used to having four to seven jobs," Williams says. "I like to have one or two main jobs with a lot of part-time jobs."



ROY COX PHOTOGRAPHY

**MANAGING IT ALL:** Larry Williams is used to juggling multiple projects. In addition to teaching and performing with several ensembles, Williams has been a member of the Lyric Brass Quintet (above left) for over 20 years.



## TIMELESS LESSONS FOR 21st CENTURY STUDENTS

Being a 21st century artist is different than when I went to school," says Larry Williams, a French horn performer and teacher. "Being focused on one thing was pretty much demanded to be successful. Now [musicians] are expected to do multiple things and do them well."

Williams encourages students to be entrepreneurial. "You need to know how to create opportunities for yourself," he says. "We have so many good French horn players. ... It's a 'who-you-know' world. Isolating yourself in a practice room isn't a good way to make people know you exist and want to work with you."

Williams also cites personality, along with performance, as a factor for how students can make themselves more marketable. "Do people like sitting next to you in a section?" he asks. "What else do you bring to the table?"

However, Williams reminds students that sharing all the details of their lives in today's social media era can work against them. "I warn students to take care when using social media," he says. "I don't tell them what to post, but I do tell them to be aware. I say, 'You're going to come across someone you want to impress someday, and you have to be cognizant of that. If you're ranting about a peanut butter sandwich for 15 days straight and come to me interviewing for a position, I don't know if I can deal with that every day.'"

Williams teaches another timeless lesson: Be respectful. For example, he encourages students to do some basic research on people and culture if they have the opportunity to tour abroad. "You're not just representing yourself," he says. "You're representing your ensemble, your country and your culture, so it's really important to be aware of that. You don't need to be a scholar, but learn what people value, how they are similar and different from you. That shows respect, which has opened some doors really quickly for me."

Williams experienced that concept firsthand when he participated in a cultural exchange while performing with the Peabody Symphony Orchestra in Russia after the Cold War. "We ran into some people who clearly didn't want us there," he remembers. "They didn't know about Peabody or our orchestra. They just knew we were Americans. Showing them respect goes a long way to get people to trust you. Then when you get to the music, it's business as usual."

One of those main jobs, teaching, has entered a new phase. In the spring of 2020, Williams was appointed associate director of the DMV Music Academy, whose mission is to expose, engage, inspire and guide musicians of all levels in the D.C., Maryland and Virginia area along their individual paths toward mastery. The academy started out as a summer percussion workshop led by Donnie Johns in Hyattsville, Maryland, and featured faculty from the National Symphony Orchestra, Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, U.S. Navy Band, and The Cadets and Santa Clara Vanguard Drum and Bugle Corps. The organization has grown steadily in the past two years, and Williams was invited to join the leadership team to help guide the academy as it expands its programming and its reach.

And — cue juggling pins — Williams concurrently launched the DMV Horn Academy/Larry Williams Horn Studio. "The Horn Academy will feature in-person and online lessons, horn and brass chamber ensembles, a masterclass series, and workshops throughout the year," Williams says. "I'm really excited that DMV Horn Academy will now be one of my home bases. I'll be able to teach horn players regionally while doing masterclasses around the country."

### THE COACH

Williams has taught French horn as a private instructor as well as in an academic environment. "I enjoy learning how people learn," Williams says. "If you watch and listen, they teach you how they best process information. Ask them questions and understand their point of view. Don't say, 'This is how you do it.'"

Because each student learns differently, Williams sets out to know them as people. "I start every session by asking them how they are as people," he says. "I need to get a sense of where they are mentally. We're here to play the horn, but it's more important to know how they are."

Williams uses some similarities between music and sports, including being in "the zone." "Part of what I teach is a form of meditation when we are playing," he says. "It's getting students into a mental state where they are deeply concentrated. When you're in that zone, you're working on a deeper level of consciousness."

One of the ways that Williams achieves that focus is by going back to his quest for balance. "In the zone state, you're firing both sides of your brain," he says. "The physical includes your breathing and tongue placement. Then there's the emotional, artistic part. When you get them both in balance, it's like a seesaw. The point isn't that it's level. You have to stay in that small space where you're monitoring and controlling it. I focus on the basic principles of playing

the horn, but then I put that aside and ask my students how they're feeling. Then I go back to technique. This back and forth gets them in the zone."

As a teacher Williams often encounters a specific challenge with the zone. "I try to get students out of their own heads," he says. "Younger students often worry if they're playing correctly. I tell them to focus on serving the music. Make it about the audience, the composer, about anything but yourself. You can teach someone to play the French horn really well, but if they don't focus, all that will go out the window when they perform."

He practices what he preaches. "My brain works the same way whether I'm performing or teaching," he says.

### THE ADMINISTRATOR

After teaching at the Johns Hopkins Peabody Institute for more than 20 years, Williams was ready for a new challenge. In 2016, he was awarded a fellowship in the Johns Hopkins University Provost's Office where he worked on university-wide initiatives.

The change to the administrative side of academia included some growing pains. "It was very weird," Williams says. "I had to wear a suit every day. There were no students; it was all administrators."

With persistence, Williams figured out that the rules of the road are the same. "We have things we want to accomplish, so we come together to figure out how to achieve them," he says. "I was like a student again."

During the second year of his renewed fellowship, Williams learned about an opening for assistant vice provost for faculty affairs. "I still wanted to challenge myself," he says. "Even though I wasn't sure I wanted to be in administration full time, I wanted to explore it."

Williams also took several business courses from Johns Hopkins and earned an Executive Certificate in Business Communication. Williams says those courses focused on "the soft skills everyone needs, such as how to communicate with different generations. I was the only musician in these classes."

And Williams will definitely make use of those skills as he flexes his leadership, communication and administration muscles with the DMV Horn Academy.

### THE COLLABORATOR

Williams still finds joy in performing with others and as a solo artist. "I lean toward playing with others," he says. "Playing music in real time with other people connects us to each other without using words. That's an amazing feeling."

Even when it's just him, "I try to collaborate with the

audience," he says. "From a young age, I was taught the point of music was to bring people together."

He encourages students to operate the same way. "I want students to play for others, not just for themselves."

Williams collaborates with more than just musicians. In 2008, he founded the American Studio Orchestra (ASO), which he calls a multimedia orchestra that includes musicians, filmmakers, dancers and other creative minds. "I began having conversations with friends from different artistic backgrounds about what they do, why they do it and what they want to do," Williams says. "I was really inspired to learn that they were asking the same questions that I was. Everybody was happy but seeking to do more."



ROY COX PHOTOGRAPHY

Another collaboration resulted in the Lyric Brass Quintet, which was formed in 1998. "It started as a group of friends who wanted to play and perform but didn't want to tour," Williams shares. "We still play every week and have managed to stay together through multiple changes. We don't realize what an old married couple we all are until someone who doesn't play with us comments on it."

From juggling for so long, Williams has learned the importance of connecting his varied activities. For example, the Lyric Brass Quintet is the brass section for ASO, and the quintet helps with the arrangements.

These days Williams' main focus is the DMV Horn Academy with a complement of side projects, all while combining life as a teacher and perpetual learner. "I've come full circle in a lot of ways," he says. "It's been an interesting ride so far, and I look forward to the future."

And to think that it all started as a happenstance. "If my buddy hadn't raised his hand that day, I wouldn't have the career I have today," Williams recalls. "I'm not one who says you have to know what you want to do right away. I just fell into my calling."

Just as any good superhero would. 🦸

**DON'T LOSE FOCUS:** Larry Williams tells his students to focus on serving the music. "Make it about the audience, make it about the composer, make it about anything but yourself," he says.

An abstract graphic featuring musical notes, staff lines, and colorful splashes in shades of blue, purple, and pink. The notes are scattered across the page, with some appearing to be in motion. The background is white with a subtle grid pattern.

**YOUNGER STUDENTS OFTEN WORRY IF THEY'RE PLAYING CORRECTLY. I TELL THEM TO FOCUS ON SERVING THE MUSIC. MAKE IT ABOUT THE AUDIENCE, THE COMPOSER, ABOUT ANYTHING BUT YOURSELF.**

– LARRY WILLIAMS

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