

Season 3, Episode 1 (Examining Values: A Conversation with Michael Wayne) Start

Michael Wayne: I was never fulfilled in my job in Boston, and I always- I didn't know why. I got the job when I was 26; what were my priorities when I was 26? Completely different than they are now. The position was not aligned with why I play.

{Intro Music} This is the Institute for Music Leadership.

Jeff Dunn: Hello and welcome to another episode of Create.Inspire.Lead. I'm Jeff Dunn, the new Program Manager at the IML and your new host for the podcast. This summer, the IML had to say goodbye to Stephen Biegner, as he and his family set off for a new adventure. So now I have the good fortune to spend this time with you, piecing together stories from musicians about their lives, careers, and current events in the field.

The idea for this podcast has always been to have our students at the Eastman School of Music be deeply involved to tell these stories and raise the issues that they are interested in. Today, we're doing just that. We're joined by Zach Goldstein, who is interviewing clarinetist Michael Wayne, who joined the Eastman faculty last year. Zach is a clarinetist himself, and one of Michael students, and at the time of this conversation he also worked at the IML. We're really excited to bring you this episode and hope you enjoy.

Zach Goldstein: Hello everyone, my name is Zach Goldstein. I'm a student at Eastman and a Program Assistant at the Institute for Music Leadership, and uh- I'll be hosting today's podcast. And why don't- why doesn't our guest, um, Michael Wayne- why don't you tell us about yourself what you do and a little bit about your career journey?

Michael: Great, thanks for having me. I'm currently the Associate Professor of Clarinet at the Eastman School of Music. Previously, I was a member of the Boston Symphony Orchestra for 13 seasons. Um, maybe I'll work- work my way backwards. So, Eastman, Boston Symphony- At that time I was also on the faculty of the New England Conservatory Music and Tanglewood Music Center. Um, prior to that, I was in the Kansas City Symphony, I had two positions there. Um, I first started as Second/E-flat Clarinet and then I'd won the job for Principal Clarinet. Prior to that I did my undergrad at the University of Michigan, and then prior to that I went to high school at the Interlochen Arts Academy for two years and originally- well, before that I grew up in Phoenix, AZ and originally born in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.

Zach: Alright, we have that in common. (Laughs) I wasn't born in Hamilton, but being Canadian. So, I guess it's safe to say that the majority of your career, and I guess focus, has been in the orchestral world professionally, so I just kind of wanted to start off and talk about that a little bit. Um- and so like in your opinion, what do you think is the most important personality trait or strength, someone needs to have to maintain longevity in the orchestral world?

Michael: That's a very good question. I think... the ability to read and understand your surroundings well-

Zach: Yeah.

Michael: and not be only in your own head, and "it's all about me". I remember my first job in Kansas City, I had no professional experience, and I didn't know what was going on. I knew how to play excerpts, but walking on stage it's like, "When do I come on stage? What do I play? Where do I put my pencil?" All these little things that I was never taught- at an early age, what was always going through my head was, "OK. I'm just looking around. What is everyone else doing? I don't want to-" and I just came up early on thinking to myself, "So if I'm the only one doing something, it's gotta be wrong."

Zach: Yeah. (laughs)

Michael: And so, I just- initially just, you sort of feel the surroundings and- and with that, every orchestra has a different culture and a different way of doing things, so you can't just take: "Well, this is how it was when I was in Kansas City, that's how it's going to be in Boston."

I think the ability to, um, read a room, read an environment, um- be able to listen to colleagues, have an understanding of their needs in your section and be able to respond to that. As opposed to just, "I'm gonna do my thing, and everyone going to come along on the journey."

Zach: Right.

Michael: Those are usually (who cause?) conflict.

Zach: Yeah, it seems like it- um, it seems like the uh, the common thing when talking to people that have careers in orchestras that you can't just- that being a good player is kind of the prerequisite, not like the entire job. It's maybe like the smallest part of it, it seems.

Michael: Yeah, I mean, once you get in the orchestra after auditioning, you've proved that you can play.

Zach: Yeah, yeah, exactly.

Michael: You know, obviously there are times where, "Does it fit well section?" and things like that, but a majority of what happens after you win the job: it's- it's that day-to-day. How you interact with your colleagues, and how do you interact with the conductor or personnel managers? Or, that's where it's: "Do I want to sit next to this person for the rest of my career?"

Zach: Yeah, yeah. Do you think that maybe it could be beneficial, then, that maybe we have like a "Musicians' Communications" course or something in schools?

Michael: Absolutely, it's something that I- I bring to lessons, but we talk about in class. You're not taught, usually these things in school. And simple things, like you know, there's- there's always going to be playing issues in a section. How do you address them in a way that isn't confrontational or blaming someone for being out of tune? You know, it's- you've got all these people who are very insecure, and it's very easy to- to make people feel threatened. Um- at the same time, you don't want to sit there and say nothing 'cause that can be worse. I do think it's a huge part of it where it's like "OK, I can teach you how to win a job."

Zach: Yeah.

Michael: How do you actually thrive in that position? That's a whole other- other thing.

Zach: Yeah, so I guess like, the- the follow- I guess you kind of answered the follow-up question I had, which was, you know: what the most difficult aspect of pursuing a career as an orchestral musician that's not commonly talked about. But it seems like the communications aspect and the being able to read and work with people aspect, maybe.

Michael: Yeah, I would say, I would say that, but also in terms of longevity is: How do you stay inspired? How do you have a good working environment, you know? Why do you play? What made you want to play to begin with?

Rarely is that still the case when people are playing orchestras. Every group, it ends up turning into a job. You don't think it's going to be when you're a student, it's like, "Oh the Boston Symphony Orchestra; it's going to be a dream!" But you start playing all this stuff over, and over, and over again, and it's- it loses that meaning. I was, uhm- just as a side note, I was back in Boston for a Chamber concert this past weekend, I decided to go to a BSO concert on Saturday night; it was the last concert of the season.

The reason I went was one of my friends was retiring and they have a whole- they give a bow at the end- there's a little party so I went to that, and I realized it was the first time in my 13 years that I was there that I saw the BSO play a concert. I never saw them play a concert. It was amazing to see because, sitting in the orchestra I was just sort of, after- after a lot- all those years, you lose focus on, "Is there anyone actually in the audience? Is there- is anyone paying attention?" Because it's just the same thing over and over again. Even to the point, my muscles still just- the funniest thing was, I was sitting on the main floor of the hall, and Andris Nelsons walked out, and I- my body went to stand up.

Zach: (laughs)

Michael: Because any time he walks out on stage for a concert, the orchestra just, you know, it's autopilot. You just stand right up, and I caught myself like, "You're in the audience, don't stand up!" So all of this, it just becomes like, "I'm just going to work."

Zach: Yeah, it's all I, I guess yeah, the- the difficult part is making it not all just become muscle memory over time.

Michael: Yeah, people don't understand when you're not in it for so long, but it ends up just, you know, for the most part, just being another- another job. But how can you, if you're in that position: How do you stay inspired? How do you stay fulfilled musically? That is, to me, one of the most difficult things in the orchestral world.

Zach: Do you have any tips on, maybe like, how to maintain that?

Michael: Yeah, my job was very unique. I would say generally that, making sure you- you have other interests, maybe even um... groups of people that you associate with that aren't in the orchestra and are even in something else. Like when I was in Boston when my closest friends, we had the hobby of cars, and we would go meet for coffee, like once a week. He knew nothing about music or what I did, and we never talked about it. *A/ways* something else, but having something as an outlet away from that is very healthy.

And musically speaking, if you have opportunities to do things outside of the orchestra, I think could be really good. I think what was difficult for me in Boston was that, my position got very, very minimal relief. So I- as I said, it was the first concert I heard. I played everything for them, for the most part. And because of that it, was harder to do things outside of the BSO. I would do chamber music here and there, but it was really hard to make anything work 'cause I couldn't get time off. So, it was hard for me to find that balance musically.

Zach: I guess, especially with an orchestra like Boston that has so many concerts and like I think, well yeah, you mentioned like playing in the Pops as well - Like that's just an added, I don't even know how many more concerts, you know.

Michael: The season there is just nuts because it's- you now, when I was in Kansas City, the talk was: "It's a 42-week orchestra, and we have 14 subscription concerts a year." That was, and that's I think, pretty typical for like a mid-level orchestra. We also did some ballet and opera and pops and education all those other weeks. Boston: every week is a subscription concert, and it's three to four concerts a week. It's either Thursday, Friday, Saturday, or Thursday, Friday, Saturday, the next Tuesday. Every week from the beginning of October/end of September through now, through May. In December and then starting now, is Pops- is a whole different season. So now, they get into five concerts a week for six weeks.

Zach: Yeah.

Michael: All sort of different programs, you just show up and open the book and you start going.

Zach: Yeah, yeah.

Michael: Then you get a couple of weeks off, and you have to relocate to Tanglewood and we played eight weeks there: three different programs a week. Plus, I played chamber music, plus I taught.

Zach: In that sense, you know when the schedule is busier, I guess probably just finding things outside of music is probably the better way to achieve balance there, rather than like finding more opportunities.

Michael: Yeah, that's the thing was it was- it was more of actually about playing less when I got there, than finding opportunities to play. It was like, just saying no to everything so I can't get away and clear my head.

Zach: Right, what would you say is the like biggest misconception about being a professional orchestral musician?

Michael: That it's always inspiring and just fun. I think, when you're in school- I remember when I was in school I- I subbed a couple weeks with the Phoenix Symphony where I'm from. I thought was the most amazing thing ever. Maybe we played Mahler 3, and I played *The Planets* with them, and then I've ever going to lunch with a bunch of the wind players, and they were just complaining the entire time and I was sitting here like, "How could you complain about this? This is the most amazing- you're getting paid to do this!?"

So, when you're young, you start- at least I had that mindset. That's really not, um, generally the case. So um, you know a lot of people just are- they complain about the day-to-day stuff. And every orchestra is different, you know, like Kansas City, a lot of people were really frustrated at the time. It's a different place now, but at the time, it was administrative things, financial things of the organization, that were there just constant complaints. And all the other things, behind the scenes that people were worried about. Boston was more just sort of um, just the non-stop work, maybe like people don't like certain conductors. Rarely was like, "Are we going to be working in the Fall?" And no, it was pretty- but yeah, I think the misconception being that it's just like this always the dream and always the most inspiring thing.

Zach: Like you do anything long enough, you know, it's just the- habit creeps in, and then- it is a job at the end of the day. Like it, you can say, "Yeah, it becomes a job", but it is, you know up until I started studying with you, I found that the way that it was talked about, even by teachers, it was- this was never said, you know? It was just kind of like, yeah, this is you work hard, you get the job. It's all- it's all love, it's all music. It's all, you know, whatever it is, but yeah, I guess it's important. It's important for people to- to know the- the real side, you know.

Michael: Just, you know, how to be prepared when these things come up.

Zach: Yeah, yeah totally. Could you maybe speak a little bit on your transition from playing full-time in Boston to teaching full-time at Eastman?

Michael: I think the biggest difference is: when you're in an orchestra, you pretty much make zero decisions about anything, especially as a section player.

Zach: Right.

Michael: I don't think I made- I- I don't think I really made any decisions because it's: "This is when rehearsals are. This is when the concerts are. This is the repertoire we're doing, the music is on the stand." I'm not doing programming, I'm not doing, um- I don't get to choose who I sit next to. I don't choose the conductor. I don't- there's- everything is done for you, for better or for worse. You just need to show up and play your job.

Zach: Yeah.

Michael: The- the difference here is that it's pretty much the opposite. I choose who I work with, um, I set my hours. I choose my curriculum and how I teach.

Zach: Would you say that like the most difficult thing, then, would be just like finding the balance between the zero control to complete control?

Michael: I'm just trying to keep an open mind when I do everything, meaning that: OK, maybe I set this studio class schedule or this mock audition this semester, but I am seeing how it works or it doesn't. And what is most beneficial for the students? And then I will make tweaks to it going forward. So to me, it's this is always interesting for me, to put something together and constantly refine it. That's how my mind works.

Zach: Right.

Michael: Rather than like, "I found the answer. This is what we're doing. This is the next 20 years of my life." So it's- I started with pretty vague, 'cause I've never been in this type of academic environment, you know. NEC (New England Conservatory), I taught for a dozen years, but I didn't have a physical studio. Um, my studio's numbers were between two and five students. Come to Symphony Hall for lessons once a week. No studio class...

Zach: Right.

Michael: There wasn't any this normal (unintelligible) academia, so I didn't really know anything coming in, other than how to teach a lesson. So, I'm- I'm still figuring it all out.

Zach: Yeah.

Michael: And, what is- What is best for the students, and so, just similar to the orchestral world, keeping my ears and eyes open to my surroundings and what is working and what is not. And if it's not working, what can I do to make it better?

Zach: I guess in a way it's- it's - It's a similar Your what you were saying about, you know... the important- important personality trait or strength is, you know, being able to adapt and read the room and read, I guess that would carry over pretty well to your situation at Eastman.

Michael: Yeah, they're also looking at: you know, there's all of my faculty- faculty members have years and decades of experience, or that means we come from different backgrounds, but you can gain a lot from that experience around you.

Zach: Yeah, totally.

Michael: Asking questions, or even the jury- how juries are here at Eastman, is uh, I think way more intense and serious than any other place I've seen. But you get- I get to experience all of the woodwind students and you see all these great things that are happening in these other studios. It's like, "Oh, I- I should be doing- I should be doing this aspect in studio class and so it's inspiring for me to see that and then start incorporating that into my own studio.

Zach: What would you say was your biggest failure in your career and what did you learn from it?

Michael: I don't know I- I don't really look at it- I mean look, I- I can go down the line of all the auditions I've lost.

Zach: Yeah.

Michael: But all the auditions I lost- I mean, take a line from my mother, is you know "It happens for a reason." But all of those you know, I look back, there's no way I would have gotten here if I *hadn't* had that experience.

Zach: Right.

Michael: Not to get too deep into it, but I- I was never fulfilled in my job in Boston, and I always- I didn't know why. What is it? It's trying to figure out what that is, and I think, for me it's coming to the realization that the orchestra is what I wanted. I wouldn't want to play with another orchestra; it's an amazing orchestra. But I think as I got older- I got the job when I was 26. What were my priorities when I was 26, completely different than they are now.

Zach: Yeah.

Michael: And I realized that the position was not aligned with why I play.

Zach: Right.

Michael: And so, would I say that's a failure for taking that job? I don't think so because it- I wouldn't have gotten this position without being in Boston. So there is one thing I- if there's

something that is sort of etched in my brain is that when I left Kansas City, the music director, Michael Stern, (I hope he doesn't listen to podcasts) tried to keep me in Kansas City as Principal in Kansas City. And they tried to do everything they could for me to not to go to Boston, but one of the things he said to me, which got scarred in my brain, was that it wasn't that that he was trying to keep me here from the Boston Symphony, he was trying to keep me here because I should be playing Principal Clarinet and not Second. That's what he was doing, and he was like, "If you were going to play principal or in any other major orchestra he would be in full support." And he thought I was making a huge mistake.

And at the time I thought he was nuts. Like are you crazy? Going to the Boston Symphony? Um, and I told him this, this year on the phone when I was talking to him that in hindsight, he was right. I don't think it was a mistake, though, this is where, like you could have taken that as like that was my biggest failure or misstep. But it led to something even greater.

{Outro Music}

Jeff: Today's episode was written and recorded by Zach Goldstein.

The music was written and produced by Stephen Biegner, Alexa Silverman, and myself. If you have questions, comments, or ideas for episodes, please contact us via our website at iml.esm.rochester.edu. If you like this episode, share it with your friends and colleagues and leave us a review on your preferred streaming platform. This podcast is a production of the Institute for Music Leadership at the Eastman School of Music. From the IML, I'm Jeff Dunn. See you next time.

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