

Episode 8 (UNIONS) Start

{Intro Music}

This is the Institute for Music Leadership

Stephen: Welcome to *Create. Inspire. Lead.* I'm Stephen Biegner. We're forging ahead with our minisodes with Dr. Blaire Koerner. And today we're talking about a topic that comes up a lot, especially for orchestral players. And that is: unions. What do they do? Do you need to join one? When should you join one? It's a big topic, and Blaire helped to demystify it a bit. And now, this is a topic I know very little about, so I'm just going to sit back and let Blaire explain.

Blaire: If you are a chamber group and you are going to local schools or if you're getting hired by a college or if you're doing a residency with the museum, you don't necessarily need to do a union. That's not something that's required of you. However, there's a handful of organizations out there, usually orchestras, sometimes operas and, you know, ballet pits and other places that require you to be unionized.

So the first time I actually even thought about this is when I went to Eastman and I got hired to do some gigs out in Syracuse with their musician-run orchestra. And they said, are you unionized? And I said, "No." And they said, you need to get unionized at the end of next week or else you can't be hired. So there's a force requirement for a lot of those types of freelance gigs. So if you were planning and bouncing around in a big city and just do everything that comes your way or as much as you can, that is within the larger institutions or organizations, you are most likely going to be required to do it.

Now, if you're planning on creating your own combo to play at parties and weddings and other things like that, you don't need to be unionized, because that's your own little group that you're getting together and you're contracting yourself out. And that's not something that's required of you. So it really depends. But if you're just doing all of that. But then you get called for a really cool gig to sub in at the local orchestra and you're not unionized, you're going to need to go and get that like ASAP.

So a lot of the larger groups I was talking about, you know, that manage themselves are probably not unionized. They might be individually, personally to go and sign up for different things just because they might take extra gigs on the side or they might use the benefits that they can get through the union. But it's not necessarily a requirement. Of course, the other benefits about unions as well is just, you know, if you're interested in looking for orchestral or other jobs, they're the ones that list all the jobs. Right? So they're the ones that give you a magazine every month and says here are the job postings. And they also might tell you about

blacklisted opportunities, the ones you should avoid because they're no longer paying well enough or there's problems there. They also might tell you about stolen instruments. So if you're on the lookout for purchasing something or you find something, keep that in mind that people sell instruments. I mean, there's lots of things that come through that, all side benefits, but it isn't a requirement anymore.

But I will say, what the main reason of a union is is to protect your rights. Right? So I get emails all the time from American Federation musicians talking me through, you know, when they successfully get a bill or policy passed to help support composers or help to get studio musicians more pay or compensation for little jingles that were made and then made lots more money and all this other stuff, so it is really fascinating to see the policy side. They are your voice. And sometimes when you really want to improve your situation or the situation of a group of you in a city, they'll be the ones to help you navigate that. So if you're really big on advocacy and making things right and, you know, supporting your field and getting people the benefits that they deserve, connecting with the union is going to help you with that because they are the larger voice and can help you, you know, gather names and help you get through to officials and so forth.

Stephen: So, when is a good time to join a union? Blaire explained that sometimes you're forced to join for certain gigs. But, if those types of gigs aren't popping up for you, does it make sense to join anyway, just in case? And how do you do that?

Blaire: So *how* is actually pretty easy. Each location has a union group, so in Rochester it's 66, so there's like a number associated. So first you'd have to just figure out, in your location, what would be your local group. And each group is organized by, like, their own head who would be the person you actually interact with? I physically went there. Obviously right now, during COVID times, it's probably digital, but I physically went there, read some things, signed some things, asked some questions, answered some questions, and then I just paid my dues. And that's the biggest thing is you do have to pay your dues every three months.

You have to pay a certain amount and that's probably based a little bit on location as well as other things. So I can't tell you what that amount will be. So you have to do a little research. It's very easy like I said, you know, not one organization like you need to join the union by the end of next week in order to get... That was easy. I just made an appointment, showed up, sat down, signed paperwork, and then I got my little paper card and it got sent to me in the mail every year and I just keep filling it out and signing it and we're good to go. So it's actually not that hard.

When is a really good question because there are dues. You know, you have to think about your own financial situation and how is that going to play into it? And do you want to pay a certain amount of money per year if you're not actively gigging or actively in this field? So if you are switching over to more teaching, if you're switching over to more administration and even like in some spaces, composition, I mean, they will still support you and argue for you, but there's not that many opportunities I could see, necessarily, because you're not necessarily gigging.

But they might help you with contract development and giving you a lawyer to review that so that you're, you know, being supported. But if you're switching away from being an active performer, you might not need it.

You might also join it for a while because you're actively gigging and then you move to a new area and you're still networking and settling down and you decide you're just going to hold off on freelancing until you, you know, got your finances situated. You could stop for a little while and then you can go back to it. So it is a membership thing so you can choose when to stop and start. But I guess the biggest thing is if you don't actively pursue freelancing and you're just hoping something is going to fall in your lap, going for a union is going to be fine, but you're not necessarily going to be using all the benefits. So if you're going to be paying for the membership, go do your research and see what it has to offer so you can really utilize all those benefits.

If you are also actively looking for an orchestral or military band, that's a really good place to start because I'm sure a lot of professors will bring in their American Federation musician and post up certain post that's happening in your field, but once you graduate, you won't necessarily have that connection. They won't necessarily be emailing you all these opportunities. So you need to be aware of when these positions open up. And you might only be able to do that because you actually physically get the magazine or see the magazine online because you are a member.

Stephen: And if you join a union in one city and then move - what happens?

Blaire: So, yeah, you would have to basically alert everybody and transfer over to the new local because that's what that union really... I mean, you're getting benefits to the whole thing, but on my ID card, it literally tells me what my union number is. Now I've gone out to Buffalo and I've gone out to Syracuse like I was a local union member here. But if you want to get updates and information from your local and from here, you're going to want to get switched over. And it probably just means, you know, reaching out and saying, I would like to switch. I mean, you're still covered. You're still technically under the union. But if you want updated information that's

happening in your area, then yes, you should do that. Just so in case there's a big heads up, there's this thing that just happened. Please avoid this individual. Now you are aware, but otherwise you are technically just under the union. But if you switch over, you can at least be more informed of what's happening locally. And you know who is kind of the leader in your area.

{outro music}

Stephen: So, this is a big topic, and we have only scratched the surface. We hope to do a longer, more in-depth episode about this in the future, so look out for that. Of course, thanks to Dr. Blaire Koerner for sharing her knowledge on this topic. You can set up an appointment with her through Handshake if you want to talk to her one on one. Just click the link which I will put the show notes.

Questions were compiled by Frances Inzenhofer and Emma Gierszal. Intro music and incidental music was by me, and the outro music was composed by Alexa Silverman. Please be sure to follow us on SoundCloud or on the IML's Facebook page for podcast updates, and of course you can always email us with comments, questions, or ideas for future episodes.

Now, go out. Make art. Do good work. From the IML, I'm Stephen Biegner. Until next time.

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