

In 1960, I was a student in the tenth grade at Putnam City High School in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. My English teacher, Mrs. Thomas, gave our class an assignment to research the occupation that each of us hoped to pursue and write an essay about it. She gave us a list of questions to use as an outline. I knew then that I wanted to become a professional musician and that the most likely occupations were a percussionist in a symphony orchestra or a music educator, most likely a band director.

I began playing percussion in the school band in the sixth grade and soon after started taking private drum lessons with Alan Abel, who was at that time the Principal Percussionist in the Oklahoma City Symphony. I studied with him for three years until he joined the percussion section of the Philadelphia Orchestra. Mr. Abel was my idol at the time (and still is, just as he is for many other percussionists), so I wrote him a letter asking the questions in Mrs. Thomas's outline. With his usual generosity, Mr. Abel answered each of my questions in detail. For my essay, I essentially copied down Mr. Abel's answers, and for that I (or I should say "we") received an A+. Here is my essay.

MY OCCUPATION

The profession I am considering is the field of music, to be more specific, a professional percussionist. To obtain information on this subject, I wrote one of the percussionists in the Philadelphia Orchestra, Alan D. Abel. I asked Mr. Abel questions based on the outline given in class. The following are his answers.

Q. What were your reasons for entering this field?

A. I was very active in music, specifically band, all through grade school and junior and senior high school. I took a general college entrance course and decided before my senior year that I would like to be a musician. I was never deeply interested in another field of endeavor.

Q. What are the employment opportunities in this field?

A. There are few opportunities in the symphony orchestra field. There are quite a number of employment opportunities in music education, particularly at the secondary level.

Q. What are some advantages and disadvantages in your work?

A. Advantages: a fulfillment of self-expression not available in many kinds of work; an opportunity to further the culture and arts of the world; a profession that is respected. The working conditions are unique, which is an advantage to some people and a disadvantage to others.

Disadvantages: The pay is low in proportion to the place of the symphony orchestra musician or music educator in society.

Q. What is the range of earnings?

A. In a symphony orchestra, \$1,500 to \$12,000 a year depending on the size and importance of the group and the “extra work” (such as opera, ballet, private teaching) available in the city. As a public school music teacher, \$3,000 to \$10,000 depending on the state and local school system and “extra work” such as private teaching, clinics, and some professional playing.

Q. What are the working conditions?

A. The working conditions in a symphony orchestra vary considerably in different orchestras. They are unique and the same in every orchestra in that the clock hours are not long, but the work is exceedingly concentrated and there is much pressure in striving for perfect performance. The working conditions are “good or bad” depending on the player’s personal likes and dislikes: some conductors are very demanding and overbearing; the hours are irregular; there is always some traveling; it is seasonal work; etc.

Public school band directors usually carry a smaller class load than most regular classroom teachers, but they are usually expected to be active in many after-school activities such as providing music for athletic events and civic functions.

Q. What is its importance to society?

A. A symphony orchestra sets the musical standards and furthers the culture of its own area, the country, and in the case of well-traveled and recorded orchestras, the world. A music teacher, besides helping students enjoy themselves in the performance of music on their own instruments, can help them to enjoy listening to good music and to broaden their cultural outlook on life. Often many side effects can be realized by the student who gets personal attention from a private teacher in the way of learning better study habits and developing good character traits.

Q. What are the educational requirements?

A. In order for aspiring musicians to be admitted to a good college music program, they must be proficient on at least one musical instrument, which usually means private lessons for a number of years. Most symphony orchestra musicians begin their private study at an early age.

Q. What high school subjects should be taken?

A. General music, music theory, music appreciation, band, and orchestra.

Q. What are the job qualifications?

A. For a symphony orchestra musician: an unalterable love of music; a driving desire to attain perfection in playing an instrument; an excellent musical aptitude; and a healthy, well-coordinated body.

For a music educator: an enthusiastic love of music; a strong desire to teach young people; a good musical aptitude; good organizational ability; and a healthy body.

What I have learned from Mr. Abel is that the most important things in becoming a professional musician are a natural talent and love of music, and a driving ambition to attain perfection in music. I plan to take all the music I can in high school. The colleges I am considering are the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, and the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. Eastman has long been known for its high standing and would offer me many opportunities, but because of expenses, I will probably attend the Curtis Institute if I get the chance. Curtis offers full scholarships. You must audition for these, and this is the only way you can enter the school. There are only three spots for a percussionist at any time, and in two years there will be an opening for another percussionist. This is lucky for me because that is when I will be ready for college. There is a smaller chance for a scholarship at Eastman, and even if I did get one it would probably not be full, as the scholarships are at Curtis. When I graduate from college, I would like to join an orchestra, teach privately, and teach in a college. I would also like to get a doctor's degree.