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Life in the Early- Music Fast Lane

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If it's Monday, it m

*The peripatetic and exhausting and fascinating and
insanely fulfilling life of an early musician in America.*
by **Debra Nagy**



RECENTLY WATCHED THE BEATLES' 1964 CLASSIC FILM *A HARD DAY'S NIGHT* FOR the first time. It is a lot of fun—the kidding around, physical comedy, fabulous camera work, and especially the sense of community created in the performing sequences (be they impromptu—as in the luggage car of a train—or before large audiences). The pervasive good humor is a joy to behold, though I was especially struck by the boys' hard work: the stress of getting them from one performing

must be Collegium



venue to another; the frenetic pace; the concern about where and when they might get a chance for a meal (will there be any food in the green room?), a chance to relax, or even a bit of quiet or privacy. And, of course, there's the challenge of trying to keep up with

administrative tasks on the road, such as when the boys are forced by their manager to hole up in their hotel room to respond to a backlog of fan mail.

I'm no Beatle, but I recognized a certain amount of my own life—and those of my friends and colleagues—in the film.

I play period oboes and recorders and have a second specialty in 15th-century music. As period players, we're specialists by definition, yet we may be called upon to play or sing music from anywhere between 1100 and 1850, at pitches (generally) ranging from A=392 to A=465, in venues that include churches, art galleries, museums, and concert halls in virtually every corner of North America (and beyond) during any given week of the concert season. For a wind player, in particular, this means maintaining skills and associated equipment for seven to fifteen instruments.

A friend and bassoonist recently posted this status FB update: "For some reason during tonight's rehearsal everything I have to do in the next few weeks finally sunk in. From November 10 to 23: 5 performances, 5 instruments, 4 styles, 3 pitches, and 2 time zones. I love my job, but the universe owes me a beer." My initial response was, "only 2 time zones?"

The life of a freelancer is a potentially exciting one, and yet, if you're successful, exhaustion and burnout can be serious issues. We're working hard all the time attempting to juggle all the different aspects of our professional lives—the performing, teaching, practicing, and managing of our schedules (6–18 months out), in addition to maintaining our personal lives (relationships, families, home-life, and staying in good physical and emotional health). Many of us also have entrepreneurial tendencies, so we're inspired to organize our own ensembles or projects, which can be extremely rewarding, but add yet another level of stress.

It's a rare opportunity when my partner of ten years, Ana, can join me on tour. So, part of what keeps me feeling centered is that the players and singers on the early music

scene in the U.S. are a tight-knit, friendly, and supportive bunch. At this point, I know I'll encounter friends (really, a surrogate extended family) wherever I go. I might see some of my favorite colleagues several times in a month. It just might be one week in San Francisco, another in Philadelphia, and another in Cleveland. The sense of community built over shared meals—whether in restaurants or (even better) homemade—is also central to my sense of well-being.

I relish the time at home, when I have it, and I create routines for when I'm on the road that help me feel grounded. For instance, when in Berkeley, CA, I always make time to ride my bike down to campus for an afternoon at the university's beautiful music library. In San Francisco, I'll meet a friend for lunch at Samovar or hike up to the top of Buena Vista Park. In Portland, OR, you might find me at Stumptown Coffee Roasters. Last spring in Seattle, the Liberty Bar became my adopted living room.

Where you rest your head on the road is pretty important, too. Admittedly, I hate hotels and am generally happy to be hosted by volunteers. Occasionally, homestays can be uncomfortable, but in several cities, I've been staying with the same generous hosts for so many years that they seem like family. I'm grateful for the support of my "Berkeley grandparents," with whom I exchange cards on birthdays and at the holidays—and have a standing invitation for blueberry pancakes on Sunday mornings (even when I'm not staying there!).

This past fall, I kept a journal to chronicle my time at home and on the road. Along the way, I spoke with some of my colleagues about the joys and challenges of our freelance lives. My experience is not unique—it's just one example of how we're all making our lives in music.

Wednesday, Sept. 10

The concert season kicks off with a project with my own Cleveland-based ensemble, Les Délices. Though we started our concert series in 2009, Les Délices only received 501(c)3 status a year ago, so recently I've begun writing more grants and working hard learning the fundraising ropes. It's been a fantastic, challenging, and rewarding ride with the group so far. This weeklong project includes rehearsals, our first outreach concerts during a Friday night art walk, a hired engagement on a regional concert series, and our annual fall donor reception.

Tuesday, Sept. 16

After teaching all day Monday and Tuesday morning, I catch a flight to New York for a project with Tenet and the Sebastians. Like me, oboist Kathryn Montoya also spent the morning teaching (at Oberlin), so it's nice to see a friendly face at the airport and know that if we're late for rehearsal (we'll be rushing from LaGuardia), we'll be late together!

It's clear from the first notes of the rehearsal that this will be a fantastic project. The singers sound amazing and it's a pleasure and privilege to work with Scott Metcalfe. I met Scott on my very first gig back in 2000 in Portland, OR, and I've been full of admiration for him ever since. So even though it's the first time I'm working with this group, I feel as though I'm surrounded by family.

Friday, Sept. 19

Following a noontime concert, I take a long walk down Lexington Avenue. My destination: the world-famous spice shop Kalustyan's. I love the cramped yet organized aisles, filled floor-to-ceiling with little plastic bags wearing their signature yellow-labels: seventy-five varieties of salt, honeys from around the world, cinnamon from eight countries available in various forms. Kalustyan's also inevitably makes me think of home and what I might make the next time I'm there. I buy ingredients for homemade cocktail bitters (cinchona bark and quassia chips), chef-quality sheet gelatin and rose petals (I imagine a fancy dessert with rose petals suspended in a Riesling gelée), and amchoor (dried mango) powder for lovely, South Indian curries.

Pages 26–27: Baroque oboist and Les Délices artistic director Debra Nagy, left, performs at The Bop Stop in Cleveland with colleagues Stephen Bard (oboe), Kathryn Montoya (taille de hautbois), Simon Martyn-Ellis (baroque guitar), Michelle Hymphreys (percussion), and Anna Marsh (bassoon). Photo by Ana de Freitas Boe.



Since I don't have an evening concert, I "do admin" for several hours sorting out logistics for Les Délices' upcoming November tour (Will we bring our own harpsichord? How many cars do we need to rent? Flight arrangements to?) and finally venture out around 9:30 p.m. for a solo dinner at my new, favorite Italian hole-in-the-wall on Amsterdam Avenue, Piccolo (my second time there in as many days).

Saturday, Sept. 20

I'm up at 7 a.m. writing extra lines for some 15th-century chansons for use with the Case Western Reserve University Collegium Musicum, which I direct. By adding a voice *si placet* [if you please], the original three-part songs can now be played by four players. Finally, around 10:30 a.m., I venture out for some air and to get a little exercise. I head downtown to explore the meatpacking district and walk along the High Line Park. On the way back, I want to avoid Times Square, so I trek north along Ninth Avenue through Hell's Kitchen towards Lincoln Center, where I'm meeting up with Kathryn Montoya for lunch.

I've known Kat almost twenty years: we first met in Mark Cudek's early-music class at Interlochen Arts Camp. She is one of the most passionate, dedicated musicians I know and she's on the road *a lot*. Naturally, our conversation turned to our lives in music, and we both nodded with understanding when she said, "A career with non-stop travel has a shelf life."

It's clear, though, that Kat and I both love music and feel privileged to be able to make it our profession. "Music has been my faithful companion these many years," she said, "but sometimes there's a fine line between it feeding your soul and crushing it." Kat went on: "As we get older, it's coping with and arranging the logistics—like, where can I stay Wednesday night?—that becomes the most difficult or onerous. ... Making music: that's the easy part."

Sunday, Sept. 21

After a late night, I'm in a cab at 6:30 a.m. and headed home to Cleveland for a few days. This will be my last Sunday at home for a while, so I want to make the most of it. After five days in New York's concrete jungle, I'm ready for a little nature. My partner picks me up at the airport and we head straight to our

favorite park for a long mid-morning walk. These are my small attempts to achieve work-life balance. Settled securely in the hammock on my back porch, I soak up one of the last warm afternoons of the season while I put the finishing touches on scores for Les Délices' upcoming October project.

Monday, Sept. 22

It's Monday, so it must be Collegium.

I've been teaching in the Historical Performance Program at CWRU since 2007. Most out-of-town performing projects start rehearsing on Wednesdays, which leaves Monday and Tuesday as my main teaching days.

The day begins with private baroque oboe lessons. At 2 p.m., I get to spend an hour and a half with all of my graduate student singers, except they're playing Renaissance recorders. It's a blast to work with this group of fun, advanced musicians who are coping with the challenges of a new instrument, learning how to turn the consonants in texted music into varied articulations, and—since they're all sopranos—enjoying playing inner parts.

From 4 to 6 p.m., I work with my Medieval Ensemble. This group rehearses throughout the school year, which has really fostered a deeper understanding and appreciation for medieval repertoires in my students. Many of them have also taken my Medieval-Renaissance Notation class, so I feel proud they're able to approach many of these pieces in original notation. Their project this year is called "Love is a Fortress." Today I'm coaching works by Dufay, Grimace, Binchois, and Pullois. Bonus: I'm happy with the *si placet* voices I wrote on Saturday morning in NYC!

Once Collegium is done at 6 p.m., I run up to Shaker Heights for Les Délices' first board meeting of the year.

Tuesday, Sept. 23

The day is spent teaching and prepping for my next trip to Charlottesville, VA. At lunch-time, I run across the street to the Cleveland Museum of Art for a meeting about doing a special gallery concert in May in conjunction with an exhibit of prints and drawings on musical subjects. Yes! It will work out! Now to coordinate some outreach activities, and perhaps I can find us an additional performance on a small regional series...

Today is also the last chance I'll have to

Below:
Debra Nagy, Julie
Andrijeski, Josh Lee,
Simon Martyn-Ellis.
Photo by Ana de
Freitas Boe.



check in with my garden or do any cooking for over a week, so I make sure to take advantage of this fall's bumper crop of raspberries, picking at dusk. I also harvest bunches of sage and rosemary I'll freeze and be happy to use all winter. Parsley will go into tonight's dinner. (I always end up trying to execute some large cooking project the night before I leave on a trip. That way, there are leftovers for Ana while I'm gone). Processing kale will have to wait for when I'm next at home.

My cooking habits are not just about loving food (though I do). They're about staying connected, feeling grounded. They also provide a sense of place and add to my sense of self-sufficiency and control. As traveling musicians, we often don't know where we'll find our next meal. (Will I be able to pick up dinner at the airport? I'll get to my host's place at 11 p.m. Will there anything to eat? Perhaps there's only junk available at the closest café, where one can pick up food between the warm-up and the concert.)

So many early musicians I know are passionate about food, wine, and, by extension, cooking. We are craftspeople as well as artists. Early-music folks, in particular, have a real DIY sensibility, and we feel a strong urge to connect with our community through shared experience both on stage and around a table. And let's not forget, either, that cooking for friends and loved ones is another type of performance!

Wednesday, Sept. 24

I get a lot of work done on the road (case in point: I'm writing this article from a hotel room in Florida).

A 7 a.m. flight to Charlottesville (via Philadelphia) means I'm up at 5:15 and at the airport by 6. Early-morning departures like this make me think of viola da gamba player Josh Lee's use of the hashtag #glamour.

I handle a lot of correspondence when I'm in transit. Before 11 a.m., I have written more than twenty emails that range from logistics for Les Délices' November tour, radio ads for our October Cleveland program, artist housing for October,

answering insurance questions, and getting photos from the recent outreach concert to arranging payment for a guest artist who recently taught at Case. My close friend and colleague Julie Andrijeski has been known to tell me, "I received a barrage of emails from you, so I figured you must have been on the plane." My father also regularly gets a phone call from me when I'm waiting for a flight, so he's been known to answer the phone,

"Oh hi, Debra. Where are you going today?"

Wearing so many different hats, it is certainly a challenge to stay organized! The truth is that I am always thinking ahead. People who know me know that I am never without a small notebook (pictured, left). My partner calls this my "Linus blanket." I have a thought, I write it down; I add it to another to-do list. I start a new page brainstorming ideas for next season or jotting notes from a meeting or maybe even writing menus and meal plans for when I'm next at home (generally a clear sign I'm feeling homesick). On the plane, I often find some private time to redefine my goals for this week, this month, or even this year. There are so many different tasks, different aspects to this working life, and different details to keep at hand.

Following a long day of travel and rehearsals as a featured guest with the Charlottesville baroque ensemble Three Notch'd Road, the band ends up heading out for pizza. I'm exhausted and feel a sore throat coming on as I quietly nurse a beer and listen in on my colleagues' conversations.

Two of the players in the group went back to school following their musical training and maintain part-time, non-music careers that supplement their incomes, provide with them financial stability, and allow them different perspectives on the workplace. Both agreed that when either they or a client is sick, the only responsible thing to do is to cancel. In music, though, not only is there no such thing as paid vacation or sick leave: in many cases, cancelling might not be an option. You can't reasonably leave colleagues and employers in the lurch at the last minute, and oftentimes you can't afford to lose the income. After all, maybe the week of work you're considering cancelling is just one of two weeks of work you've got lined up this month.

Sunday, Sept. 28

I escape my home-stay early this morning and walk into town for coffee and free Wi-Fi. It's a beautiful, quiet, cool morning perfect for exercise and soaking up a little sunshine. Opportunities to move around can sometimes be in short supply when you're on the road.

Sunday morning before an afternoon concert is prime time to be working on and prepping for next week. This weekend, I wrap up a grant proposal in support of Les Délices' January concerts in Cleveland with Blue Heron, book a hotel for our November tour and residency at Williams College, and catch up with my dad on the phone. Following concerts and master classes in Charlottesville and Williamsburg, we finish up this afternoon with a program in Staunton, VA. We only had a half-hour to explore between our arrival and warm-up, but what a gorgeous town.



Sunday, Oct. 5

I've been working a new (to me) job with Opera Lafayette in Washington, DC, since Wednesday. As much as we all love Bach and Handel, I cherish the opportunity to play works I don't know. This week, we're giving the U.S. premiere of Rameau's *Les Fêtes de l'Hymen ou Les Dieux d'Égypte*. A ballet-héroïque, the show is more than half dance. The performances feature three dance companies in wildly differing styles, but the collaboration is inspired, the singers are wonderful, and the choreography is fabulous.

We had a free day on Saturday, so I took a rare day off for a trip to Baltimore. I spent a quiet afternoon on my own visiting the Peabody Library and the Walters Museum and walking down and around the inner harbor before heading to Adam Pearl and Aaron Sheehan's house. They made me a lovely dinner, plied me with Manhattans, and helped me get a kitty fix (I miss mine), thanks to their adorable new kittens. Following Sunday brunch, it's time to head back down to DC for our dress rehearsal at the Kennedy Center Concert Hall.

Thursday, Oct. 9

I'm back on a plane to New York for a repeat of the Rameau at Lincoln Center. I head straight from LaGuardia to meet with Jolle Greenleaf for lunch. Jolle has been a dynamic force on New York's early-music scene in recent years, and it's easy to marvel at her accomplishments. Tenet, her vocal ensemble, is doing the kind and quality of work and programming that I respect and aspire to in a particularly challenging, competitive environment. Jolle also has a family and a young child. I wonder how she does it. I am reminded of sage words from harpsichordist Barbara Weiss: "If you keep on performing miracles, people will come to expect them."

By lovely coincidence, two of my Les Délices colleagues, Julie Andrijeski and Michael Sponseller, are in town rehearsing for a Boston Early Music Festival program at the Morgan Library. They catch the Rameau, and we head out together for a late dinner. The opportunity to share a meal with good friends when away from home makes all the difference in my outlook. I make it back to the hotel after midnight and will walk out the door again before 6 a.m.

Wednesday, Nov. 5

After nearly three weeks of performing and teaching at home

in Cleveland, I'm on the road again. I land in Miami to work for the first time with Seraphic Fire, which is teaming with the New York period orchestra the Sebastianians in Vivaldi's *Gloria*. Both groups are high energy and super talented, and there are a number of singers and players I've never met before, including my roommate for the week, cellist Hannah Collins.

The musicians are staying at extended-stay hotels in an industrial section of town. On the plus side, our rooms have modestly equipped kitchens, so I'm thrilled to be able to make my own meals. Ever ambitious in the (small, hotel) kitchen, a few of us players collaborated on Saturday's lunch of shakshuka (a Middle Eastern dish of poached eggs in a spicy pepper and tomato sauce) and sautéed kale with garlic before a rocking concert of Vivaldi and Handel in Fort Lauderdale. There's nothing so satisfying as solidifying new friendships through shared experiences making music and eating meals.

Coda

When the Beatles spoke with *A Hard Day's Night* screenwriter Alun Owen, they described their lives as "a train and a room and a car and a room and a room and a room." It's true; I get it. As freelancers, our work can have its banal elements and even a few grim realities, but it's the opportunity for euphoric musical moments shared with friends and audiences that elevates our experience and renews our inspiration from week to week. I'm reminded of what it's all for when I read critic Brendan Gill's response in *The New Yorker* to the Beatles' 1964 film: "I admit that I feel a certain mindless joy stealing over me as they caper about uttering sounds." ■



Performing with Tenet and the Sebastianians.
Photo by Nan Melville.